The Neutrino Entraptor

by Amalgam000

Summary

Six months after Voyager’s return to the Alpha Quadrant, newly-promoted Admiral Janeway and her new Delta Quadrant Unit receive a cry for help from an unexpected source. To answer it, they must test out B’Elanna’s groundbreaking but risky research, and in so doing, come to terms with the changes that have affected them since their return. A post-series story that is also a sort of “fix-it” for Janeway and Chakotay. Because, come on!

Notes

Wow, posting this story feels both liberating and bittersweet – it’s been on mind for several months now, so it’s strange to let it go. What am I going to daydream about, now?

Anyway, the story is complete, so I will be posting regularly, probably one installment per day. It hasn’t been beta’ed, so I apologize for any mistakes!

Pairings: Janeway/Chakotay-centric but features the whole “cast”, also references to B’Elanna/Tom and Neelix/Dexa

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Prologue

“Once, a long time ago, beyond the skies of Talax existed a sea of living stars; stars so bright and so joyful, their lights brightened the night sky in twirls of gold and fire! The living stars feared nothing, for even when they died, their dust remained suspended in the sea of stars, to be illuminated by the others – their essence living on.

Our ancestors could see them as they playfully danced and chased each other across the dome of night, their tails trailing behind them in a flash of light and stardust. Even though the stars paid no heed to the small and insignificant lifeforms that observed them from below, it is said that they illuminated the Great Forest with eternal light and brightness, bestowing their guidance and wisdom upon the departed souls when they reached the Great Forest to rejoin their ancestors.

Many, many years ago, in the time of my great-grandmother’s great-grandmother, the living stars heard of a Great Wave of Darkness that consumed all that was light and happiness on its path. In their arrogance (or maybe it was just innocence) the living stars didn’t fear the Great Wave of Darkness and paid no heed to the rumors. They danced and chased each other as they had done for millennia, and believed they would keep doing so for millennia to come.

But, soon enough the Great Wave of Darkness was upon them, looming large and dangerous as it advanced, oblivious to the light that it consumed along the way.

Brash and innocent, the youngest of the stars flew to the Wave and asked the Darkness: “why do you consume all that is bright? Do you not see how happy we are?”

The Great Wave of Darkness replied: “And can you not see that your happiness is another one’s despair? We are of darkness, darkness is what makes us whole.”

Upon realizing that the Great Wave of Darkness would destroy them if it carried on its current path, the stars decided to wage war to stop it from devouring their light. For incommensurable time they fought – light against shadow, primordial brightness against eternal darkness. But the Great Wave of Darkness merely grew and grew as it absorbed the energy from the living stars it devoured while it relentlessly, carelessly blazed forward, unperturbed by the war the living stars were waging against it.

When the Talaxians next looked up to the night sky, the sea of living stars had vanished, leaving behind nothing but void and emptiness…”

Neelix trailed off as he finished the story, the sudden silence heavy within the confines of his communication station on the asteroid he now called home. He looked down into Brax’s eyes as the boy stared up at him from where he sat by the console. Fear had widened his eyes into a mask of fright, and Neelix forced a soft smile onto his face as he reached out to circle the boy’s small shoulder with his arm.

A few months ago, weeks after Neelix’s last communication with Voyager – after he had finally been able to tweak his communication systems to include the hyper-sub space technology Voyager had used – a transmission had finally, unexpectedly come through. Neelix had been astonished to hear B’Elanna’s voice describing how she and her team of scientists had been able to reestablish the flow of transmissions from a new Deep Space station’s communications array located near the border between the Alpha and Beta Quadrants. The wonderful thing about it was that, instead of the month-long delay between outbursts, there was no restraint on how many transmissions could be sent, and it only took about 12 Federation hours for the transmissions to travel from the Alpha Quadrant to
Neelix’s asteroid. They had since then established regular communications and updates. In his recordings, Neelix had told them about the miners’ departure from the asteroid belt two months after Neelix’s decision to say. He’d told them about how Dexa had decided to join the Council, and had gossiped about the latest news. Meanwhile B’Elanna and a few others had updated him on all that had happened to the Voyager crew since their return home. He’d also gotten what amounted to letters from a number of people, like Naomi and her mother, Seven of Nine, Tom, Chakotay, and a few others who just wanted to say hello.

Today, however, Neelix was the bearer of bad news – or at the very least rumors of an alarming nature – and he struggled to hide his anxiety when he pulled his adoptive son closer against his side. He turned to the console once again and pressed the button to reopen the transmission.

“I know this probably all sounds a bit ridiculous to you all, especially you Mr. Vulcan, and you as well Captain Janeway – well, I guess it’s Admiral, now. But I have good reasons to believe that the strange threat I’ve heard about today, this… thing… that seems to be coming our way – and eventually your way, is the same that frightened my people so long ago; scared them so much it was recorded into fables like the one I just told you about. At first I thought it was just a plasma drift – I’ve seen them before in the Talaxian system – and I’d always thought that this legend originated from such phenomena, but… The description of my informant – a great, fast-moving dark cloud that absorbs light instead of merely hiding it – is too particularly similar to the stories to be a coincidence. It’s hard to tell if or when it will be here, I don’t know how fast it travels, or if it’ll even travel far enough to reach you in the Alpha Quadrant. But, considering the nature of B’Elanna’s research, I figured I would try to reach out, and warn you if I could. As you know these last few months I’ve been following B’Elanna’s instructions on constructing the device and assembling the necessary materials for an eventual test run.” He paused, glancing briefly at his adoptive son’s head. “We’re safe for now. But I hope – if you get this message – that you’ll be willing to test it out, and maybe in doing so transport us out of the path of this… darkness. That is, if you’re willing to have a bunch of Delta Quadrant refugees on your doorstep,” Neelix added with a small chuckle, a poor attempt at lightening up the mood of his message, before he sobered and gave a sigh. “I hope you get this message soon. We’ll be waiting to hear back from you.” He paused again, squeezing Brax harder against his chest. “Whatever happens, I wish you all the best, my friends.”

Neelix cut the transmission quietly.

“Will they be able to help us?” Brax asked after a moment, his voice muffled by Neelix’s chest.

“Of course they will be!” he reassured, hoping Brax couldn’t hear the doubt in his voice. “I’ve never met people more clever or determined than those Terrans! Admiral Janeway won’t give up on us, and neither will the others! And my friend Seven, she was Borg once, you know, she has all the knowledge of the Collective in her mind, I’m sure she’ll be eager to help. Now, it’s our job to make sure the device is assembled properly, right down to the minute details of B’Elanna’s instructions,” he added, infusing enthusiasm and determination in his tone as he patted Brax’s back and gently pushed him away to stand.

“Do you really think it’ll work?”

“The Neutrino Entraptor? Of course it will. And if I know my friends, it’s going to take us to our new home. They call it Earth.”
Chapter 2

“Beyond the edge of universe,
there's a kind of real darkness...
where even the light has gone astray.”
— Toba Beta, Betelgeuse Incident: Insiden Bait Al-Jauza

The scent of roasted coffee beans wafted to Kathryn’s nose when she walked into the Night Owl, bringing with it flashes of memories of her time at the Academy, when she had (almost literally) lived in this place. In those days, the Night Owl had become her favorite spot to work on her assignments and pull all those all-nighters. The dimmed lights, scattering of wooden tables, worn sofas and hidden corners had created a stark and inviting contrast against the usual bland, sterilized Starfleet common rooms on campus. To Kathryn it smelled of quantum mathematics and exogenetics.

A nostalgic smile curved her lips as she made her way deeper inside; she hadn’t set foot here since her last year at the Academy, and although the faces around her were different, the atmosphere and rhythm of this place were not. It hadn’t changed one bit.

She had, though.

Especially over the last seven years. Being here brought home just how much she’d evolved away from that headstrong, ambitious and slightly naive young woman she had been then… Without warning, her mind conjured up Chakotay’s voice and teasing grin: ‘Except maybe the headstrong part’.

She resolutely and quickly nipped this made-up image in the bud and went to place her coffee order while she waited for her friends to arrive. Having been back in San Francisco for over six months now, she had only been half surprised when Karen, one of her best friends from the Academy, had contacted her, inviting her to meet and catch up.

Yet, for reasons she didn’t particularly want to delve into, before tonight Kathryn had shied from such reunions, even dodging the couple of tentative contacts Mark had made since her return. It wasn’t that she wasn’t looking forward to reuniting with acquaintances or curious about Mark’s motives in contacting her; rather that a part of her dreaded the questions and inquiries about Voyager’s journey and consequent return to Earth.

Months of countless debriefings, ceremonies, celebrations, galas, memorials and press conferences had left her weary of the attention. More than that, it reminded her of everything that she had given up when she had accepted a promotion to vice admiral upon her return. All of those public events had felt like a drag on the future she was attempting to create away from Voyager and its memories. All she’d wanted was to lay low for a while, and move on with her life.

Her new position didn’t really permit a clean cut – the file she had brought with her tonight being a case in point – but she was trying. Now that she was back home, she had to look toward the future; she had to use the knowledge and experience she had gained as Voyager’s captain to further Starfleet’s interests and promote exploration. This had become a mantra over the last few months, one she repeated to herself every time she felt herself in danger of regretting her decision. It had been her choice to accept the promotion to admiral after all; now she had to learn to live with the
consequences.

It wasn’t all bad – it really was nice to be back on Earth, to be able to live with the thought that she could see her mother and sister the next day if she wanted, to wake up to beams of sunshine through the window of her bedroom and to eat fresh foods. But there were days when such little pleasures – those things she had missed so much when she’d been on Voyager – weighted but little in comparison to the exploration, adrenaline rush and the friends that she had left with her ship. Today was that kind of day.

With her hot beverage in hand, she made her way to an empty table and steeled herself to re-read the file she had brought with her.

It was a simple request for reassignment.

Reassignments weren’t normally part of her job description as Head of Starfleet’s Exploration Division. Nevertheless, Tuvok had specifically, deliberately, handed it to her moments before she’d left the office. If she hadn’t known him any better, she would have sworn that he’d given her a ‘look’. But Vulcans didn’t ‘give looks’.

Taking a sip of the coffee and sighing in pleasure as it danced on her taste buds, she savored it before she set down her mug and looked at the file again.

A request for reassignment. But not just anyone’s: it was Seven of Nine’s request to leave Voyager and join Kathryn’s new Delta Quadrant Unit at Star Fleet Command – DQU as most people called it. With Tuvok at its head, the unit was in charge of monitoring any activity coming from the direction of the Delta Quadrant, and designing technology to push the exploration to that space between the Delta and the other Quadrants that they had skipped by using the Borg transwarp conduits. In collaboration with, and building off of, the Pathfinder project, over the last few months the Unit had overseen the construction of Deep Space 12, a new relay outpost at the very edge of the Alpha Quadrant, maintained regular communication with Neelix (much to everyone’s pleasure), and monitored for any Borg activity that might come from that quarter. They had given them a hard blow by destroying the Hub, but there was no way of knowing how hard of a blow it had been.

And now Seven wanted to join in the effort. It made sense, in a way. But it was her motives for the transfer, both explicit and implicit, that made Kathryn uneasily curious. Reading Seven’s words for the second time that day, Kathryn could almost hear the younger woman’s voice in her head, the clinical tone devoid of either humility or pride, as she described how she believed her skills and expertise could be put to better use in DQU.

Kathryn had to give it to Seven, she could make a good argument.

Yet, despite her every attempt not to think about it, Kathryn couldn’t help but wonder one thing: did Seven’s sudden request have anything to do with her relationship with Chakotay? Was this a symptom or result of trouble in paradise?

Knowing Seven, it was unlikely that any type of relationship would influence her decisions – she could compartmentalize and take ‘professionalism’ to the standards of any Vulcan. And yet... As logical and cool-headed as Seven might be, her inexperience with human feelings might still lead her to flee emotions she didn’t understand, that she couldn’t compute. If something truly had gone wrong between her and Chakotay, Kathryn wouldn’t blame her for wanting to escape from her feelings, or his presence.

Hadn’t she herself done something similar?
Well, whatever it was that had made Seven make the request, it wasn’t Kathryn’s place to judge or comment. By keeping this romance – or whatever it was that was going on between them – from her, Chakotay had made it clear that it was none of her business. She was almost certain he knew she knew, but neither of them had ever acknowledged it, not even after their return to Earth. It remained to this day the elephant in the room – to use an old adage.

She probably would have remained unaware too, if not from her older self’s temporal meddling. *Chakotay and Seven of Nine. Her husband.* The shock and unexpected pain of those two words still constantly rippled through her, like she was feeling the effects of a delayed-action weapon, or the emotional hurricane that the proverbial butterfly’s wings had created. As much as she’d tried, she could never truly comprehend it, or accept that Chakotay had truly moved on from the special connection she’d always believed they had shared.

Even though it probably wasn’t obvious to an outside observer, something of her friendship with Chakotay had cracked at that moment, and Kathryn still felt the new, subtle distance between them acutely. It felt like she had lost her best friend – more than that, it felt like she had lost him. The tiny flame of hope that one day their circumstances would allow them to dissolve the lines of duty that kept them apart, had been abruptly, painfully extinguished.

The truth was, she had taken him for granted, and was now paying dearly for her mistake. And she didn’t know how to cope with that kind of loss. How did one move on from something one never had in the first place? The hurt and sense of betrayal were still raw, despite months of trying to ignore them. She was angry, too. Not at Chakotay and Seven, but at the circumstances. She didn’t know for how long Chakotay and Seven had been involved by the time she’d learned of it, but she couldn’t help but wonder at the timing. What if they’d gotten back to Earth just a little earlier? Would that have changed anything? Would they have realized that this could be an opportunity for them to explore the relationship that had been denied to them by circumstances and command structures? Or was that simple wishful thinking?

Taking another sip of coffee, she forced those thoughts to the back of her mind and swallowed back the now familiar pain of regret.

Whatever her feelings and Seven’s motives, if reassignment was what Seven wanted, Kathryn would wholeheartedly grant it. In spite of their own rollercoaster history, Kathryn still cared greatly for her, and wished her all the best that humanity and Earth had to offer. And truth be told, she couldn’t even begin to imagine what kinds of progress the DQU would make with her assistance, knowledge and efficiency.

This was as far as Kathryn allowed herself to go in her reminiscing before she put the file away and returned her attention to her surroundings, taking slow sips of coffee as she did. It wasn’t long before her old friends Karen and Sia’kl came through the door, and their ebullience and excitement at the reunion distracted Kathryn from her melancholy thoughts, especially as coffee eventually gave way to wine.

They were well into their third hour of laughter, anecdotes and stories about their days at the Academy when Kathryn’s combadge suddenly came to life. “Tuvok to Admiral Janeway.”

Kathryn sent an apologetic look to her friends and made her way out into the cool night air, instinctual dread clenching her stomach uncomfortably. “Go ahead Tuvok.”

“My apologies for disturbing you, your presence is required at Headquarters.”

“What’s going on?”
“We have received a transmission from Neelix containing potentially alarming information.”

Understanding that he wouldn’t tell her more over open channels, Kathryn nodded to herself. “I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

Kathryn took in a steadying breath as she made her way back through the coffee shop. Despite the dread that knotted her stomach at whatever danger was looming over them, though, a tiny, secret part of her was exhilarated, thrilled, that something was happening. Something to nudge her out of the routine she had buried herself under, and to rouse her from the apathy that had taken hold of her recently.

Kathryn bid her goodbyes to her friends, promising a rain check ‘on all of her Delta Quadrant stories’ before hurrying back to the Exploratory Division headquarters.

She reopened communications with Tuvok as she made her way, and the Commander briefed her with typical efficacy on Neelix’s timid cry for help and even allowing her to hear the transmission for herself. Puzzled, but instantly concerned about the fear in Neelix’s tone, Kathryn was quick to dictate a reply and other instructions – painfully aware that Neelix wouldn’t receive it for another 12 hours or so.

By the time she made it to HQ, her team had things handled.

“Ensign Celes,” Kathryn greeted as her newly appointed communications officer came to meet her. “Please wake up the admirals and tell them of our situation – we don’t know what this is yet, but I want them aware nonetheless. Then contact the fleet, here’s the message I want you to send to all vessels,” Kathryn stated as she handed the younger woman a PADD with her hurriedly-drafted instructions.

“Right away, Admiral,” Tal agreed.

The HQ control room was a hive of activity as her personnel bustled about their respective consoles and screens, the same crew that Kathryn distinctly remembered sending home only a few hours ago. Their devotion to their work was truly tremendous. There was an excited buzz in the air, a certain frenzy tinged with urgency, as they carried on their respective tasks. Most were so engrossed in what they were doing, they didn’t even glance at her as she strode across the room toward her office.

Tuvok suddenly appeared at her side and fell in step with her.

“Your first week back from Vulcan and we’ve got ourselves a situation, coincidence?” Kathryn teased and smiled at his confused expression. He had never known how to react to teasing and Kathryn had always found it endearing. It made him less formidable, somehow.

“I hardly believe my presence here holds a causal relationship with what is happening in the Delta Quadrant.”

Kathryn patted his shoulder. “It’s good to have you back. Any news?” She asked as they walked.

“None. However, a connection has been established with Voyager, the Captain is waiting.”

“I’ll take the call in my office. I’m ordering the fleet to meet up at Deep Space 12, can you see to it that they respond promptly, and answer any questions they might have?”

“Right away.” With a nod he left her side as Kathryn walked on.

When she reached her office, a steaming cup of coffee was waiting for her and Kathryn smiled at the
gesture. It was probably Tal Celes or Sam Wildman’s doing, though in all honesty such thoughtfulness could have come from each and every one of the people working under her in the Division.

She settled behind her desk and turned on the live feed on her monitor. Kathryn’s treacherous heart skipped a beat when Chakotay’s face appeared on the small screen.

“Admiral Janeway,” he greeted with an all too familiar teasing glint in his eyes, as if he was still testing out the combination of “Admiral” and “Janeway” on his tongue. “It’s good to see you, Kathryn,” he added, his inflection sending a shiver down Kathryn’s spine. She didn’t know why, but there had always been something unique about the way he said her name.

Even though she had done her best not to acknowledge how much she had missed him over the last few months, the feeling struck her with a vengeance now. Since his promotion they had barely spoken face to face, and the sight of him – of his warm dark eyes, dimpled smile, and quiet authority – was so bittersweet it was almost painful. She had told him years ago that she couldn’t imagine a day without him, and now she knew how painfully true that was. But there was no time to linger on that now.

Pushing her feelings deep inside herself, she gave a crooked grin as she replied in kind. “Captain Chakotay. I only wish it were under more pleasant circumstances.”

Chakotay sobered with a nod. “Tuvok briefed me. Have you heard anything more from Neelix?”

Kathryn shook her head before taking a sip from the coffee. “No. I would love to get some answers before I deploy any resources, but I’d rather be safe than sorry. If we’re to take his warning seriously, we need to start working on a plan for his people’s evacuation now. Time might be of the essence.”

“I agree. Have you ever heard of anything like the ‘Darkness’ he talked about?”

“No, not as such. It might be a number of things, and without more information we can’t really rule out anything. But whatever it is, it sounds like it actually absorbs energy, so it won’t be stopped using any of Starfleet’s energy-based weapons. If it can be stopped at all. We’ll have to think outside the box on this one.”

“That’s your specialty,” he quipped before letting out a lengthy sigh. “Where do you want us?”

“Right now Voyager’s the closest and fastest starship in the vicinity of Earth. I need you to give us a ride,” Kathryn drawled sarcastically.

One corner of his mouth quirked up. “I don’t usually pick up hitchhikers, but I’ll make an exception. We should be there in about four hours.”

“We’ll be ready. Please tell Seven that her reassignment has been granted, but we’ll need her aboard Voyager while we take care of this. B’Elanna will need all the help she can get to bring the Entraptor up to testing condition.”

Kathryn observed Chakotay’s reaction closely at the mention of Seven, but he merely blinked before he nodded – giving nothing away. “I’ll let her know.”

She took a sip of coffee. “What does she make of this phenomenon?”

He shook his head. “The Borg don’t seem to have encountered quite like Neelix described, but like you said it could be a number of things. She’s going through our databases to see if we can narrow down the possibilities.”
Kathryn nodded. “All right then, I’ll see you in a few hours. Drive safely, wear your seatbelt, etcetera, etcetera,” she added with a raised eyebrow and he gave quick smile.

“Will do. Chakotay out.”

Kathryn leaned back into her chair and stared at the darkened monitor.

Well, so much for moving on.

A knock on the opened doorframe caught her attention. Her Chief Engineer stood in the doorway.

“B’Elanna, what have you got for me?”

“Not much just yet, we’re still trying to figure out exactly what’s going on, there just isn’t that much data to make sense of right now, but here are my preliminary recommendations for testing the Neutrino Entraptor and getting Neelix out of there,” she replied as she handed Kathryn a PADD. “I’ve already sent all my most recent updates to him, as you asked.”

“Thank you. Any way we can cut on the time it takes between transmissions?”

“Tuvok and I are collaborating with Barclay and the Communications Center to work on that, but it might take a while to boost the signal. It’s stretched pretty thin as it is.”

“And the Neutrino Entraptor?”

B’Elanna took a second and Kathryn threw her a look. “I have Tom working on simulations as we speak. It’ll be ready for testing soon.” She added, as if to reassure herself. Kathryn gave her a scrutinizing look. B’Elanna’s fidgeting was hint enough that she wasn’t as confident as she made it sound.

After a moment of Kathryn’s scrutinizing she seemed to deflate and her voice shook slightly. “Actually, Admiral, I’m nowhere close. If I’m gonna have to make it work that soon, I’m going to need some help.”

Trying to ignore her guilt for putting so much pressure on B’Elanna’s shoulders, Kathryn rose to her feet curiously and walked around the desk. “Who do you have in mind? You already have the best and brightest astrophysicists working on this with you.”

B’Elanna grimaced. “Maybe so, but they lack… freshness of perspective. I need someone whose ideas haven’t been tainted by the rigors of Starfleet training yet. No offense.”

Kathryn narrowed her eyes. “Are you talking about Icheb? Are you sure? We’ll all be traveling to DS12, it might be dangerous. And aboard Voyager you’ll have access to Seven’s expertise as well.”

B’Elanna had obviously not been aware that they were actually spacebound, but she quickly recovered from her surprise.

“Seven will be helpful, of course, but Icheb… You’ve read his latest essay on the role of leptons in augmenting the gravometric energy within dark matter, his ideas are… way beyond what he’s going to be learning in a classroom. And they can be used to improve our chances of making the Entraptor work.”

Kathryn couldn’t help a small curious smile. “Of course I’ve been following his progress, but I must say I’m rather surprised you have, B’Elanna.”
B’Elanna gave a small, if not self-conscious, shrug. “Since Seven isn’t here, I figured it wouldn’t hurt to keep an eye on him.”

Kathryn stepped closer and met B’Elanna’s eyes. “All right then, you better go get him. We leave in four hours. I’ll arrange it with his superiors.”

oooOooo

The sun wasn’t up yet as B’Elanna made her way through the grounds at Starfleet Academy. It was strange to be back here in the early hours of morning. The smell and ambiance of the dawn fog brought back memories of a time when she had struggled to make it through classes on top of all of her issues with her classmates. Despite all of Starfleet’s talk of unity, as a girl with Klingon blood and cranial ridges she had never belonged here in the eyes of the other students, and she could never adhere to the protocols and discipline that was required… It did Janeway’s social instincts credit for succeeding in integrating her within a Starfleet crew when no one else could. Not that she would say it out loud, but B’Elanna was immensely grateful for it.

She shrugged away the knot in her stomach that was all too often present lately, and made her way to the library common room where she knew she would find the young drone-turned-cadet.

As expected, Icheb was sitting at one of the tables, bent over an assignment and his fingers flying over the keyboard of PADDS as he wrote. Yet, in a way that reminded B’Elanna too much of herself, he was alone, and he seemed to like it that way. She bit back a smile at the memory of the time she had tried to bring him out of his shell and he had misinterpreted her actions as romantic interest. She had stopped trying so hard after that, but now she realized that maybe she should have persisted – while making clear that she was doing it out of friendship, and nothing else.

B’Elanna approached him, doing her best to ignore the way the room seemed to weigh on her, ready to engulf her. “You’re up awfully early, what are you working on?”

Icheb startled and jumped to his feet when he saw her. “Lieutenant Torres!”

B’Elanna gave him a small smile. “At ease, Cadet. Show me?” She extended her hand and he nervously handed the PADD.

“It’s my assignment for the exogenetics class.”

B’Elanna scanned the contents briefly before handing the PADD back. “Looks good.”

“Thank you.” He stared at her expectantly for a few moments longer, until B’Elanna found the words to say what she came here to say.

B’Elanna sat down and invited him to do the same. “I’m not just here to check on your work, Icheb. Actually, I need your help.”

His confusion seemed to grow. “You need my help.”

“Have you heard of the Neutrino Entraptor project?” He nodded briefly. “We’ve made some progress, but our deadline suddenly just got much closer, and… let’s just say we could use your help. But that means going to Deep Space 12 for a while. Of course Admiral Janeway gave the green light, so she’ll take care of ensuring that you’re not penalized for skipping classes while we’re gone.”

He gave a quick nervous smile, before frowning again. “A green light is good, correct?”

B’Elanna couldn’t help it, she grinned as she nodded. “Well? Are you in?”
He jumped to his feet again, grinning excitedly. “Of course!”

“Good, you should go pack, and meet us at the DQU in one hour.”

He nodded and hurried to gather his things before he gave her a grin and a nod and left the room. B’Elanna sighed as she watched him go, already anticipating her own packing, and how she would let Tom know of her assignment.

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“Are you sure going on this mission is a good idea, B’Elanna?” Tom asked as he bounced Miral against his chest in an effort to stop her from crying. It was as if the six-month old could feel the sudden tension between her parents and did all she could to express her protest with the shrillest sounds possible.

B’Elanna sighed frustratingly as she pulled out her clean uniforms from her closet to toss them onto the bed. “What do you want me to do, Tom, leave Neelix to fend for himself? Let the others test out the technology I’ve created?”

“Of course not, I’m just saying we have no idea what this anomaly that Neelix described is, or what it does, or what kinds of dangers you’d be getting yourself into.”

B’Elanna threw him an angry glare over her shoulder as she stormed to the bathroom. “When we were on Voyager we pulled much more dangerous stunts than this!”

Tom followed her as Miral kept on crying, large tears falling onto her cheeks, her face red from the effort. B’Elanna stopped her packing and snatched Miral from Tom’s arms. He didn’t protest, but rather leaned on the doorframe to cross his arms across his chest.

“Maybe, but it’s different, now!” He retorted. “We have a daughter!”

B’Elanna narrowed her eyes at him before she looked at Miral whose sobs were slowly abating. She gently wiped the tears from her cheeks with the pad of her thumb. “Thanks for the reminder, Tom! It had somehow slipped my mind!” she replied angrily, her tone dripping with sarcasm.

She returned her gaze to her beloved daughter’s face, her dark eyes now dry of tears and her head getting heavier against B’Elanna’s shoulder as distress slowly yielded to exhaustion. Oh how much she loved this little one! Yet, how much she’d had to sacrifice for her as well… B’Elanna had sworn to herself that she would never resent Miral, or Tom, for the choices she had made upon their return to Earth and her acceptance of Janeway’s offer to work at the DQU, but sometimes she just couldn’t help it. It was strange how in all her time aboard starships, she had not once felt as claustrophobic as she did living on Earth. Her metaphoric need for breath and space was growing increasingly powerful, and the longer she stayed the more it felt like she was going out of her mind. It wasn’t Tom’s fault, and certainly not Miral’s – in fact it wasn’t about them at all.

It just was.

“Sometimes it just feels like-” Tom stopped himself and shook his head. “It feels like I’m losing you to this job, B’Elanna. I guess I’m afraid that it’s going to take you away from me for real one of these days, and I can’t-” he stopped himself again and swallowed with difficulty. It tugged at her heart to see him like this, but she was as helpless as he was.

Feeling a little calmer now that Miral had stopped her nerve-wrecking cries, B’Elanna sighed and looked back at Tom. “It’s not the job, it’s… I don’t know what it is, but sometimes I feel like I can’t breathe, I’m stuck. I need to do this, Tom. Not just for Neelix, but for me too. For us. But I can’t do
it without your help.”

Tom held her eyes for a long moment, before he relented. “Fine. Do what you want.”

B’Elanna’s temper flared with a mix of frustration and guilt. He reached out to take Miral from her again and went to place her in her cot.

“Tom…”

“No, I mean it B’Elanna.” He was whispering now, so as not to disturb Miral. “Do what you gotta do. I don’t understand this need you seem to have, but I’m not gonna be the one holding you back. You better make damn sure that you’re coming back, though.”

An unexpected smile tugged at B’Elanna’s lips. “You really think you can get rid of me that easy?”

Tom merely threw her a small smile over his shoulder while he leaned over Miral’s cot to stroke her soft hair.

“You could come too, you know,” B’Elanna went on as she watched him. “Both of you. I’ll need your holodeck expertise for the simulations.”

He threw her another glance over his shoulder. “Oh I don’t think so. One of us should stay here with you,” he replied softly to Miral, the tiny tense muscles of her face slowly slacking as sleep gained on her. “But I’ll do what I can from here.”

It still amazed B’Elanna how much fatherhood had changed the man she loved. Where he had once been immature and irresponsible, he was now fiercely protective, and took on his responsibilities in stride. It was astonishing.

It was humbling.

Walking up to him, she circled his waist and leaned her cheek against his back, feeling his shoulder blades rise and fall with his sigh as he covered her hands with his own.

“I’m going to miss you. Both of you. So much,” B’Elanna admitted softly and squeezed him tighter.

He sighed again, not happy with her decision, but understanding. “I know. Promise me you’ll be careful.”

She spun him around until he was facing her. “I promise.”

She reached up to kiss him briefly.

“Then I better help you pack.”

oooOooo
Kathryn stood at the door, both of her hands clutching the PADD as if the feel of it pressing against her ribcage helped her damper the excitement it contained.

The door to Chakotay’s quarters slid open, revealing the man himself with a curious, albeit guarded, smile curving his lips when he saw her. “Captain!”

Kathryn forced herself not to glance over his shoulder and into his quarters. She knew for a fact that Seven was in the Astrometrics lab – she had checked before coming over – but it was almost overwhelmingly tempting to check that he was indeed alone.

Instead she looked up at his face. “Is this a bad time?”

“No, not at all. Please, come in,” he said as he shifted to let her through. “Sorry the place is a mess, I was packing.”

Kathryn gave a small smile as she took in the boxes, clothes, uniforms and various objects lying all over the main room. There seemed to be a system to the way he was packing, but it eluded Kathryn’s scientific organizational preferences. To her eyes it all looked like random clusters of belongings.

“I haven’t had a chance to get started myself yet. I think I’m still having trouble believing that our journey is really over, and that we’ll be back on Earth in a couple of days,” she replied as she stepped more fully inside. “If I start packing it’ll make it real, somehow.”

He nodded, hands on his hips, as he gazed at her pensively for a moment. “I know what you mean.” When she didn’t reply, he gestured to her hands still clutching the PADD tightly. “Is everything okay?”

Kathryn startled from her thoughts. “I come bearing gifts. Of sorts,” she said, injecting some humor into her tone as she bowed forward and extended both hands with a flourish to present him with the PADD.

Amused at her formal gesture, his brows furrowed together curiously as he took it. He glanced at her before he looked down and started to read. He tensed and kept still for a few, long seconds, before he glanced back up again. His expression was more confused than happy. “I don’t understand.”

“It’s a pro-”

“Promotion,” he said with her. “Yes, I see that. I just find it hard to believe that Starfleet would want to give me a captaincy not 24 hours after they begrudgingly gave me a full pardon, unless…” His eyes narrowed as they met hers. “It was you. You did this, didn’t you?”

Kathryn recoiled slightly at the accusation in his words, if not his tone, not understanding why this seemed to upset him. She’d thought he would be pleased by the idea of a promotion to captain! After all of the help and service he had provided her over the years, she wanted to give something back, show him that she was proud of him.
She gave a small shrug and walked to the nearest chair, resting her hands on the back of it as she turned back to face him. He hadn’t moved from his spot, but his eyes had followed her across the room.

“You may remember that it is the privilege of a promoted commander to offer three promotions, one of which is commander to captain.”

Kathryn saw it the moment it dawned on him.

She pointed at the PADD he was still holding. “I got one of those myself, about an hour ago. In fact my reaction wasn’t that different from yours.”

He blinked before brightening up a little. “Kathryn, that’s fantastic, congratulations!” he said at last. “Admiral Janeway… Has a nice ring to it,” he added.

Kathryn nodded her acknowledgment as she started moving again, walking toward him, one hand on her hip. “I’m still getting used to it myself. But, with me out of the picture, Voyager will need a new captain. I admit I would feel better about my promotion if I knew that Voyager was in your capable hands. There’s no one I trust more than you, and there’s no one more deserving.”

His eyes held hers searchingly before he looked down. It didn’t bode well that he seemed to be looking for a way to let her down easy.

“I thought you would be pleased,” she said softly to his bowed head after his silence stretched a little too long.

He looked up from the PADD. “I am, of course, I’m flattered – honored – that you would entrust Voyager to me…”

“But?”

“But, now that we’re back, I’m not sure this is what I want – I’m not sure Starfleet is what I want.”

Kathryn could only stare at him in shock. How had she not known that he would not wish to take her place as captain? How had she not known this about him? How had they never seriously discussed what he would do if they returned home? How hadn’t she asked? Or was this sudden lack of interest a recent development, because of his relationship with Seven of Nine?

“I see,” she lied, her eyes still fixed on his face, too stunned by this revelation to say anything else.

“I’m not saying ‘no’,” he clarified at her expression, “I just need some time to think on it.”

“But of course,” she breathed out, still stunned that she could have missed something so important, so vital to understanding him. It suddenly struck her that, without noticing, they had started drifting apart recently. How could she have let that happen? She forced herself out of her surprise. “You have a couple of days before we reach the Solar system. Will that be enough time?”

He nodded. “I’ll have an answer by then.”

“Alright.” With one last glance, Kathryn nodded then turned toward the door.

“Kathryn,” he called just as she was about to open the door, and she spun back around. He was still standing in the same spot. “What made up your mind? About your own promotion? Giving up Voyager, exploration… I know it couldn’t have been an easy decision.”
She considered this in silence for a moment, before she met his eyes again. The answer was almost too simple. “I need a change, Chakotay. It’s time for a change.”

He must have heard something, some kind of emotion in her voice, because his expression shifted with new understanding. “I understand. Finding a new sense of purpose is not easy.” He paused and he inhaled, his eyes studying her for a moment. “I really hope you find what you’re looking for.”

It struck Kathryn how, only a few weeks ago, his reply would probably have been closer to “whatever you’re looking for, Kathryn, we’ll find it together.”

No longer.

oooOooo

A/N: This one was a little angsty, but it’ll get better, I promise!
“Energize.”

One second Kathryn was standing in the transporter room in HQ, the next on the transporter platform aboard Voyager, greeted by the sight of Chakotay, Lieutenant Kim and Seven of Nine (smiling, grinning, and offering a solemn nod, respectively).

Kathryn fought to ignore the way her heart swelled at the familiar faces and surroundings.

Chakotay took a step forward to welcome Kathryn, B’Elanna, Tuvok and Icheb as they stepped down from the platform.

“Welcome aboard,” Chakotay greeted and Kathryn could not quite keep herself from staring at him, her heart lurching in recognition of something, as if it was more aware of him now than it had ever been before. The pleasure was bittersweet and Kathryn shook herself mentally. “I’d offer giving you a tour, but…” He trailed off with a crooked smile.

“It’s great to see you all,” Harry added as if he couldn’t contain his excitement any longer, and went to hug B’Elanna and shake the others’ hands, setting in motion a series of welcoming hand shaking and half hugs as the crewmates reunited. Kathryn watched with a small smile while Chakotay shook Icheb’s hand warmly before Seven hugged the young man briefly, if a little awkwardly.

“It’s good to be back,” B’Elanna said with a happy sigh, grinning from ear to ear as she bent down to pick up her equipment.

It was nice to see her so happy. While Kathryn understood B’Elanna’s reasons for taking up the position with the DQU – why with Tom being a Holodeck programmer designing scenarios for the Academy based on their Delta Quadrant logs, and their six-month old daughter – there was no question in Kathryn’s mind that B’Elanna belonged on Starships. She was an explorer and thrived on challenge and risk. Over the last few months, she had witnessed B’Elanna slowly withdrawing into herself – a bad sign for anyone, but even worse for someone with Klingon heritage. It was as if she was slowly withering away, as if the ties that kept her on solid ground were also slowly shackling her down. Kathryn understood better than anyone how that felt, and why B’Elanna’s grin and excitement suddenly appeared so sincere. That’s because they were.

Kathryn was excited to be back aboard Voyager too – her ship, her home. But contrary to B’Elanna, she couldn’t let that sudden rush of bittersweet pleasure fuel the jumbled pool of emotions that constantly threatened to bubble up to the surface. Because if she acknowledged those feelings, if she allowed them to soar free from her tight grip, she was afraid she would be left empty and vulnerable, with nothing to hold on to other than an overwhelming sense of loss.

“I realize it’s barely morning for you all,” Chakotay added as he stood, hands on his hips, his eyes just gliding over Kathryn’s, “we’ve prepared some quarters for the duration of your stay aboard. Harry will show you to your rooms if you want to get settled and get some sleep before the briefing with the rest of the fleet’s captains.”

“Thanks,” B’Elanna replied, “but I’d rather get to work. We have a lot to do.”

“As do I,” Tuvok stated, while the others nodded in agreement.

“We’ll just drop off your stuff, then. We’ll meet you back in the briefing room, Captain,” Harry said, the last part of the sentence directed at Chakotay, before he grabbed most of their bags and started.
leading the group through the door. Kathryn lagged behind.

Chakotay turned to Seven. “Please instruct our helmsman to set a course for Deep Space 12.”

“Oh of course,” she replied before turning to Kathryn. “It is good to see you, Admiral Janeway. I’m looking forward to this time together.”

Kathryn let out a small gasp at the unexpected disclosure. “As am I, Seven.”

Seven acknowledged her with a nod, then turned on her heels, leaving Chakotay and Kathryn alone. Kathryn followed her with her eyes until she disappeared around the corner, fighting the urge to ask her all the questions that were burning on her tongue.

“Admiral,” Chakotay greeted her at last, his smile nervous rather than completely sincere. He looked like a man who no longer knew where to stand – literally and metaphorically. “Walk with me to the briefing room?” he suggested, his tone strangely formal. This kind of nervous formality was so unusual for him that it reawakened some of the dreadful tension in Kathryn’s stomach.

She couldn’t, wouldn’t let her feelings taint this time she would have with him, the crew, and Voyager, she decided as she squared her shoulders and raised a teasing eyebrow.

“At ease, Captain,” she ordered on a drawl, letting her lips curl up slightly.

His surprise at her teasing turned into a relieved chuckle. “Sorry! For some reason I feel like a young cadet facing his first evaluation! The previous captain left mighty big shoes to fill, I would hate to disappoint.”

It was easy to smile and mean it. “There’s no chance of that.”

“Well, shall we?” he gestured for her to lead the way and he fell in step with her as they veered in the direction of the bridge.

The silence between them stretched as they walked, once again filling the space between them with a strange kind of tense energy. Kathryn tried to shake this new awareness of him – the warmth of his presence, the way his sleeve brushed against hers as they walked, the warm, woody masculine scent she had long associated with him. It only served to remind her of the distance between them: she could almost see that crack in their friendship, right there where their hands didn’t touch. But surely it wasn’t too late to mend it? She cared about him too much to let her own feelings push him away forever, so she took in a deep breath before giving him a small smile.

“What chance your replicator is fully functional?” she asked. Maybe eating together – as they had done countless time over the years – would help ease the tension. “I’ve been fueling on nothing but coffee and wine for the last seven hours, and I’d like to avoid crashing in the middle of the briefing with the captains, if possible. Captain Lionar would greatly disapprove of such behavior!”

His lips quirked up at the quip. “Coffee and wine?” He repeated in surprise. “Dare I ask?”

“I was having some drinks with old Academy friends when we received Neelix’s transmission.”

“Ah. The replicator might be a little rusty – since we’ve been re-commissioned we’ve been mostly using fresh rations, but I’m sure I can make it cook something decent. Wine and coffee aren’t good on an empty stomach, as the Doctor will be happy to remind you,” he teased. “Deck 1,” he ordered when they entered the turbolift.

Kathryn made a face. “Oh, let’s make a secret pact not to tell him, shall we?”
“Cross my heart,” he chuckled, the sound of it lightening the mood between them and creating a soothing balm on Kathryn’s concerns.

“How is the Doctor?”

“Same old, he’ll be happy to see you, though,” he said before giving her a long studying sidelong glance.

Kathryn resisted the urge to squirm under his examination, but self-consciously touched her hair, now long enough to pin up with a hair clip on the back of her head. “What is it?” she asked when she couldn’t bear it anymore.

“You look tired.”

Kathryn’s curiosity switched to a twinge of indignation – after months without any real communication, this was the first thing he had to comment on? She scoffed playfully.

“You’re one to speak,” she retorted in kind. And it was true. It wasn’t obvious to anyone, but Kathryn knew him well enough to notice the faint darkness under his eyes and the way his brows were almost constantly furrowed, as if he perpetually had something on his mind.

He let a small, wry smile touch his lips as his eyes slid to hers again. “Tell me your reasons and I’ll tell you mine.” In that moment, they were back to their old selves and Kathryn chuckled in relief, her heart lifted, as if by magic. Oh how she’d missed him!

“The teal suits you, though,” he added on a smile as the turbolift doors opened.

Kathryn looked down at her uniform – it had taken her months to get used to the Science Division uniform that had replaced the Command red colors she had worn as Captain. For some reason, neither uniform truly seemed to represent her essence anymore – maybe Starfleet should have designed a striped one with both colors! The red cuffs and undershirt just didn’t seem enough.

They made their way across the bridge and entered her- his ready room. Kathryn’s step faltered as she walked in and took it in. Chakotay had barely added anything to the room after she’d emptied it, no doubt keeping his personal touch for his quarters, and it looked strangely empty.

Oh but how she had missed this place!

She quietly made her way to the large window – just in time to admire majestic Saturn as Voyager flew by, barely far enough to avoid its gravitational pull. Chakotay’s Spartan tastes notwithstanding, it was almost like she’d never left.

But she had.

Chakotay didn’t comment on her movements, and instead went directly to the replicator. Kathryn was so distracted by the view that she didn’t hear what he ordered for her. She almost startled when he suddenly reappeared at her side, carrying a tray with what looked and smelled like chicken noodle soup. She vaguely remembered telling him once that this was her favorite comfort food. Kathryn’s stomach grumbled in response.

“Oh Chakotay, you’re a mind reader!”

With a small smile curving his lips, Chakotay set the tray down on the small coffee table facing the window before they both sat on the couch, a respectable distance between them.
“I have to say I was surprised to see Icheb accompany you,” Chakotay started conversationally as she picked up her spoon.

Kathryn nodded. “B’Elanna’s idea.”

It was his turn to nod. “She looks well, happy to be back. How is Miral? And Tom?”

Kathryn nodded around her first sip. Bliss. “Tom’s doing well. B’Elanna could tell you more, of course, but his new life seems to suit him. And Miral, well she is a delight, you should see her!” She paused for a second, meeting his warm gaze. “I have to confess though, I’m a little worried about B’Elanna. I’m hoping being here will do her good.”

He inhaled and leaned his forearms on his thighs, his gaze still studying her. “And you?”

Kathryn froze, but didn’t let it show as she wiped her mouth with her napkin. “Me?”

“Are you happy with your new life?”

She considered it for a while. “Most of the time.” She paused. “Well, maybe half the time,” she said lightly, only half-joking.

He nodded more seriously than she had anticipated. “Is that your reason, then?”

She sighed, remembering his earlier suggestion that they tell each other why they appeared exhausted. “I suppose it is.” Pushing her tray further on the table, she leaned back against the back of the couch, turning slightly to better face him, one of her elbows coming to rest on the back while she leaned her temple against her knuckles. “I just don’t understand myself, Chakotay. I brought the crew home. We made it. What I desired for so long, what I hoped for, I got. So why doesn’t that make me happy? Why can’t I move on?”

She hadn’t meant to reveal so much, but Chakotay had always had that power over her, a power to make her open up to him and reveal some of her most private thoughts. Sitting so close to him, basking in his scent that reminded her of home and adventure and possibilities, staring into his warm dark eyes, it was all too easy to tell him everything. It always had been. And apparently not even the crack in their friendship could change that.

He sighed. “If you ever find the answer to those questions, Kathryn, let me know. I’ve been dealing with something similar myself.”

“You have? But why?”

“I wish I knew.”

“Is that your reason, then?” She asked as she bent forward to resume savoring her soup. She fought the urge to ask him about Seven and her reassignment.

He was silent for a couple of seconds. “Part of it, probably. It’s true I’ve had a lot on my mind recently. Being Captain… with all of its pressures, life and death decisions…” He sighed. “It weighs on me Kathryn, a lot more than I thought it would, based on my previous experience. A lot more than it did you it seems… All of that pressure, those challenges – they seemed to nourish you, egged you on. You made it look ever so easy.”

Kathryn stared at him, amazed that he had noticed, yet at the same time not surprised at all. He went on before she could formulate a response.
“Sometimes I think, that maybe… maybe I should have taken a different path. As you may recall, this assignment was not necessarily what I had in mind when we got back to the Alpha Quadrant.”

She felt his words like a slow stab. Was it possible that he was blaming her for Seven’s request of reassignment and what – she assumed – were problems in their relationship? After all, had she offered him the promotion, he would have been able to do what he wanted, and not have issues of rank and authority affect the power dynamics of their relationship. She hadn’t understood his reluctance to accept the promotion then, but she thought she did now.

“Do you regret taking on the post?” she asked warily.

“Regret? No. But I do wonder about the road not taken sometimes, and whether or not I would have been happier had I turned you down then. And followed my heart’s desires when I had the chance.”

Kathryn felt a tight grip take hold of her heart at the way he avoided her eyes as he said the last few words. She was right – he did blame her! Oh how misguided she’d been when she’d offered him the promotion! Her raw emotions must have shown on her face because he quickly looked away and gave a falsely chipper chuckle.

“Now don’t you worry, I see this all as a challenge, and I’m not quite ready to give up yet.”

Kathryn didn’t smile as she studied him quietly.

“I never meant to force your hand.”

He seemed genuinely confused. “What are you talking about?”

“The promotion to Captain. And taking command of Voyager. I realize now I took advantage of your friendship and it wasn’t fair of me to play that card. I didn’t mean to force your hand,” she repeated.

“You didn’t.” He sighed, casting his eyes down toward his joined hands. “But I won’t deny that I accepted the promotion partly because of you.”

Oh Chakotay…

“You were so excited for me to take command of Voyager, and… it meant a lot to me that you would entrust this ship, our home, to me.”

Kathryn fought the urge to reach out and touch his arm. A few months ago that would have been the natural thing to do, but now… Her grip tightened on her spoon instead. “Chakotay, it’s not too late to change your mind. You can still follow your heart’s desires.”

He gave a wry smile. “Maybe. What about you?”

Puzzled by this vague answer, she bit back the questions that burned on her tongue. “Oh no, it’s too late for me. Now all I can do is learn to make my peace with it.”

He sighed. “What a pair we make… Well, I should go back to the bridge,” he said, slapping his thighs with his palms. “We have another half hour before the long-distance briefing with the rest of the fleet, I’ll make sure the briefing room is ready. Stay here as long as you need. My ready room is your ready room.”

Kathryn scoffed softly at his teasing tone as she watched him stand. “Thanks.”
He lingered for a second, as if he had something else on his mind, but then closed his mouth again and gave a small nod before leaving the room.

oooOooo

B’Elanna was setting up her PADD to display her latest data onto the monitors for the briefing with the fleet captains, when Janeway, Chakotay, and the rest of the senior officers walked into the briefing room. She noticed a couple of unfamiliar faces among the bridge officers – one was a tall Pejoran man who introduced himself as the chief of security, and the other a fair-haired female lieutenant who introduced herself as the helmsman. B’Elanna greeted them with a nod and resumed her preparations while Janeway worked with Tuvok to set up the conference call with the other six captains heading up Janeway’s fleet of the Exploration Division.

B’Elanna tried to get her nervousness under control. It wasn’t like her to be intimidated by anyone or anything, but the importance of what they were about to do, and the sheer pressure placed upon her shoulders to make it succeed and help Neelix and his people… She shook herself and squared her shoulders. She willed her hands to stop shaking as she once again looked over her data to make sure she remembered what to say to bring the captains up to date on her project.

She felt slightly queasy, yet there was something thrilling about it all too. If they succeeded… It was almost too much to even think about it, to hope that all of their hard work these last few months – that B’Elanna’s frustrations – had not been in vain… She had to admit, the shiver of excitement that rolled down her spine felt good, invigorating, like it suddenly awakened her Klingon genes, the part of her that had slowly faded over the last few months. She hadn’t felt that exhilarated in a long time! Being back on Voyager, and to be testing out her work made her feel like she was home again. She hadn’t realized just how much she had missed this life until she had set foot on Voyager again.

The usual pang of guilt tightened her chest: why couldn’t she feel like this when she was on Earth? Why couldn’t her family – those two people she loved the most in the entire universe – be enough to satisfy her?

B’Elanna’s thoughts were interrupted when Seven made her entrance, and it was with unusual curiosity that B’Elanna noticed Janeway’s subtle glance between the former drone and Chakotay – though neither of them even reacted to the other’s presence, not even a smile, or an acknowledging nod.

She’d learned through the grapevine shortly before Voyager’s return to the Alpha Quadrant that Chakotay and Seven were involved, and though it had surprised her, she’d barely given it any thought at all – after all it was none of her business, and she’d had plenty going on in her own life to distract her from what was going in the others’. But now that she was in their presence, she was intrigued, and perhaps felt a little bit of protectiveness over Chakotay. She’d always cared about him – he’d had her back when no one else would – and even though she’d come to appreciate Seven’s tactical expertise over the years, she couldn’t say the same about her strange personality. Added to that the privileged knowledge she now had regarding certain of Janeway’s private feelings, thanks to a late night conversation a few months back, when they’d both had a little too much Vulcan wine…

So it was with a mix of watchfulness and nosiness that she subtly observed the three of them now. Tom’s love of gossip was definitely rubbing off on her…

“B’Elanna, are you ready?” Janeway asked, pulling her out of her thoughts.

“As much as I can be at this point,” B’Elanna replied.

Janeway gave a nod to Tuvok, who pressed the console, bringing to life the various monitors on the
wall and, one by one, the captains’ faces appeared on the screens, most bleary-eyed from being pulled from their sleep.

“Thank you for joining us on such short notice,” Janeway started by way of greeting. “As my original transmission explained, we’ve received some intel with potentially alarming information from our ambassador in the Delta Quadrant. Seven,” she added with a nod in her direction, passing the torch along to her.

Seven gave a nod, and touched her PADD to play Neelix’s transmission on the comms. B’Elanna had listened to his transmission so often while she’d worked on possible theories she knew it by heart, yet there was something – a catch, a tone – in Neelix’s voice that got to her every time. Neelix’s voice wasn’t designed for that kind of darkness – it was supposed to be positive, inquisitive, teasing, the voice of a morale officer. It was as if his tone had shifted from a major key to a minor one. It didn’t fail to constrict B’Elanna’s chest with a painful grip this time either.

“…Whatever happens, I wish you all the best, my friends.”

Once Neelix’s voice faded, there was a heavy silence as the officers and captains digested the content of the message. Chakotay let out a lengthy sigh, his eyes meeting Janeway’s with concern.

Unsurprisingly, it was Seven who broke the silence. “Unfortunately we don’t have any further information on this potential threat.”

“With all due respect to our ambassador, how can you know this isn’t just a tale, Admiral?” Captain Lionar of the Cousteau asked. B’Elanna couldn’t blame him, she’d wondered about that herself, at times.

Janeway straightened. “We don’t. But even if the threat isn’t real, Neelix’s fear certainly is. I want to help him, if we can.”

“How?” He asked.

“Lieutenant Torres’ team has been working on a project to that end these last few months, and we agree that this would be a good opportunity to test it. If it can help Neelix, and allow us to get more information on this ‘wave of darkness’, all the better. Kill two birds with one stone, as it were.”

“The Neutrino Entraptor Project?” Another captain asked.

Janeway turned to B’Elanna, who stood to walk closer to the monitor.

“That’s right. As most of you probably know, since Voyager’s return to the Alpha Quadrant, one of the DQU’s mandates has been to implement more focused research on providing means for starships to travel faster. The ultimate goal being to reestablish faster round-trip voyages to the Delta Quadrant – or other distant parts of the galaxy.”

“Like a more efficient kind of drive?” the same captain suggested.

“Right. Except our project has dealt specifically with artificial singularities. Creating wormholes large enough for starships to travel through.”

There was another moment of heavy silence, as if everyone was holding their breaths, and B’Elanna heard some of the bridge officers gasp.

“And you think you have the means to do that?” Captain Uang of the starship Aspire asked, her voice more awed than skeptical.
B’Elanna hesitated, and Janeway came to her rescue.

“Not quite yet,” the Admiral filled in as she stood and walked closer to the monitors, much in the same way she would have done had the captains actually been on board. “But we think we’re close to having a working prototype for the Neutrino Entraptor.”

“What does it do, exactly?” The tall chief of security asked.

All eyes returned to B’Elanna. “Well, as the name suggests, it traps neutrinos within a containment field, which builds up gravometric energy - this energy is then released within a tachyon beam. This allows for the neutrinos to travel through spacetime and once they reach the receptor at the other end, we’ve hypothesized that the trapped neutrinos will create enough energy to form a stable wormhole in hyperspace between those two points. If it works, Neelix and his people can use the wormhole connecting the two quadrants to escape the Delta Quadrant, and, in seconds, travel across the galaxy to… here.”

“If I understand you correctly, Lieutenant,” Captain Uang clarified, “you need a second device – in this case in the Delta Quadrant – to receive the flow of neutrinos for the wormhole to connect.”

“Yes. That’s why over the last few months I’ve been sharing my research with Neelix, and he’s been assembling his own Entraptor on his side.”

The room felt silent again while everyone considered B’Elanna’s words.

“The theory is sound,” Seven interjected suddenly, and B’Elanna threw her a surprised glance at this unexpected stamp of approval. “Lieutenant Torres, if you’ll allow me I have a number of suggestions that will improve your odds of succeeding.”

Janeway hid a smile at B’Elanna’s surprise before giving a subtle nod in her direction.

“Great,” B’Elanna said, and she could tell by Chakotay’s failed attempts at hiding a smirk that her tone wasn’t quite as enthusiastic as she’d hoped to make it.

Janeway returned her attention to the captains on the monitors. “We have a few hours before we have confirmation that Neelix has received our last transmission detailing our plan,” Janeway went on. “In the meantime, I want us all to rendezvous at Deep Space 12.”

“Deep Space 12! I thought it wasn’t ready yet?” A captain B’Elanna had never met retorted.

“It will be for our purposes, and it’ll make communications with Neelix easier if we’re near the new communications array. They know we’re coming, they’ll make sure we have livable environmental conditions on board the station for the duration of our stay.” She walked back to her chair, standing behind it and leaning her forearms on the back of it. “I know it’s not ideal, but we’ll make do. From there, we’ll spread out in defense formation. If this wave truly is coming this way – I don’t care what it takes, we’ll be there to greet it. Understood?”

The captains nodded.

“You have your orders.”

Tuvok cut the feed and the monitors returned to black.

Janeway turned back to the officers in the room. “I know this is a risk, but I’m not willing to leave Neelix behind if there’s any chance that we might be able to help him. But even beyond my own concern for our friend, keep in mind that the mandate of this division is to explore, and push the
boundaries of the known universe. I believe this project counts as a boundary-breaker, whether we succeed or not.”

The officers nodded in agreement. “Good. B’Elanna, Lieutenant Kim, Seven, you know what you have to do.”

B’Elanna nodded. Right. All she had to do now was actually make the device work before Neelix was engulfed in an unknown darkness bound on annihilation.

No pressure.

“Yes, Admiral,” B’Elanna replied before gathering her PADDs, and heading back to Engineering.

OOOoooo
Interlude

1 week after Voyager’s return to the Alpha Quadrant

It was a cold and foggy afternoon. The mist-kissed wind from the San Francisco Bay rose above the waves and dampened Kathryn’s skin and hair as she stood at the end of the pier closest to Starfleet Command. As much as she loved a balmy sunny day in Northern California, a part of her actually savored the feel of the wet cold against her skin and the salty scent of the wind rising from the waves. The thick fog clinging to the land hid most of the Bay and surrounding land, but it was still beautiful. It reminded her of the old tales of King Arthur and misty Avalon that her sister had raved about when she was a romantic teenager. As much as she would have denied it then, Kathryn’s own little heart had beat just as fast as her sister’s at the thought of King Arthur and Guinevere, the Knights of the Round Table, and their quest for the Holy Grail.

What would be her quest now? The new pips on her collars felt heavy, as if the weight of the Admiralty came with the promotion.

For seven years her sole purpose had been to return Voyager to the Alpha Quadrant, and to reunite the crew with their loved ones. Every morning she’d woken up knowing exactly what had to be done, albeit with a few surprises and obstacles along the way. But that sense of usefulness, of purpose, was no longer relevant now that they were back. And that had been one of the reasons behind her decision to accept the promotion to vice admiral. Surely, her new position would provide her with ample challenges to keep her sharp, and ways to satisfy her scientific and personal ambitions?

Well. She’d be damned if she let this sudden sense of… emptiness… stop her from moving forward with her life. She would find a new purpose, and once she did, she would be able to settle into her new life on Earth and look back on this time as one of great change, but also great potential.

“An intriguing decision,” Seven’s voice from behind her startled Kathryn and she looked over her shoulder, pushing back wet strands of hair from her face.

“What’s that?” Kathryn asked as the younger woman approached her until she was standing next to her. Contrary to Kathryn, Seven had come prepared: with an umbrella. Although all things considered, it didn’t do much to protect her perfectly arranged hair against the damp air and the insidious mist. Seven didn’t seem to mind, though.

“To be standing here in this damp cold, when there is nothing to see.”

“I disagree,” Kathryn replied before taking in a deep breath of brine and leaning her forearms against the railing. “Think about it, when was the last time you’ve felt a wind like this blow against your face, Seven? Not even the Holodeck can replicate something like this. Sometimes it’s just about enjoying the sensations.”

Seven seemed to consider her words, but in the end gave her a small smile. “Perhaps, but I still do not see the appeal.”

Kathryn smirked to herself as she returned her eyes to the dark waves at her feet. “Maybe in time you will.”
“What sensations are you hoping to experience?”

Kathryn gave a small shrug. “That I’m really here, back on Earth. That I’m alive, I suppose.”

“I see.” Though it was clear she didn’t. “Is this why you left the celebrations, to remind yourself that you’re alive? I can understand the impulse, the speeches were so tedious death did seem an appealing option.”

Kathryn stared at her in wry amusement. “Why Seven of Nine, did you just make a joke?”

“Yes. Although the fact that you have to ask seems to suggest that it was a poor one.”

“Actually it wasn’t half so bad. So, aside from the boring speeches, what do you think of Starfleet, and the festivities?”

Seven sighed. “It is much as I imagined. In all honesty I would have gladly eschewed the celebration. To be standing in a room and making idle conversation with strangers is an inefficient use of my time.”

Kathryn scoffed. Preaching to the choir. Although, there had been a time when that kind of formality would have appealed to her and to her sense of duty.

In fact, in her many fantasy scenarios in which she returned to Earth, projected-Kathryn rejoiced in such festivities, in the attention and the protocols. But the real thing wasn’t half as fun or half as satisfying as she had imagined. She was glad and proud that she had accomplished her mission, but what she hadn’t realized while she had fantasized about this moment, was that the return home would come at a price. That she would lose part of herself in exchange for her crew’s happiness and safety.

“However,” Seven went on, “it is good to see the efforts of the crew rewarded. Yours included. I understand this promotion to Admiral implies that you are to leave Voyager and that Chakotay is to replace you as Captain.”

Kathryn nodded, unsure where she was going with this. “That’s right.”

“You will be missed.”

Surprised at this admission, Kathryn dismissed the compliment to better hide the bittersweet pain that her words evoked. “Oh I’m sure Chakotay will do such a fine job, and you’ll all be so busy, you won’t even have time to miss me.”

“Perhaps.”

“So I assume Chakotay has asked you to stay on Voyager, then?” Kathryn asked after a moment, unable to stop the words from crossing her lips.

“He has pointed out the option as one of many possibilities, however he believes this is a decision I need to make on my own. So after weighing my options, I have indeed decided to remain on board for the time being.” She inhaled uncomfortably as her eyes traveled as if to pierce the mist ahead. “I’ve observed that most of the humans I have encountered here are uneasy in my presence. Until Terrans have accustomed themselves to the idea of my being here, I believe it for the best. Besides, Voyager is the only home I’ve ever truly known as an individual.”

“I understand.” Kathryn studied her profile for a moment. Surely the fact that Chakotay would remain on board had played a part in her decision too? “Chakotay must be pleased with your
decision.”

Seven gave a small sigh. “In truth, my decision appears to perplex him, but he dismissed it as “nothing” when I inquired.”

Kathryn fought hard to keep her gaze away as she desperately tried not to read anything into this. None of your business, she reminded herself. “Well, he’s probably just a little anxious with his new command.”

“Perhaps.”

“Seven, can I ask you a question?”

Seven threw her a curious look. “You do not usually require my permission.”

Kathryn couldn’t stop a small smile from curving her lips. “It’s an expression, usually implying that the question one means to ask may be uncomfortable.”

Seven raised an eyebrow. “Proceed.”

“You and Chakotay… How long has it been going on?”

“If you refer to our “dating,”” she started, the term still sounding alien coming from her, “then it is a relatively recent development.”

Kathryn held her breath as she shifted to look at her. “How recent?”

“Six weeks and two days. May I ask you a question?”

Kathryn would have smiled if the tight grip on her heart hadn’t been so painful at this revelation. She mentally scrambled to try to remember what was going on aboard Voyager six weeks ago; to figure out if she could attribute Chakotay’s inclinations to a specific moment. She couldn’t think of anything. “Sure,” she gasped, doing her utmost not to let her emotions betray her.

Thankfully, Seven didn’t seem to notice Kathryn’s turmoil as she went on. “Why are you really out here in the cold, rather than celebrating with your crew and their families? It is most uncomfortable.”

The truth was, Kathryn wasn’t sure. One moment she had been drinking champagne, standing with the newly promoted Lieutenant Kim, Tom and Admiral Paris, and the next the room had felt too small, the air too close. For the first time in her life, she had felt claustrophobic.

“I just needed a breath of fresh air,” she replied as she straightened.

“Are you not coming back to the event? The others have been looking for you.”

She pushed herself from the railing. “Sure. Lead the way.”

Once back inside, Kathryn separated from Seven to make a quick stop in the ladies room to fix her hair as best as she could before returning to the large Starfleet Command ballroom where the “welcome home” ceremony and celebration were taking place.

When she walked back in, she found Chakotay was returning as well (though from where she didn’t know), a distracted look on his face. He gave her an acknowledging nod when he saw her and they walked into the ballroom together.
“I haven’t had a chance to officially congratulate you on your promotion,” he said, keeping his voice just above a whisper while they rejoined the rest of the crew. Most of them were dispersed into small groups, chatting with each other, their families, or other Starfleet officials. “It probably doesn’t mean anything, but… I’m proud of you, Kathryn.”

Kathryn’s heart almost broke at the softly spoken words. It meant more to her than he could imagine. “Let me return the sentiment, Captain,” she replied with a formal nod and a smile, though she couldn’t quite help the sudden stinging behind her eyelids. She blinked it away.

“Thank you.” He furrowed his brows, as if there was still something on his mind.

“What is it?”

“I’ve just received my orders. I’m to take Voyager and its crew to patrol the Cardassian border the day after tomorrow.”

Kathryn swallowed with difficulty. “So soon.” She’d spoken it so softly, she’d be surprised if he’d heard her. She quickly recovered. “I guess the admiralty took advantage of my distraction the last few days to make plans for Voyager without consulting me. I’ll give them an earful as soon as I get the chance. We’ll see how fast they’ll regret making me an admiral!” When she looked back at him, Chakotay was smiling as he gazed at her. Was it wishful thinking or was there a kind of tenderness in his gaze and smile?

“It is a little soon,” he agreed, “I wish I’d had more time to prepare, but don’t worry about Voyager, I’ll take good care of her.”

A waiter moved past them and Kathryn stopped him to grab two glasses of champagne from his tray, and handed one to Chakotay. She was careful not to let their fingers touch when he took it.

“I have no doubt about that, but the Cardassian border?” She leaned a little closer so she could lower her voice. “Really? Why send former Maquis there, if not to taunt them?” Kathryn asked, taking advantage of his bent head to speak more directly into his ear. Like she’d done countless times when they’d sat in their respective chairs on the bridge of Voyager. But this time it felt different – as if no matter how close together they stood, they could never close the gap that now stood between them.

“Actually, I requested the assignment.”

“Why?”

“Closure. I’d like to see what it’s really like out there. Find out what happened for myself. And if Voyager’s presence there can help Starfleet keep up its operations in that area, all the better.”

Kathryn sighed as she moved away and grabbed a plate from the buffet table. “I think I understand. Have you made any progress assembling your crew? Seven told me she was remaining on board.”

A sheepish expression crossed his face for a fraction of a second before he nodded, watching her movements as she dumped a pile of greens onto her plate. “I want this to be voluntary, so I’ve been compiling a list of crewmen and women who told me they’d like to join. And Starfleet’s made some suggestions to fill in some of the positions vacated by those who’ve decided to join your Delta Quadrant Unit. Have you heard that Tom’s considering a position at the Academy?” He asked with an incredulous grin and Kathryn nodded as she moved further down the table for vegetables.

“As a Holodeck programmer of teaching scenarios, yes I’ve heard.” Chakotay followed her, even though he made no move to make a plate for himself. She figured he must have eaten while she’d
been on the pier.

“I’m still waiting on B’Elanna’s answer though,” he said.

“I offered her a research position at the DQU, but I doubt she’ll take it. I think she’d be bored out of her mind being stationed on Earth.”

“Oh I’m sure you could make life interesting for her. You’ve certainly kept me on my toes, these last seven years.”

“I can’t decide if that’s a good thing, or a bad thing!” She teased, but it sounded forced to her ears.

Six weeks and two days, Seven had said. If only they’d returned home six weeks and two days earlier...

He pretended to consider her comment. “Mostly good… I think,” he teased back, though his tone was no longer in it, his voice softer – as if he’d guessed her train of thoughts, or seen it reflected in her expression.

She couldn’t resist the urge to look into his eyes, even knowing that he would probably be able to read everything she was feeling in her expression. When she met his eyes, they were softened with some raw emotion that she couldn’t quite identify. Regret? Pity? Guilt?

He opened his mouth, and-

“Admiral Janeway! Captain Chakotay!” Admiral Hayes interrupted. It took Kathryn every ounce of willpower to tear her gaze away from Chakotay’s. “Forgive the interruption! I just came to congratulate you both on your promotions. I’m looking forward to working with you both.”

“Thank you,” Kathryn replied while Chakotay nodded his thanks.

“I noticed that Mr. Tuvok isn’t here, this evening,” the Admiral added conversationally. Kathryn was so intent on focusing her attention elsewhere – anywhere – that she almost missed Chakotay’s frustrated working of his jaw or how he gulped down a large sip of champagne. She briefly wondered why he should be annoyed. Saved by the bell, more likely!

“I’m afraid not, he’s taken a leave of absence on Vulcan. We dropped him off on the way. A personal matter to attend to.” Tuvok was adamant that his family would be able to help cure his condition. Kathryn dearly hoped so! “He plans on returning from his leave as soon as he is able.”

“Of course, of course, who could blame him? I’m certain he was eager to reunite with his family, after all this time.”

“Yes, although as a purely logical being, he’s the first one to deny it!”

Admiral Hayes chuckled dutifully. “Yes, well do send him my regards when you next speak to him.”

“I will,” Kathryn promised before the Admiral excused himself.

When Kathryn returned her gaze to Chakotay, he appeared to have recovered from the interruption.

“Well, I should get going, there’s still a lot I need to do before the deployment.” His eyes traveled over her shoulder. “And there’s B’Elanna, I should go and ask if she’s made up her mind. Excuse me.” His nod had such an air of finality that Kathryn fought the urge to run back outside, into the fog.
Instead, she finished her champagne, squared her shoulders, and stubbornly refused to watch him go.
Chapter 6

A/N: Here’s a little break from the angst, some plot development and good news for J/C…

Chapter 6

Neelix drummed his fingers on the table as he listened, trying to contain his impatience. After receiving news of the rumored path of the “Wave of darkness” of legends, Dexa had called in a council meeting to discuss the settlement’s options. Should they evacuate? Stay? Find some way to resist or to deflect it? Neelix had yet to disclose his own thoughts and ideas – or the fact that he had already contacted the Federation. The odds that Admiral Janeway and B’Elanna would be able to help were too low to get anyone’s hopes up just yet.

First, they had to convince the meeting attendees to take the threat seriously. They had been sitting here for over an hour now, yet Dexa was still trying to do just that. And it wasn’t going well.

“It’s like I said at the beginning of this so-called meeting,” a grumpy old man called Xar was complaining, “this is pure nonsense! An old tale told by Talaxians to make themselves look important!” He added with a nasty look in Neelix’s direction. Even though most of the asteroid’s population had known Talax in their lifetime, many viewed themselves as a separate entity altogether. It had taken a while for Neelix to understand, but he now realized that it often was at the heart of tensions among the asteroid inhabitants.

Even though his insides were boiling with annoyance at Xar’s narrow-mindedness, Neelix’s expression softened in empathy when he saw Dexa draw a long sigh. This was going nowhere.

“Maybe,” Dexa conceded. “But what if you’re wrong? What if the threat is real? Maybe we should at least prepare for the eventuality! My cousin Nirax has taken his ship to gather some more information on what is going on, he should be back so-”

“This is a waste of my time-” Xar interrupted. “It’s enough that you two have had us rebuild starships and opened up trade with outsiders, now you’re-”

Another attendee shushed him. “Just listen to what Dexa has to say, Xar!”

“You all can stay if you want, but I’m not going to waste another second listening to this…” Xar stated as he rose to his feet and threw Dexa and Neelix a disgusted look. To Neelix’s dismay, after Xar rose, two others followed, and then two more, and then five, until there were only a handful of people left.

Dexa dropped into her seat in discouragement and Neelix reached out to touch her hand. It was but a small reassurance.

“Look,” Neelix started as he stood and rocked on the balls of his feet while he searched for the right words, “I know I’m still kind of an outsider here, and I understand your reluctance to hear me, to hear us, but… I’ve come to know each and everyone of you over the last few months, and you’ve come to know me too. You know that, like you, this place is my home now. I’ve come to know it, cherish it. And I don’t want to leave. But we need to consider the possibility-”

“Mother! Neelix!”
Neelix startled when Brax’s voice echoed through the chamber. A moment later, the boy appeared through the doorway, panting as if he’d been running.

Dexa jumped to her feet. “Brax, you should be in bed, what are you—”

“They’ve replied, Mother! Neelix, Starfleet has sent a reply! Everyone, come and listen!”

Neelix shared a stunned look with Dexa before he joined Brax, ignoring the looks he was getting from those who had stayed as he started running towards his communication room. He was vaguely aware that several of the meeting attendees followed.

Once in the communications room, Neelix licked his lips nervously as his fingers hesitated over the playback command. Brax approached to take his hand and smiled up at him.

“Go on, it’s good news. I was here when it came through,” he admitted with a guilty look at his mother.

Squeezing his hand and sharing a nervous look with Dexa, Neelix pushed the button.

There was a little bit of static, but then… “Neelix, this is Admiral Janeway.” Neelix chuckled in relief at the sound of his friend’s voice and grabbed Dexa’s hand. “We’ve just received your transmission. I hope you and your people are still safe. Rest assured that we take your concerns very seriously. I’m gathering the fleet, and B’Elanna is readying her latest Entraptor instructions for you, she should transmit them to you shortly.”

“They came through just before this message!” Brax told them before Neelix returned his attention to the message.

“We hope to be able to start testing it soon. However the 12-hour delay in communication will be problematic for coordinating our efforts. We’re trying to come up with a way to speed up the transmissions, we’ll keep you posted.” There was a brief pause, and Janeway’s voice took on a softer, concerned tone. “You must be aware, though, that all of this is very theoretical at the moment, and will likely be extremely risky. I have every confidence in B’Elanna and her team, but I thought I should point that out anyway. Until we have more for you, please tell us more about this ‘Wave of Darkness’ you described. What do you know about it aside from the story you told us? I hope to hear back from you soon. In the meantime, be safe.”

Janeway’s voice faded out, leaving Neelix and the others standing still as the words sank in.

“Neelix, what does this mean? What is this device they’re talking about?” One of the meeting attendees, a woman named Graxia, asked.

Neelix inhaled. This was just what he needed to give him the strength to keep working on convincing the asteroid’s population that the threat could be real. “Yes, I have a lot to tell you all. Let’s go back to the meeting chamber.”

“Can I stay and send the reply, Neelix?” Brax asked excitedly and Neelix couldn’t help but share a smile with Dexa.

“Go on,” she told Neelix, “I’ll stay with Brax and help with the message.”

“Thank you. Oh, and try to hail your cousin Nirax again,” he said in a lower voice, “we’re going to need his telemetry. The sooner the better.”

“We’ll call him back,” Brax stated, with an air of someone who took his responsibilities very
Neelix’s smile widened tenderly before he nodded and touched Brax’s cheek. Then he turned on his heels and headed back the way they’d come.

Brax’s voice drifted to his ears even as his feet took him down the stairs. “Hello, my name is Brax, I’m Neelix’s son. We’re all fine. Thank you for replying to our message.”

Confident that his family had things under control, Neelix started telling the others what he’d been doing these last few months.

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“No, if we increase the force of the energy burst, the gallium will revert back to its liquid form and the containment field will fail within a nanosecond of the test!” B’Elanna argued as she stared at the monitor.

Icheb recoiled a little from the tone, and B’Elanna softened when she saw his distressed expression. She was putting an awful lot of pressure on him. “Look, it’s not a bad idea, but I just don’t think it will work. Tom has been running simulations from his Hololab on Earth, he should have the results soon. But for now, we need to consider another solution to stabilize the containment field.”

“What about changing the casing materials to ensure that there isn’t any leak of energy within the main transcapacitor?” Harry suggested.

They were silent for a moment as they all considered it.

“That will only delay the inevitable,” Seven’s voice suddenly chimed in as she made her entrance into Engineering.

B’Elanna threw her a glance. “Thanks for joining us,” she said sarcastically. “What took you so long?” They’d been at it for hours already!

Seven appeared unaffected by B’Elanna’s flippant tone. “I had to teach Ensign Lik how to operate the Astrometrics search engines. With my impending transfer to the Delta Quadrant Unit, Voyager will require someone to take over from me, and I will not be able to train a suitable replacement while I work with you on the Neutrino Entraptor.”

Oh. Wait. “What?” B’Elanna blurted out at this news. Seven transferring to the DQU? When had that happened?

“Show me what you have so far,” Seven ordered, oblivious to the others’ surprise at her announcement, as she reached out and Icheb handed her his PADD. B’Elanna exchanged a look with Harry, who shrugged, admitting his ignorance about any transfer.

“You’re transferring to the DQU?” B’Elanna repeated.

“As soon as we have accomplished this mission.”

“In what capacity?” She asked, her voice sounding a little more hostile than she intended.

Seven took her eyes away from the PADD just long enough to briefly glance at B’Elanna. “That has not yet been determined. Admiral Janeway will assign me where she believes my expertise will be best used.”
“Huh.” B’Elanna’s own… reluctance… to work with Seven notwithstanding, she could definitely use her help with some of her research. And this news held some interesting implications regarding her new interest in gossip...

She returned her attention to the core of the device, fiddling with its internal sensor. “What did Chakotay say when you told him you wanted to leave Voyager?”

Seven didn’t so much as blink at B’Elanna’s very personal question. Strange woman. “Very little. But I believe he is pleased with my decision.”

B’Elanna’s brows furrowed in confusion even as she kept on working. “Pleased? But aren’t you two-”

She stopped when she spotted Harry behind Seven shaking his head, his thumb slicing across his throat – clearly telling her to stop talking, as if this was a dangerous or forbidden topic.

B’Elanna replied with a defensive shrug.

Seven ignored them. “If you mean to ask whether we are involved in a romantic relationship, the answer is no. Although we were, for a short while. Several months ago.”

They had broken up? It was both surprising and not surprising! B’Elanna had known it wouldn’t last! She’d even told Janeway a few months back.

But how in the world had this particular piece of gossip not reached the DQU before then? It explained her and Chakotay’s purely professional interactions, though. She briefly wondered if Janeway now knew what she clearly hadn’t three months ago. She looked at Seven curiously. “What happened?”

“We deemed the relationship unviable. It was terminated.”

B’Elanna scoffed at the bland stating of the obvious. Didn’t that woman ever feel anything? “So you said. You don’t seem upset.” The sensor seemed to work perfectly, so there was no need to recalibrate it.

“In what way should I be “upset”?”

“I don’t know, most people when they end a relationship usually feel something!”

Seven’s brows furrowed together as she considered it, but then her expression cleared. “Such feelings are irrelevant. It is, as humans say, water under the bridges.”

“Bridge. Under the bridge. But you must be hurt, or angry, or something!” B’Elanna insisted, for some reason incredulous of Seven’s alleged ability not to feel anything – not when B’Elanna usually felt so damn much. “You lost a good man, there!”

“An interesting notion. But he was never mine to lose.”

B’Elanna frowned, ignoring the way both Icheb and Kim tried to appear like they weren’t listening by staring intensely at the readings on B’Elanna’s tricorder.

“What does that mean?” B’Elanna asked.

“Bridge to Lieutenant Torres,” a disembodied voice interrupted through B’Elanna’s combadge, and B’Elanna thought she spied a relieved expression cross Seven’s face. Though it had come and gone
so fast she might have dreamt it. She felt guilt for pushing her only for a fraction of a second.

“Torres here,” she responded.

“You have an incoming transmission from Tom Paris. He has the results of his latest simulation.”

“Thanks, patch him through to Engineering.”

B’Elanna couldn’t help but smile when Tom’s face appeared on the monitor. It had only been a few hours but her heart swelled at the sight of him. This feeling, this pull, she felt towards him suddenly reminded her why she had chosen to stay on Earth in the first place. Standing here in Engineering aboard Voyager and missing Tom and Miral, it was all too easy to forget her struggles of the last few months. She fought the urge to ask him about Miral, and how her baby was doing, but this was a conversation better held in private.

“Hey guys, miss me?” Tom greeted with his typical boyish grin, and they replied in kind. Tom’s face turned serious. “I don’t suppose you’ve heard anything more from Neelix?”

“Even if we can improve the speed of the transmission, it’ll still be a few hours before we can expect any reply,” B’Elanna replied. “What have you got for us?”

He nodded, acknowledging the change of subject. “I just finished the latest simulation based on the parameters you provided me. You’re getting so close to a working prototype, but…”

“It failed,” B’Elanna finished for him. “What went wrong this time?”

“The containment field destabilized 2.3 nanoseconds after the wormhole was established.”

B’Elanna sighed as she exchanged a look with Icheb. “But the wormhole connected?” She asked, searching for a little shred of good news.

Tom grinned proudly. “It did. For 2.3 nanoseconds.”

“That is no small accomplishment, however, based on my calculations, the devices will need to remain connected for 3.5 seconds for the wormhole to remain stable enough to send matter through,” Seven informed.

“3.5 seconds!” Icheb repeated with more emotion than B’Elanna had ever heard from him. “To make it stable for so long will require an extraordinary amount of energy!”

“I know, but we have to make it work,” B’Elanna retorted. In fact, it was exactly this problem that had kept Reg Barclay from attempting a full-size wormhole the year before. But the Entraptors should be able to circumvent this problem.

“I believe the problem is not in the strength of the containment field, but in the amount of energy generated by the trapped neutrinos inside the device,” Seven replied. “Instead of generating an overwhelming outward burst of neutrinos, I suggest releasing a steady flow until it builds up enough to sustain a wormhole. Free of the stress of a burst of energy, the containment field should hold. And we can compensate as the energy released by the trapped leptons builds up.”

B’Elanna slowly turned back to Tom’s face on the monitor. “It could work.”

Tom nodded. “I’ll alter the parameters for my next simulation. Stay tuned,” he said before he cut the transmission.
“In the meantime,” Seven continued, “we should focus our attention on improving the rate of neutrino capture within the core of the device, and coming up with an adequate launching sequence for when the device is ready to be activated.”

“Well, now that Seven’s here, I need to get back to the bridge,” Harry said, looking altogether too happy to be leaving. “Good luck.”

B’Elanna waved him off and rubbed her face. “I’m going to need more coffee.”

After the briefing with the captains and while B’Elanna’s team worked on the Entraptor, Kathryn had retired to her assigned quarters to catch some sleep before they reached the rendezvous point at Deep Space 12. But, she’d had so much on her mind, what with the mission and the memories that being on Voyager brought forth to her mind, that it had taken her a long time to fall asleep. And when she finally did fall asleep, it was for a fitful rest, disturbed by strange dreams of infinite voids and failing wormholes.

As she made her way to the mess hall now, fresh out of a sonic shower, Kathryn tried to rub sleep out of her eyes, but to no avail.

Her mind was still filled with the disturbing images of her dreams – of Neelix’s twisted grin when he told her: “Glad you could make it to the end of all things, Captain!” Or of watching helplessly as Chakotay was slowly swallowed by that wave of darkness. In her nightmare, Chakotay had seemed oblivious, awed even, by what was happening to him. At one point, his features half devoured by shadows, he’d turned to her and said: “what’s taking you so long?” Freudian psychologists of the old days would have had a ball deciphering that one, Kathryn thought wryly.

The mess hall was crowded by the time she reached it, and Mr. Chell was busy cooking breakfast behind the counter. The enticing aromas made Kathryn’s mouth water. But first, coffee. She absentmindedly filled up her cup and grabbed what she needed for a quick breakfast.

She was distracted from her thoughts when Seven walked in and, seeing Kathryn, walked over to her table.

“Seven! How are the simulations going?”

“As efficiently as possible under the circumstances,” she said as she stood by the table. “I volunteered to gather some sustenance for Lieutenant Torres.”

Kathryn could only stare at her. “You volunteered?” A few months ago she would have delegated such trivial errand to someone else. Harry Kim, most likely.

“Yes. I sensed that she needed some time to process the news of my impending transfer to the Delta Quadrant Unit.”

“Ah,” Kathryn smiled wryly. She could only imagine B’Elanna’s reaction. Kathryn hadn’t thought to warn her. She stood and gathered her empty tray and coffee. “Speaking of your transfer, we should discuss your assignment when we have a chance. I’d like to hear your thoughts about your future position there. Walk with me?”

Seven went to retrieve coffee and fruit for the others and the two of them started to walk towards the turbolift.

“I confess I’m curious Seven, why did you request the transfer?” Kathryn asked, hoping her tone
came across as conversational, and not outrageously nosy. “The last time we spoke about it, you were quite adamant to remain on Voyager for a while.”

Seven sighed almost imperceptibly. “Circumstances have changed. And I believe my expertise would be put to better use in the Delta Quadrant Unit, especially considering Lieutenant Torres’ new research. Had I known sooner that artificial singularities were the object of her work, I probably would not have waited this long to make the request. And hopefully the Federation has grown used to my being here, and will value whatever contribution I can make.”

Kathryn sighed. “I hope so too.” They reached the turbolift and Kathryn stopped. This was where they parted ways. “Well, we’ll discuss the rest when this is over.”

Seven gave a curt nod.

Kathryn watched her go pensively until the turbolift doors fully closed. Once again she couldn’t help but wonder…

“Just in time,” Chakotay said when he spotted Kathryn stepping out of the turbolift, “we’re almost at Deep Space 12.”

Kathryn took a sip of her coffee as she walked around the consoles and down the stairs to join him, nodding to the bridge officers on her way. “It’s not a coincidence, I planned my alarm clock according to our course.”

“Of course you did.” A small crooked grin. He gestured for her to take the Captain’s chair, but as much as she appreciated the gesture, it wouldn’t be right. She shook her head. She’d rather stand anyway.

“I’ve been wondering,” Chakotay started, hands on his hips as he stood next to her, “assuming that we succeed in opening up a wormhole and getting Neelix and his people out of the anomaly’s path by bringing him here, what’s the next step? What are you planning to do if it really does head our way?”

He was speaking softly enough that none of the bridge officers could hear his words and Kathryn instinctively leaned closer. She nodded, understanding his eagerness to be ready. Unfortunately she hadn’t planned this far ahead yet.

“The plan is to have a plan by then,” she whispered back. “In truth, Chakotay, right now I’m just hoping that once Neelix and his friends are out of danger, we’ll have plenty of time to figure out what it is and how to stop it if need be. As much as I’d love to have a perfect solution right now, we just don’t have enough information to-”

“Forgive me, Captain?” Lieutenant Harris, the helmsman, interrupted. “We’ve arrived at the coordinates.”

Chakotay nodded. “Slow down to quarter impulse for our final approach toward the Deep Space station. Put it on screen.”

“Aye aye Captain.”

Kathryn turned her attention to the viewscreen as Deep Space 12 came into view. It was sleek-looking station, even in its unfinished state, though it was smaller than other Federation similar constructions. Kathryn noted that both the Solstice and Aspire had arrived already, each starship anchored at its respective dock.
Seeing that his pilot had the docking under control, Chakotay returned his attention to Kathryn, his hesitant glance studying her face for a moment, as if gaging her mood. Kathryn raised an expectant eyebrow in response and he cleared his throat. “I know this is not the time, but…when this is over, there’s something I’d like to discuss with you.”

“What is it?”

“It’s of a… personal nature.”

Kathryn had only had time to throw him a curious glance before her combadge came to life.

“Astrometrics to Admiral Janeway.”

Kathryn pressed her badge, sending Chakotay an apologetic glance. “Go ahead Ensign.”

“I’ve completed charting the course for the wormhole.”

“Thank you Ensign Lik, I’ll be there shortly.” Kathryn met Chakotay’s gaze. “So it begins.”

He nodded, but his hand touched her arm lightly, stopping her before she could step away. “Finish this conversation later?”

She considered him for a long second, and in the end gave a nod.

Just as she was about to leave, her badge came to life again, stopping her in her tracks. “Tuvok to Admiral Janeway.”

“Go ahead, Tuvok.”

“I have good news to relate. The team working on accelerating the transmissions have devised a way to cut the transmission lag by half.”

Kathryn met Chakotay’s eyes, the concerned frown that had been darkening his features since she’d come on board brightening with the news. “That’s great, Tuvok. Send an update to Neelix as soon as you get the chance, letting him know of the new time delays between transmissions. And let B’Elanna know as well.”

“Understood.”

Kathryn returned her attention to Chakotay. “I’ll meet you back here as soon as I’m able.”

He gave a formal nod, before returning his attention to the docking procedures.

When she arrived in Astrometrics, Ensign Lik was still at the console and he straightened nervously when he saw her.

“As you were, Ensign,” Kathryn told him as she joined him at the console. “Show me what you have so far.”

“Yes, Admiral.”

They went over Lik’s findings for projected trajectories for the wormhole, and a location where to launch the Neutrino Entraptor from and discussed them for a while, debating certain choices for the originating burst, or from where exactly they were to launch the device once it was ready. The best spot appeared to be thousands of kilometers outside the range of the station, a short distance by Delta Flyer.
She was about to double back to the bridge, when her combadge crackled once again. “Bridge to Admiral Janeway, we’re receiving a transmission from Neelix.”

“I’m on my way.”

When she reached the bridge again, Tuvok was there as well, and Kathryn acknowledged him with a nod.

“Let’s hear it.”

Tuvok pressed the console and the message started. “Hello, my name is Brax, I’m Neelix’s son. We’re all fine. Thank you for replying to our message.” Kathryn exchanged a smile with Harry, then a female voice, Dexa, took over. “Neelix has charged us to tell you that he has received your transmission, and is working on gathering information as we speak. He and our son Brax have been assembling the device you call Neutrino Entraptor, and he hopes that you can coordinate your efforts to open a portal before the Darkness gets here.” There was a pause, and when she spoke again, Dexa’s voice was softer, tinged with fear, but also determination. “I hate to have to leave my home, but Neelix has told me so much about you, I know I can learn to make a home with you all, as Neelix once did.” There was another pause. “We will contact you again soon.”

“The process to accelerate the transmission appears to function perfectly,” Tuvok informed, filling the silence that Dexa’s fear had left hanging and heavy on the bridge. “The timecode seems to suggest that they sent it about six hours ago, half of the time it took before.”

“Good. Have you alerted them of the shorter transmission delays?”

“I have.”

“Good, let’s prepare our response. Let them know that we-”

“Engineering to the bridge.”

Kathryn stopped mid-sentence at the sound of B’Elanna’s voice over the comms and shared a look with Chakotay.

“Go ahead,” he said. “We have Admiral Janeway with us.”

“Good, she’ll want to hear this too. We just finished reviewing the latest simulations results – we checked them over and over and… we think the Neutrino Entraptor is ready for testing.”

A/N: Next up: Chakotay's point of view!
A/N: This interlude is basically a continuation of the previous one, set the day of the promotion ceremony. This one is from Chakotay’s point of view. I hope you're still with me!

1 week after Voyager’s return to the Alpha Quadrant

Chakotay sighed in relief when he stepped into his temporary quarters at Starfleet Headquarters. He removed his uniform jacket and walked to the replicator, not even bothering to turn on the lights.

He opened his mouth to order some hot tea, but changed his mind at the last second. “Scotch.”

He rarely drank alcohol – replicated or otherwise – outside of social events, but tonight, after the interminable promotion ceremony and the following festivities, he needed the fortifier – and a distraction from the image that was imprinted in his mind. The one of Kathryn’s eyes as she had pinned his collar with his Captain’s pips. There had been something in them, a kind of sorrow hidden behind the pride that had tugged at his heart even while her cool, gentle fingers had scraped against his neck.

He’d seen it again, that expression of dismay, earlier this very evening by the buffet tables, her eyes wide and unblinking when they met his. Chakotay had felt the pain of her gaze acutely, fueled by his intuition that, somehow, he was the cause of her distress. Yet he couldn’t for the life of him figure out what he could have done to provoke it. He thought he knew her better than anyone, at least among the crew, but this particular Janeway mystery eluded him completely.

True, her attitude toward him had shifted subtly since their return to the Alpha Quadrant, as if the closer they got to Earth, the more distance she was attempting to put between them. But he had attributed it to the changes that loomed over them, and he’d been comforted by the belief that things would settle eventually.

He’d been utterly convinced of that, until tonight.

It occurred to him that she might have found out about his relationship with Seven and was upset with him, but he quickly dismissed that as a ridiculous notion. She had long drawn a very clear line between them, and he had always respected its boundaries, no matter how painful it had been sometimes, especially after Mark’s letter, when she’d started opening her heart up to other men.

No, it had to be something else.

Could she be unconsciously blaming him for taking Voyager from her? It didn’t make sense; she had been the one to offer the command to him – no, to ask him to take the command. Or maybe she was distressed, not because of what he’d taken from her, but because of what she’d given up. Maybe, despite her best intentions, she now saw him as a reminder of a life she had loved, but given up, for reasons he couldn’t quite fathom. But they were hers, and that was all he needed to know to respect them.

Well, he couldn’t think about this now. If distance was what Kathryn needed – to mourn the end of their journey, or accept the changes that were bound to turn all of their lives upside down – then he would give it to her.

He walked to the large window offering a breathtaking view of San Francisco’s nighttime skyline,
and took a sip of scotch, sighing as the warmth of it as it traveled down his throat.

He’d told Kathryn he wasn’t anxious about his first mission as an officially reinstated Starfleet commander, but he was. Oh he had enough experience in command positions not to be worried about his leadership skills – he knew he had them; no, his anxiety came from other quarters.

For one there was Kathryn’s utter confidence in him, and in the belief that he would take care of Voyager as well as she had. Of course he was ready to do everything and anything to honor that confidence, but to command Voyager, of all starships, added a lot of pressure to his first real command since the Maquis. It was personal. Voyager was a home of sorts, not just some borrowed property he had to be careful not to scratch.

And then there was the mission – the one he had requested on an impulse – to patrol the Cardassian border. He’d spoken the truth when he’d told Kathryn that he sought closure. But he was afraid of what he might find over there. Would there be any sign of his fallen comrades? Any kind of monument honoring their sacrifices? He wasn’t going there for retribution, he wasn’t that man anymore, but he knew that once there, he would have to summon every ounce of will power not to succumb to that dark impulse. It was still within him, he knew it, but he couldn’t – wouldn’t – let it take a hold of him again. Nevertheless, the possibility scared him. This would be a test of his commitment to his new command like no other.

And last but not least, there was his relationship with Seven.

A week ago, when they had still been thousands of lightyears away from Earth, he had been perfectly happy with the slow pace of their relationship, trusting that the feelings that were slowly reawakening in his heart were parts of the sum people called love; that in time, they would make up a whole, to replace the one that had been denied to him by circumstances and command structures.

But now that he was a Starfleet captain…

A long time ago, when he’d been Captain of the Valjean, he had been involved with a woman under his command, and it had ended in catastrophe. Under no circumstances did he wish to go through something like that again, no matter how different Seven might be from Seska.

He could still recall Kathryn’s words, whispered in his ear, so long ago, when they’d discussed establishing a policy regarding fraternization: “As Captain that’s a luxury I don’t have…”

He hadn’t known her very well then, but his heart had leapt into his throat nonetheless. But now he understood her words better than ever.

So the choice that had plagued him since Kathryn had offered him the promotion was this: Captaincy and Voyager, or his relationship with Seven. In his mind there was little room for compromise, short of reassigning Seven to a different starship, or even the Delta Quadrant Unit. But that wouldn’t be fair to her, not when she’d been so determined to remain aboard Voyager when he’d discussed her options with her.

Liar, a little voice echoed in his mind. Deep down you’re just relieved to have a reason to end the relationship with a woman you like and admire, but don’t really love.

He drank the thought away, but…could this be? Could he have been so wrong? Could he have misjudged the nature of his feelings so badly?

When Kathryn had first offered him the promotion, he’d been adamant not to accept it. After all, he had never seriously considered rejoining Starfleet in an official capacity if they ever returned to the
Alpha Quadrant, and he would have been perfectly happy to stay on Earth, or any other planet, as a civilian. But the look in her eyes...

Before she’d even left the room, he’d made his decision to accept the promotion.

The honorable part of him revolted at how easy this decision ultimately had been then. He hated how easy it was for him to break the trust that Seven had put in him and his words that nothing could make him turn away from her.

It had only taken one distraught look from Kathryn Janeway.

She’d always been his most dangerous weakness, but also his greatest strength, and now the error of his feelings struck him full force. What a fool he’d been! How had he even convinced himself that she wasn’t the only one he ever wanted? The only one he ever needed?

He hadn’t meant to toy with Seven’s feelings, or her innocence when it came to human sentiments, but now he realized he had, albeit unwittingly. And he’d fooled himself too; he’d fooled himself into thinking that he loved her, that they could make each other happy.

This couldn’t go on. He had to tell her the truth.

Setting his glass down, he strode across the room and exited into the corridor without looking back.

He found Seven outside her quarters, just returning from checking up on Icheb who was getting ready to move in at the Academy. She greeted him with a small smile, and though his insides twisted in guilt, he also noticed that her smile didn’t quite reach her eyes.

“Icheb okay?” He asked, unable to feel unconcerned despite what he came here to tell her.

“That’s understandable.”

She opened the door to her quarters and walked in, but Chakotay hesitated on the threshold. She threw him a glance when she noticed. Even though they had never been intimate, it wasn’t unusual for the two of them to spend time in her quarters. One look at his face and she frowned, as if she already knew what he’d come here to say.

“Though perhaps Icheb is not the only one having trouble adjusting,” she stated.

Chakotay inhaled as he met her eyes. “It’s not about that.” After glancing up and down the corridor, he turned back to her. “Let’s take a walk.”

Chakotay waited until they were out into the night to speak and Seven didn’t press him. The air was brisk and damp, and Chakotay couldn’t help a shiver.

“To be honest I’m not quite sure where to start,” he said eventually as they walked, without any real destination.

“You have never shied from expressing your opinion before.”

“This is different. It’s about us, about our relationship.”

Seven stopped walking and he imitated her. “You wish to terminate our romantic involvement,” she stated calmly, and Chakotay struggled to read her expression in the darkness of the moonless night.
He studied her features as best he could, but in the end only settled for the truth. “I- yes. Yes.”

She blinked and looked away. “I see.” The light of a streetlight reflected dampness in her eyes at the movement.

Chakotay swallowing painfully at the sight and he resisted the urge to reach out. But it would only make things worse. “I know there’s nothing I can say that will make things right, but… Please believe me when I say that this has nothing to do with you as an individual. It’s me, just me. I haven’t been honest with you, or myself, for that matter. You deserve so much better than this, I…” He paused to gather his thoughts.

She had started walking again while he spoke, and she now took the opportunity to stop and face him again. She searched his face, a mix of confusion and hurt on her features. “While I can accept, rationally, that you no longer harbor romantic feelings for me, I admit I’m also confused.” She stated, though her voice cracked a little and she swallowed with difficulty.

Chakotay sighed and raked a frustrated hand through his hair. “I know. I’m sorry. I could tell you that it’s because of my promotion to Captain, that I want to protect you from a deeper heartache down the road, and though these things are true, it’s not quite why I’m-”

She took in a deep breath and closed her eyes, her tone sharp when she interrupted. “This is not what I meant. I understand why you are terminating our involvement.”

“You do,” Chakotay asked skeptically.

“You love another and you feel that you are betraying me – both of us – by continuing this relationship. Even though I do feel a certain anger and pain at this rejection,” she said, only amplifying Chakotay’s guilt, “your motives are not what confuses me.”

Chakotay stared at her in surprise. Clearly she knew him much better than he had given her credit for. Apparently he couldn’t say the reverse was true, she still had a nag for surprising him, and he wondered if anyone would ever be able to truly know her. “You knew? Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I understand that jealousy is often associated with human romance, but I accept the complexity of human feelings. And the diversity of different kinds of love. You never gave me any reason to doubt your commitment to me. And that was sufficient.”

Impressed that she had noticed but also slightly skeptical of her rationale, Chakotay studied her face as best he could with only streetlamps to illuminate her features. She was affected, that much he could tell, but he could also tell that she was speaking the truth. “If not that, then what is it that confuses you?”

“If you knew you harbored feelings for the captain when we started our relationship, then why have you never told her of your feelings? You took a chance with me, why not take a chance with her?”

He almost laughed derisively – both at the fact that Seven had truly seen right through him and at the thought of what she was suggesting. Why indeed. He wondered if there would ever be a time when he would be allowed to hope that Kathryn might welcome his intentions, might actually think of him in that way rather than as a good friend. Because he wasn’t stupid, he knew that’s all he’d ever been to her. He sighed, not even trying to deny that Seven had nailed his true feelings. It was humbling. “It’s… complicated.”

“Perhaps too much so for me to ever comprehend,” she sighed.
“No!” He countered forcefully. “Believe me, you will find someone worthy of you, and when you do, you’ll look back on this moment and remember me as nothing but an experiment.” He gave a small teasing smile, hoping it would cheer her up, if only a little. “I’ll be… your high school or college story. Most of us have one of those. A story about the person we dated when we were too young to realize it was a bad idea.”

She studied his face for a moment. “I wish I could have seen that it was a bad idea as clearly a few months ago as I do now.”

Chakotay sighed again, suddenly feeling deflated and cruel. Before he had a chance to say anything, she straightened.

“My feelings are irrelevant. I will adapt. Does this have an impact on my position on Voyager?”

Chakotay startled a little at her quick turnabout. “Not where I’m concerned. It’s your choice, though.”

“Then I will stand by my decision.”

“I’m glad.”

By now they had circled back to their building, and she climbed the steps to the main entrance. Chakotay remained where he was as he watched her go. On the top of the steps, she paused and turned back.

“I thank you, Chakotay. For making me a… more sensible… individual.” Her voice cracked on the last word, but before Chakotay could reply she had stepped inside.

A more sensible individual… The words echoed in his mind. Right, he had given Seven her first lesson in betrayal and heartbreak. Well done, he chided himself. He only hoped that he wasn’t the proverbial bite that would make her twice shy.

A/N: Here's to Chakotay coming to his senses! ;-)
Chapter 8

A/N: Special thanks to those who have taken time to comment and review – it makes my day! Okay, now on with the show…

Chapter 8

The anomaly of Darkness was massive. And yet, appeared weightless.

Neelix could hardly stop the panic from taking a hold of his heart as he stared at the monitor of Nirax’s small freighter, now just returned from his reconnaissance expedition. The “Wave of Darkness” of his childhood stories was real, it was coming, and it was larger than was fathomable.

His mind couldn’t quite accept that it was real, and that it wasn’t, as he’d hoped, a simple, harmless plasma drift. No, this was much larger, and it rotated around a central point like a miniature galaxy – only it was empty, devoid of any light. It seemed to slide through space – no, on space, like Tom Paris’ ice skates on ice – with no regard whatsoever for the laws of physics.

“How fast…?“ Neelix’s words failed him, his eyes glued to the tridimensional representation of the phenomenon that slowly rotated on the monitor in front of him, mesmerizing.

What was it?

“Too fast,” Nirax replied somberly. Younger than Neelix by many years, Dexa’s cousin was resourceful and clever. Neelix liked him. “I’ve estimated 83 craliax.”

Neelix quickly made the translations into his mind – he’d gotten used to Starfleet measurement units by now. He gasped. “That’s… the equivalent of warp 9.5…”

“That’s why I came back right away. We need to convince the counsel that we need to evacuate. It’s coming right at us, and no one seems to know if it’s stoppable. I’ve calculated that it’ll be here in less than a day.”

Neelix gasped again, this time failing to fight the panic tightly coiling in his stomach. Even if he could send a transmission to Starfleet, it didn’t give them enough time to reply. He’d have to send a detailed message about a coordinated time to open the wormhole, and hope they’d get it in time.

Whatever Starfleet’s decision, they had to start evacuating. Right now.

He had to get back to Dexa and Brax!

“I’ve heard that your Alpha Quadrant contacts might have a way to evacuate us. Is that true?” Nirax asked as they hurried through the tunnels.

“Yes. Well, it’s a possibility.” Neelix stopped and turned to face Nirax. “But I’m going to assume that it will work. We have no choice,” he added to himself before returning his attention to Nirax. “You need to return to the council, and convince them of what’s coming. Show them your telemetry, do whatever it takes! And then have people leave everything behind, and split up into as many ships as can hold everyone.” He started walking again. “Tell them we’re going to the Alpha Quadrant.”

He didn’t wait for Nirax’s reply before he turned on his heels.
“What are you going to do?” Nirax shouted.

“I’m going to open the door!”

Deep Space 12 wasn’t finished, and there was something nerve-wrecking about the corridors that led nowhere but to the vacuum of space. No matter how many times B’Elanna had been assured that a force field prevented anyone – or atmosphere for that matter – from being sucked out, it was still deeply unsettling to stare into that void and not see anything standing in between.

It had taken a couple of hours for the rest of Janeway’s fleet to arrive to the station, but now that they were all here, Janeway had called for another briefing with the captains, this one face to face, which was to take place aboard DS12.

Now their party, made up of Janeway, Tuvok, Seven, Harry, Chakotay, the Doctor (so that he was aware of any potential health risks) and the six other captains, sat around a large, secured, state-of-the-art briefing room, with fancy new monitors and consoles. Three of the starships, including Voyager, Aspire and the Cousteau, were visible from the large window lining the room as their sleek hulls caught the light of the nearest star.

“So, explain to us again how this is going to work?” Captain Uang of the starship Aspire asked.

B’Elanna nodded. “We’re going over the last finishing adjustments on the Neutrino Entraport now. Once we agree that it’s ready, Seven of Nine and myself will go over it independently, to make sure that nothing is amiss. Once we’re assured that it’s good to go, someone will need to take the device to a location determined by Ensign Lik and approved by Admiral Janeway.” B’Elanna touched the remote and the launching location appeared on the screen, showing its relative distance from DS12. “It should take about 20 minutes for the Delta Flyer to get there at maximum speed.”

Seven took over from her. “Once at the designated coordinates, the same person will then enter the launching sequence that we have designed. It is meant to eject the device to a specific safe distance from the shuttle. When it is in place, they will activate the Entraport remotely, using the Delta Flyer’s controls.”

B’Elanna resumed. “By then we will have communicated with Neelix a specific time for him to get ready.”

“And his device, it is the same as the one you’ve built? What did you call it? A Neutrino Entraport?”

“Technically, yes. But since we’ll be the ones to activate the containment field for the neutrinos, his will basically just serve as a receptor. I trust Neelix, but using ours to activate the flow of neutrinos gives us extra reassurance against potential errors in the construction, and also will allow us to make adjustments as we go, if necessary.”

“And then… a wormhole will form between the two devices?”

“That’s the theory.”

“And you’ve run simulations, right?” Captain Lionar retorted, his voice skeptical and frightened in equal measures. “Forgive me for saying so, but trying to create a hole in the matrix of spacetime gives playing with fire a whole new meaning, we should probably make sure that the devices will work!”

“Of course. We will be testing out the wormhole before sending anyone through. But in our
simulations our latest parameters showed a rate of success of over 77% each time. That’s… as confident as we’ll ever be about this.”

“I’ll take those odds,” Janeway cut in, effectively putting an end to the discussion. “How much time should we give Neelix?”

While Janeway was speaking, one of the station crewmen quietly walked into the room and went to speak in Tuvok’s ear, handing him a PADD as he did.

Tuvok tensed and immediately raised his hand to interrupt. “It appears our preparation time has just been cut dramatically. We have received an urgent new transmission from Neelix – he anticipates the anomaly to reach his system in…less than six hours, based on the new time lag between transmissions.”

B’Elanna exchanged concerned glances with the others.

“That barely gives us time to set up a time to activate the device!” Janeway said, touching her head in an anxious gesture.

“Neelix has anticipated as much, and has provided his own activation time. In less than two hours.”

B’Elanna scoffed in despair. “No, that doesn’t give us enough time to test the connection! To send ships through when we haven’t even tested anything is just crazy! We ran simulations, sure, but we have no empirical idea if this will work, or even if a ship can go through without losing structural integrity!”

“I understand your concerns,” Janeway replied, “believe me I hate rushing things as much as anyone here, but Neelix’s timeframe doesn’t give us any other choice.”

Seven looked at B’Elanna. “Then we don’t have any time to lose. I suggest we start implementing every possible precautions into the launching sequence so as to reduce the risks as soon as this meeting adjourns.”

B’Elanna met Janeway’s gaze. The Admiral’s expression was anxious but resolute.

“Fine,” B’Elanna conceded.

Janeway then quickly dispatched each captain with the coordinates where to station their starship, creating what B’Elanna envisioned as a line of defense against anything undesirable coming through the wormhole – or after it. Once they had their orders, the captains retreated back to their ships, leaving only Captain Chakotay behind. He looked at Janeway expectantly.

Janeway leaned her hands flat on the table. “Captain,” she told Chakotay, “you’ll provide cover for the Delta Flyer. I want you to take position here,” she ordered, pointing to the map displayed on one of the monitors.

Chakotay didn’t acknowledge her order, but instead leveled a gaze at her. “What are you going to do?”

B’Elanna’s gaze shot to Janeway in surprise at the challenge in his tone. It took B’Elanna a second of watching Janeway’s brief guilty look before catching up to what Chakotay had guessed long before she had. No, she couldn’t…!

Janeway pursed her lips into a thin line while she straightened, ever the commanding presence. “I’ll be the one taking the Delta Flyer to launch the device.”
“Admiral…!” B’Elanna started, shaking her head. Janeway had a history of taking those kinds of risks but…

Chakotay stopped her with a small hand gesture, his eyes still holding Janeway’s. He inhaled. “Fine. But I’m going with you.”

People exchanged surprised, uneasy, looks at his unyielding tone – even Seven shifted in her seat. None of them had ever truly witnessed Janeway and Chakotay butt heads so openly before, their discussions had usually been behind closed doors. And every time that Chakotay had managed to convince her not to go alone when she’d taken it upon herself to take such a risk, he had sent a senior officer – not himself.

Janeway tensed at Chakotay’s challenge, but B’Elanna saw the momentary raw emotions cross her features before she schooled them again.

B’Elanna shook her head. “With all due respect to you both, I’m the one who should be going! I built this thing, I know it inside out. This is crazy enough as it is, if anything goes wrong…”

“If anything goes wrong?” Chakotay repeated, his eyes flicking to hers. “B’Elanna! You have a daughter, a family! Whereas I’m… dispensable.”

“That’s the first stupid thing I’ve ever heard you say!” B’Elanna blurted, for a second forgetting about insubordination, and glared at Janeway entreatingly. “Admiral!”

“I’ll go,” the Doctor interjected, his tone almost amusing in its dramatics, but B’Elanna couldn’t smile.

Everybody turned to look at him, but Janeway shook her head. “I’m afraid you’re just as much at risk as the rest of us – we have no way of knowing what the wormhole might do to your program. Seven, I need you in Astrometrics to monitor the wormhole and the anomaly.” She turned back to B’Elanna and Chakotay. “As much as I’d like to, I don’t have time to argue with either of you. So, B’Elanna, you and Icheb will monitor our progress from Engineering. I trust you both to guide us remotely.” She glanced at Chakotay coolly, if not disapprovingly. “Let’s get ready.”

Chakotay gave a stern nod, though his surprise at her acceptance widened his eyes a little. “Lieutenant Kim, as my first officer, you’ll be in command of Voyager.”

Harry stood to his feet, his expression grave. “Aye aye, Captain.” Once Janeway and Chakotay had left the room, Harry glanced at B’Elanna and they shared a long, worried sigh.

ooooOooo
A/N: I think you'll enjoy this one (well I hope you do in any case)!

3 months earlier

Kathryn yawned as she made her way toward the mess hall at the DQU headquarters.

It was late, and part of her wished she were in bed, but she desperately wanted to finish her report on B’Elanna’s recent success in contacting Neelix in the Delta Quadrant before she headed back to her house. It was so exciting, and such a tremendous advancement in their research mandates, that she probably wouldn’t be able to sleep anyway.

Besides, it wasn’t like she had anyone to go home to. Three months in and she still had boxes to unpack at her new house, so the thought of going home wasn’t all that appealing.

To accomplish her goal of finishing the report, she was in dire need of a little caffeinated kick-starter. Not only had the day been extremely busy – she had spent it running around the DQU or traveling between her office and Starfleet Command – but she had also been on her feet since the wee hours of morning. Her fatigue was starting to take its toll on her concentration.

She wasn’t complaining. All things considered, she actually appreciated how exacting her new position was. It kept her too busy to dwell on what she might be missing out – out there. And on days like today, she was happy with her decision to accept the promotion. It felt good, exhilarating. Maybe she was finally starting to move on.

Most of the personnel had gone home for the night, so Kathryn was surprised to find B’Elanna sitting at the main table in the small DQU mess hall, her attention focused on the PADD she held with one hand while the other lazily brought a cup of tea to her lips. What struck Kathryn, though, was B’Elanna’s small, almost sad smile, as she read. Kathryn hadn’t seen any type of smile on B’Elanna’s face for a while now (with the exception of the moment she’d heard Neelix’s voice replying to her first transmission), and it was good to see.

“Anything amusing in there? I could use a good laugh,” Kathryn said as she made her way to the old fashioned coffee press that she had requested upon her return – much better than the replicated stuff – and she set out to boil some water.

B’Elanna glanced at her, shaking her head, unfazed to see that Kathryn was still here, despite the late hour. It was hardly unusual for Kathryn – however the same could not be said of B’Elanna. She usually went home at the end of the workday to be with her family (in fact that was the whole point of her accepting this position), and Kathryn wondered what made tonight different.

“Oh no, I just got a letter from Chakotay, from the Cardassian border. I’ve always loved his writing style, never fails to make me smile.”

Kathryn’s breath caught in her throat. She hadn’t heard from him since he’d taken command of Voyager several weeks ago, and since Voyager wasn’t part of her fleet, she didn’t have direct knowledge of his comings and goings. She quickly buried the twinge of envy that tugged at her heart.

“I know what you mean,” Kathryn replied softly. Even though Chakotay had never written her
anything more personal than tactical reports, she had read enough of the latter to remember the subtle humor he’d infused them with, always somehow managing to bring a smile to her face. As if he could sense that it was exactly what she needed. With her back to B’Elanna as she fussed over the coffee, she was glad the younger woman couldn’t see the sudden longing that was probably all over her face.

B’Elanna hummed in agreement. “Listen to this: “My memories of this place, of our fallen comrades, of our battles, of my anger and desperation, are like sea creatures soaring upwards from the bottom of the ocean, drawn toward the surface by the pull of shimmering sunlight and waves above. And now that they have resurfaced, they have no desire to dive back to the depths of my mind. Since I’ve been here, I have felt like a stranger in my own body, as if the memories that swirl through my mind right now aren’t actually mine, but those of a stranger, or of a man I once knew…”

Kathryn smiled sadly as B’Elanna trailed off, Chakotay’s voice echoing the words in her head. How she wished he’d spoken those words to her, sought solace in her. She shook herself.

“Has revisiting the Cardassian border given him the closure he was looking for?”

B’Elanna sighed. “It’s hard to tell. The rest of the letter sounds like he’s trying to give me closure,” she added wryly.

“Do you regret your decision not to go with them?” Kathryn asked gently as she turned to face her, leaning back against the counter.

B’Elanna took a moment to consider the question, her expression distant, distracted. “I don’t know.”

“It’s all right to miss it, you know,” Kathryn said softly, all too aware of the hypocrisy of her reassurance. If only she could convince herself.

B’Elanna gave a wry smile. “Is it? Every time I find myself wishing I was with them,” she gestured to the PADD, “I feel as though I’m betraying Miral. And Tom.” B’Elanna fell quiet and Kathryn considered her words in silence, the sound of bubbling water behind her echoing in the room. She quietly poured the water into the press and stirred the coffee grounds.

“But, Chakotay’s letter helps. One thing that’s clear from his words: we’re not missing out on any excitement. He jokes that the boredom of the assignment has allowed him to give Harry a lot of command opportunities while he put his feet up on your desk.”

Kathryn smiled, his words as bittersweet as the fact that he seemed to still consider the captain’s desk as hers.

Coffee now pressed and ready to be poured, Kathryn moved to sit across from B’Elanna – but a sudden desire for something stronger made her double back. Never mind coffee – wine was what they needed – she could finish the report in the morning. Reaching into one of the highest cabinets, she grabbed a bottle of Vulcan wine that she kept there for special occasions. This, she decided, was one of them.

“To celebrate your achievements,” Kathryn justified when B’Elanna threw her a surprised glance.

B’Elanna’s lips twitched upwards, but then she went on. “By the way, Chakotay’s asked me to relay a request to you before he submits it through the official channels: he’d like Voyager to be reassigned to the Exploratory Division. And, he sends his best,” B’Elanna finished, her gaze
lingering to study Kathryn’s expression carefully, curiously, a question in her eyes.

“What?” Kathryn asked at last as she sat down and poured the wine.

B’Elanna startled. “Sorry, I suppose I’m wondering… why?”

“You’ll have to be more specific, B’Elanna.”

B’Elanna returned her gaze to the PADD and read: “Please give Admiral Janeway all my best, and if you think she would take it kindly, tell her I wish she were here with us. And the same goes for you, of course.” B’Elanna stopped reading, reaching out to grab the wine glass that Kathryn was offering, and holding it distractedly while she peeked up at Kathryn again “Why doesn’t he ask you to be part of the fleet? Why doesn’t he tell you these things himself? Hasn’t he written to you? I know it’s none of my business- well, actually, I suppose Chakotay made it my business when he asked me to be his messenger.”

Kathryn pursed her lips as she leaned back in her chair and crossed her legs, resting her elbow on the back of her chair. She was unsure how to reply, or how much to divulge about the complicated state of her relationship with Chakotay.

“Is it because of Seven?”

Kathryn’s eyes shot to B’Elanna’s in surprise.

B’Elanna smiled, more kindly than was typical of her, then scoffed. “I still can’t believe it, I can only imagine how it must feel like for you… I mean you’ve been such good friends. It has to be strange.” She trailed off, her expression apologetic and hesitatingly inquisitive, somewhat unusual for the hot-tempered woman. As if she knew that she was threading beyond the usual professional line, but offered a friendly ear nonetheless, regardless of her own reasons for staying here so late.

Kathryn suddenly understood. B’Elanna needed to talk, she needed a simple conversation, maybe to take her mind off her own problems – whatever they were. Because as different as Kathryn and B’Elanna were, they had found themselves in the same boat, and were now both struggling to paddle away from a life they had loved, but forsaken for reasons that had seemed right at the time. B’Elanna had done it for her family, her daughter, and Kathryn had done it to nudge herself out of her comfort zone, to satisfy her ambitions and love of Starfleet – and, something she had barely admitted to herself – to escape the shock of her learning of Chakotay’s relationship with Seven.

It was the openness on B’Elanna’s face, that vulnerability, that did it. Or maybe it was the wine vapors. Vulcans did make exceedingly strong wines. Kathryn released a long sigh. “Oh I don’t know, B’Elanna. I think maybe we just drifted apart, without neither of us realizing. It happens to the best of friends.” She took a sip of wine, savoring the sweet, sour and burning flavor.

“Chakotay is a deeply loyal man, he wouldn’t let that happen,” B’Elanna retorted.

And yet, it had. And Kathryn didn’t blame him for it.

They were silent for a moment until B’Elanna gave a wry chuckle. “You know it’s funny, before I fell in love with Tom, I remember feeling envious of the relationship you and Chakotay had. You were so… in sync, even in the early days. It infuriated me at first; I didn’t understand why he trusted you so blindly. But then I realized: you had just connected, like two pieces of a puzzle. Complementing each other. Making a whole.” B’Elanna took another sip of wine. “That’s why I think the thought of him with Seven surprises me so much. Seven isn’t capable of that kind of… connection. I’m not saying she won’t in time or with the right person, but she’s still too… Borg… for Chakotay.”
Kathryn took another sip, part of her relieved to hear from B’Elanna what Kathryn had barely dared to acknowledge to herself. “I don’t know about that. I think Seven feels much more than she lets on.”

“Maybe.” B’Elanna shrugged before leaning forward to prop her elbow on the table and rest her chin in her hand. “But, that connection you and Chakotay have… I’ve always assumed you two would eventually... you know, get together. That is, if our circumstances ever changed, because I know how important duty was - is - to the both of you. But I thought, if we returned to the Alpha Quadrant... you know?”

Kathryn rubbed her temple to hide her sudden flush, before taking another sip of wine. She was bursting to say what had been kept inside for so long, for too long. She leaned to rest her elbows on the table, her fingers brushing against the side of the glass as she stared into the amber liquid.

“I’ve never told anyone this, not even admitted it to myself for a long time, but the truth is... deep down, I believed that too, for a while.” It felt strange to say the words out loud, as if it suddenly made all of her feelings real, somehow.

B’Elanna kept silent, and quietly took another sip of her wine, her expression empathetic, but mostly just... listening, the wine already causing her dark eyes to lose their sharp focus. Kathryn herself felt her inhibitions slowly crumble down at her feet as a tingly kind of warmth spread through her veins. She took another sip.

“But there was too much standing between us,” Kathryn went on – now that the floodgates had opened, there was no way to close them again. “We’d long drawn a line between us – and we never crossed it. We saw other people, and kept on with our lives, but I think there was a part of me that believed that one day – one day, when we’d finally return home – the line of duty that stood between us would disappear. I thought he’d believed it too. But I guess I was wrong. Or maybe I just took too long, and he got tired of waiting for something that could well never be.”

B’Elanna’s voice was uncharacteristically gentle, understanding. “Have you ever told him any of this?”

Kathryn shook her head before taking another sip. “Oh no. As close as we were, that’s one conversation we couldn’t have. Not once the parameters had been established.” By her. She had done that. Kathryn finished her glass with a large gulp. B’Elanna grabbed the bottle and wordlessly refilled it. “So,” Kathryn went on, “as much as it hurts to think about it, I care about him too much not to want him to be happy. And Seven too. So all I can do is to wish them all the best.”

B’Elanna stared at her. “You’re more generous than I could ever be,” she said before gulping down the rest of her own glass. Kathryn promptly refilled it; two could play that game. “But I can’t help thinking – it might not be too late.”

Kathryn smiled wryly. “Why B’Elanna Torres, I never pegged you for a romantic.”

B’Elanna looked insulted. “I’m not! Which is why you should believe me. Besides, he’s hardly mentioned her in his letter,” she added.

“I’m sure he’s just being discrete.”

B’Elanna shook her head. “Believe what you will, Admiral, but if I were a gambling woman, my money would be on Chakotay coming to his senses sooner rather than later.”

Despite Kathryn’s innermost, urgent desire to trust B’Elanna’s instincts, rationally she couldn’t let
even the tiniest sliver of hope take hold of her heart. Because if she did and B’Elanna was wrong...

“Good thing you’re not a gambling woman.”

B’Elanna gave her a mischievous look. “Well, time will tell, I suppose.” She raised her glass for a toast. “To the future.”

Kathryn raised her glass. “To the future – may it bring us as much joy as did our past.”

Their glasses clinked.

ooooOooo

A/N: I don’t know why but for some reason I like the idea of Janeway and B’Elanna being drinking buddies ;-) Those two didn’t get enough interaction on the show, in my humble opinion!
“We need to activate our Neutrino Entraptor as soon as possible!” Neelix said as he barged into the communications room, startling Dexa and Brax.

“Should we not wait for Starfleet to activate the device on their side, like you asked them to do in your message? The time is almost here, waiting a little longer might not make that much of a difference and would probably be less risky!”

Neelix met her gaze, urging her to understand what he couldn’t say in front of Brax. “I’m afraid not. We have to start the process now.”

Dexa didn’t need to hear anything else as she met Neelix’s gaze and renewed determination took over her stance. “I’ll start the evacuation,” she said as she rose to her feet and took Brax’s hand.

“Nirax is already on it, but I’m sure he could use the help. I’ll make the final adjustments to the device and get it ready. As soon as you have everyone assigned to a ship, I’ll launch it.”

Dexa nodded, her concern obvious in her expression. “Once it’s launched, how long will you have until it activates?”

Neelix tried to sound calm. “According to B’Elanna’s latest calculations, about 30 seconds.”

30 short seconds. Not a lot of time for Neelix to pilot his freighter away from it, but it would have to do. He’d already worked with Nirax on improving the thrusters and shield, to increase his chances of making it back to the asteroid to join the others before they went through.

“How long will the conduit stay open?”

Neelix pursed his lips. “We have no way of knowing. So we need to be ready.”

She gave a small nod. “I understand.” She grabbed his hand while her other hand rested protectively on Brax’s shoulder. “Good luck.”

He gave a small smile, hoping to convey some reassurance. He wasn’t sure he succeeded.

oooOooo

It took B’Elanna and the others approximately one hour and a half to make the necessary preparations for the launching of the Neutrino Entraptor. Kathryn was painfully aware that B’Elanna had been rushed – she had formally complained again once after the meeting – just for the record, she’d said. But this knowledge of how worried B’Elanna was didn’t help Kathryn’s nerves.

Now aboard the Delta Flyer, Kathryn and Chakotay worked in relative silence while she entered the coordinates into the control panel, and he made sure that the device was properly connected to its launching station in the Flyer’s cargo bay.

“We’re all set for departure,” Kathryn said after turning on the comm system. “Chakotay?”

“Everything looks good from this end,” he replied before activating the force field that would enable them to open the latch to eject the device without losing atmosphere in the front compartment. He then returned to the front of the Flyer and took the copilot seat.
“Acknowledged, we’re ready here as well,” B’Elanna’s disembodied voice replied from Engineering aboard Voyager, her tone strained, anxious. “Good luck.”

Kathryn and Chakotay worked to initiate the thrusters and steer the shuttle out of Voyager’s shuttle bay towards the designated launching coordinates. According to B’Elanna and Ensign Lik’s calculations, they had about 20 minutes until they reached the destination, and 30 minutes before the deadline Neelix had given them. That didn’t leave a lot of leeway for human error.

Kathryn tried to relax once the Flyer was on autopilot, but the sheer importance – and danger – of what they were about to do prevented her from releasing the tension that coiled her stomach into a tight knot. She threw a glance at Chakotay, hoping to draw from his legendary grace under pressure. Sure enough, he appeared perfectly focused and poised as he busied himself with crosschecking his PADD data with those of the flight console.

“B’Elanna was right, you know,” Kathryn started softly as she leaned her head back against the headrest. “You should have let me come alone. As a Captain, your first duty is to your ship and your crew.”

His dark eyes flicked to hers briefly and the muscle at his jaw tensed unhappily. He had been expecting the reproach, she realized. “Then why did you let me come?”

“Because, as a Captain, it was also your prerogative to make that decision.”

His expression softened and he looked at her again. “I appreciate that.”

“Doesn’t mean I agree with your decision – I still think it was a mistake.”

He gave a small smile, half-amused half-wry. “Says the woman who, if in my shoes, wouldn’t have thought twice before doing the exact same thing, who was always the first willing to sacrifice herself for her crew – who’s doing it right now!”

“Well,” she conceded, realizing how similar her way of thinking was to his, “don’t tell B’Elanna, but maybe I think I’m dispensable too.”

His lips twitched upwards. “That really does sound dumb when you’re not the one saying the words.”

He gave her a pointed look, and the mirth and challenge now dancing in his eyes was too contagious for her to be insulted at his words, especially when she agreed – she couldn’t keep a chuckle from bubbling to the surface. His smile widened at the sound, eyes now twinkling.

“Nevertheless, I’m glad you’re here!” Kathryn admitted as their chuckles faded, and she reached out to squeeze his arm.

“There’s nowhere else I’d rather be,” he admitted, his eyes already back to the commands.

Kathryn’s heart somersaulted, but she forced herself not to read anything into his words. Instead she went for humor. “Nowhere?” She teased. “Not even that place you programmed into the Holodeck, by the lake, with the shimmering waters, fireflies and blooming flowers?” She had seen it only once, not too long after they’d returned from their forced quarantine. So long ago, now.

He let out an amused huff. “Not even there.” He paused, then threw her a teasing grin. “Well, I suppose I could be tempted into heading an archaeological expedition in the jungles of Central America right about now.”
Kathryn’s expression softened as she gazed at him. “Is that what you would have rather been doing, if you hadn’t taken the promotion? Archaeology?”

“Does that surprise you?”

She studied his strong profile, the intricate tattoo that was such a large part of his personality, of his past, of the people and traditions he so cherished now. She should have known, should have realized that, despite his joking tone every time he’d mentioned archaeology, anthropology or teaching, he had meant it. “No. No, it doesn’t.” She paused. “If that’s really what you want to do, Chakotay, that’s what you should be doing.”

He threw her a small smile. “I’m glad to hear you say that, because I’m actually considering it. In fact that’s what I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Really? But you’re just considering it. Why the hesitation?” She paused, taking a long second to debate with herself whether to push the conversation, to consider whether she was ready to hear his answers. She inhaled, her eyes set on his face. “Have you been staying on because of Seven? Because with her reassignment-”

His head snapped to hers, his dark eyes widened with genuine surprise – confusion, even. “Seven? No! Why do you say that?”

Kathryn gave him a ‘don’t take me for a fool’ kind of look. “Come on Chakotay, let’s stop pretending – I’ve known you two have been involved for a long time now.”

He frowned as he met her gaze. “Kathryn, if you think anything is going on between me and Seven, I have to report that, for reasons unexplained, the gossip has been traveling ironically slow.”

It was Kathryn’s turn to frown, a little annoyed by the joking lilt in his voice. “I don’t understand. Just a few months ago, at the promotion ceremony, Seven told me you were-”

He nodded, catching up to Kathryn’s train of thought. “It’s true we tried dating for a while, but it’s been over for a lon-”

Kathryn barely had time to register what he was saying before the control panel let out a shrill beep that had them both snap their attentions to it. Lights flashed a constant warning. “What’s happening?” Kathryn asked as Chakotay looked over the data.

He shook his head. “The sensors are reading a rise in neutrino emissions, but we haven’t activated anything, we haven’t even reached the coordinates,” he replied, dumbfounded.

Another beeping sound, but louder and of a lower frequency resounded from the back of the Flyer. From the Neutrino Entraptor. Chakotay jumped to his feet and went to open the door to check on it. Kathryn sprang to her feet when she saw it.

It was activating.

“Chakotay?”

“It wasn’t me!”

She hit her combadge. “B’Elanna, talk to us, what’s happening?”
The beeping and warning beacons on the control panels had sent everyone in Engineering into action mode. The frenzy paralleled B’Elanna’s nerves as her personnel buzzed around her, handing her PADDs, talking, trying to figure out what was going on. B’Elanna forced herself to focus, and her voice was calm when she replied.

“We’re reading a rise in neutrino emissions, but it’s not coming from this end. Seven, are you getting the same data as I am?”

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From her position in Astrometrics, Seven of Nine read through the data and frowned. “It appears that Neelix is attempting to open the wormhole from his side. The neutrino flux is now caught within our Entraptor. Admiral, Captain, you need to release the device into space before the wormhole fully connects! I suggest you do so quickly.”

---

Kathryn exchanged a look with Chakotay. “Negative, we’re not at a safe distance from DS12, I don’t want to risk the station, how long do we have until a connection forms?” She asked while Chakotay started entering the command codes to initiate the launching sequence for the device. There was no way of knowing what would happen to the station if the device connected while in such close proximity – or worse, if something went wrong.

“21.2 seconds,” was Seven’s reply.

Kathryn exchanged another look with Chakotay. “Let’s make the most out of those 20 seconds,” she told him. He nodded before returning to the control panels, his fingers working quickly to resume the launching sequence. “We’ll get as far away from DS12 as possible.”

“Negative!” B’Elanna’s voice sounded strained. “You need to launch it, now!”

“15 seconds.” Seven’s voice.

Kathryn ignored them. “Voyager, raise your shield and take your position to shield DS12.”


Kathryn disengaged the autopilot and threw another look at Chakotay. “On my command.”

A curt nod.

“10 seconds.”

The Neutrino Entraptor in the back of the Flyer started sending beams of blueish light, and the humming was so loud it vibrated within Kathryn’s chest.

“5 seconds.”

“Just a little closer…” She could now see that Voyager was in position. 4…3… “NOW!” Kathryn shouted to be heard over the now deafening humming, and Chakotay punched the final command. The latch opened and the launching station promptly ejected the device. Kathryn took command of the sticks and veered as far and fast as she could, doing all she could to put some distance between the Flyer and the device, but it didn’t feel nearly enough as a funnel of darkness and light started to form around the Entraptor, now floating in space behind them.
“The wormhole is forming,” Seven’s voice stated over the comms, intermittently broken with interference. “Delta Flyer, I suggest you get as far away from it as you can so as not to get pulled into it by the initial gravitational flux.”

_Easier said than done._ The Delta Flyer was already shaking badly, the metals groaning under the pressure of the gravitational pull. Kathryn’s hands struggled to keep the navigation steady as the Flyer jostled under the pressure.

“The pull is too strong!” Chakotay cried over the sound of the rattling and groaning of metal, as his fingers moved deftly over the control panels. “I can’t reroute power to propulsion!”

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Harry Kim paced the bridge of Voyager, biting his lips nervously as he monitored the conversations helplessly, debating with himself the best course of action.

After a moment’s hesitation, he punched his combadge.

“Delta Flyer, we’re coming to beam you out of there!”

“Negative!” Chakotay ordered, the word breaking with static interference. “Hold your position, keep the shield up until the wormhole is stable.”

“Captain…!”

“That’s an order!” Chakotay barked.

Harry raked his fingers through his hair helplessly. “Yes sir.”

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“We just have to hold it a little longer!” Janeway shouted over the sound of her teeth clattering together by the strength of the turbulence shaking the Delta Flyer. “Chakotay, try overriding the secondary systems and reroute power from them instead!”

He worked quickly. “It seems to be helping. But there’s no telling for how long it’ll hold.”

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B’Elanna sat on the edge of her seat, her eyes glued to the monitor showing the Entraptor and the slowly shifting funnel. Her conscience was torn between fear for Janeway and Chakotay and thrill at what she was witnessing. The Neutrino Entraptor was emitting a violent flickering of blue light while the space around it seemed to shift. The movement wasn’t visible to the naked eye, but B’Elanna’s sensors were able to display it on her console. She couldn’t tear her gaze away.

And then something in the space around them all _clicked_, or nudged into place, and the wormhole formed, releasing the Delta Flyer from its pull as it did, hurling it forward and away from the rest of the ships. Well, the important thing was that Janeway and Chakotay were safe for now. They could take it from there.

B’Elanna snapped her attention back to her task.

“The wormhole is stabilizing, we need it to hold for 3.5 seconds,” B’Elanna stated, her breath stuck in her throat.

“One second,” Seven’s voice counted, “two seconds. The containment field is losing integrity.”
“Compensating,” B’Elanna replied as she adjusted the emission rate. Her fingers shook as they slid over the console.

“The wormhole appears to be stabilizing once again, 2 seconds, 3 seconds.”

B’Elanna held her breath and exchanged an anxious look with Icheb.

“4 seconds. 5 seconds. The wormhole is now stable.”

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Even piloting his freighter as speedily as he could from the spot where he had rocketed the device into the space above the asteroid, Neelix could only gape as the bright beam emitted from the Neutrino Entraptor started to funnel, as if siphoned into nothingness. The wormhole formed and opened in the space above the asteroid belt with an indescribable shift – almost like a soundless pop that was felt even in the tunnels. It was extraordinary.

He let out a nervous breath when he finally landed and reached the surface and the tunnel entrance. Dexa and Brax were waiting for him, along with several of the asteroid inhabitants who had been designated to Neelix or Nirax’s ship.

“It’s working!” Brax shouted with excitement as soon as Neelix entered the tunnel. “Neelix, our device is working!”

Neelix gave him a quick smile before meeting Dexa’s eyes with urgency. She nodded and immediately directed two neighboring families to the back of the ship. “Hurry everyone, please go all the way in, we’ll have room for everyone, but you need to make sure you go all the way in!”

“Neelix…” Brax’s small hand on his arm, and his quiet, fearful stating of his name had him turn to face his son. He wasn’t looking at him, and Neelix followed his gaze to the skylight window that afforded a view of the other side of the asteroid belt.

“It’s here.”

The anomaly of darkness seemed to block out any and all of the starlight usually visible from the asteroid. It was so large that it was difficult to see how close it actually was. Neelix gulped, his hand covering his mouth instinctively, before he exchanged a look with Dexa and scurried her into the vessel, making sure that Brax was at her side. “Have you seen Nirax?” he asked once he was assured they were safely inside.

Dexa shook her head. “No! He should be here by now!”

“We need his ship, otherwise we won’t have enough room for everyone!” Neelix whispered in spite of his panic and anger so that the few passengers who remained without an assigned evacuation ship wouldn’t hear. He exhaled as he looked around, his eyes scanning for Dexa’s cousin among the anxious crowd around them. “We can’t wait any longer: you go ahead and start directing the ships through the wormhole from here. When they’re all through, take this ship through as well. Starfleet will be expecting you. I’ll go see if I can find Nirax. Don’t wait for me, I’ll catch a ride with him. Don’t worry. We’ll be fine.”

Dexa hesitated, fear clouding her eyes, but in the end gave him a fearful nod and quickly disappeared among the evacuees aboard Neelix’s ship.

--
Kathryn sighed in relief once they were clear from the pull of the event horizon and the Flyer slowed down, and she heard Seven and B'Elanna taking control of the wormhole.

However her relief was short-lived. The lights aboard the Delta Flyer flickered, then the power went down with a disappointed hum. Kathryn exchanged a look with Chakotay before he attempted to reinitialize the systems.

After a moment, he looked back up at her and shook his head.

They would need some help getting back to the station. While Voyager was closer, she didn’t want to move it from its current position, so that left her Aspire and Captain Uang.

“Aspire, this is Delta Flyer. We appear to have burned out our power cells. We’re gonna need a ride back.”

Captain Uang’s voice responded. “Understood, we’re on our way.”

“Kathryn, look!” Chakotay’s voice caught Kathryn’s attention and she followed his gaze to the giant rotating mouth of the wormhole and its flickering of lights as neutrinos attempted to escape their confinement.

The surface of it, the event horizon, seemed to shift subtly, and then…

A small vessel appeared through.

Chakotay grinned and Kathryn unbuckled her seat belt and stood to get a closer look, moved beyond words at the sight. They’d done it! After months and months of hard work, B’Elanna’s Neutrino Entraptor worked! The significance of the moment wasn’t lost on her and she shared an astonished gaze with Chakotay.

“Sensors have detected a vessel exiting the wormhole,” Tuvok’s voice stated.

“We have a visual, it doesn’t look damaged,” Kathryn confirmed with a widening grin. “Direct them to the station,” she instructed as she looked up in awe.

“We have made contact with the ship, everyone is well and accounted for,” Tuvok added.

Just when she was about to redirect her attention to Aspire’s movements, another Talaxian ship crossed the event horizon of the wormhole, and Kathryn’s amazed chuckle echoed with Chakotay’s.

And then there was a third ship, and a fourth.

---

Neelix ran through the tunnels in search of Nirax, fear warring with determination within him. One look towards the wormhole through the roof panels and the ships disappearing through gave him renewed resolve, but any flame of hope died at the tendrils of darkness that seemed to quickly surround everything in its deathly claws. He could still see some of the neighboring asteroids, but the dark, misty cloud was quickly spreading all around the asteroid belt, casting a suffocating shadow upon them as it deftly moved to hide the light from this system’s main star. Soon Neelix wouldn’t even be able to see the ground underneath his feet, and if It caught up to him before he could make it back to the ships…

The fear was almost paralyzing. Neelix had always been terrified of the dark, but this overwhelming nothingness was like nothing he had ever experienced. He struggled to breathe, the air catching in his...
lungs as he ran, his legs buckling from under him.

The memory of Chakotay gently yet insistently guiding him through a darkened Voyager sprang to his mind and Neelix held on to it with all his might, to the memory of Chakotay’s calm demeanor, like a drowning man to a lifeboat. It helped him focus on his breathing and he slowly felt the panic start to fade.

He finally found the tunnel entrance to the settlement and ran inside. “Nirax! Nirax!” He called, desperation overtaking any breathlessness he might be feeling.

“Neelix! Over here!”

Neelix spotted Nirax running toward him with three additional inhabitants – including Xar – on his heels and let out a relieved sigh. “Where have you been? We need to go, NOW!”

“Those three decided to go back for their belongings,” Nirax explained with an annoyed glance at the people behind him. Xar had the good sense to look contrite when Neelix glanced at him. The group didn’t skip a beat before they resumed sprinting through the tunnels.

When they finally made it to Nirax’s ship, the darkness was getting dangerously close to both the asteroids themselves, and worse… the wormhole. Soon it would be blocking their access altogether. That was not good.

Neelix didn’t have to voice his fear as he exchanged a look with Nirax. Grim-faced, Nirax hurried everyone onboard, including those who had been anxiously waiting for evacuation, and promptly shut the latch before he dropped himself into the pilot seat.

“Have the others successfully gone through?” Nirax asked as he pressed and flicked various controls on the console and the ship hummed to life.

“I’ll find out.” Neelix took the copilot seat and switched on the communication systems.

---

“Federation starships, this is Neelix, what is the status on the ships that were sent through the wormhole?”

B’Elanna perked up at the sound of his voice. “Neelix, this is B’Elanna. We’ve confirmed that four ships have now come through.”

“Five,” Seven’s voice corrected. “The fifth one has just crossed the event horizon. Their passengers are all safe and sound.”

“Oh what wonderful news!” Neelix’s voice replied with relief. “We’re the last one, we should reach the wormhole shortly.”

“See you on the other side,” B’Elanna replied with a relieved grin.

“Yes.” There was an uneasy pause.

She frowned. “Neelix?”

“You should be aware that the Darkness is quickly closing in on us.”

B’Elanna tensed uneasily. “What are you saying?”
“I suppose I’m saying that there’s a chance, a very slight chance, mind you, that we might not make it.”

B’Elanna rubbed her face, shaking her head. “I can’t accept that, Neelix.”

“We’ll do our best, I promise. But if I don’t make it-”

“Don’t say that-”

“If I don’t make it, please take good care of Dexa and Brax for me.”

B’Elanna desperately scrambled for a humorous reply, anything to deflect the heaviness of Neelix’s words. She came up empty. “We will. Now enough of that, and you bring yourself over here, got it?”

A solemn silence. “We’ll do our best,” he repeated.

--

Seven of Nine monitored the wormhole with heightened emotions, her pulse racing and her palms clammy against the console as she tried to synchronize Voyager’s sensors to those aboard Neelix’s vessel via the wormhole’s gravitational pull. She resisted the urge to wipe her palms on her suit as she focused on the data on the large holographic screen in front of her, doing her best to ignore the emotions that constantly seemed to interfere with her efficiency.

With one final touch, the screen beeped happily and the telemetry from the Talaxian ship scrolled across the monitor. She found herself holding her breath as she found and followed the vessel’s icon on the screen while it slowly moved toward the event horizon. And then she swallowed hard.

The darkness was too close, too fast.

Neelix was right, the odds of them being able to make it before being overtaken were slim. One in five, actually.

She considered several scenarios, but none of her solutions were expedient enough to be helpful. They needed more power.

--

“We need more power!” Nirax shouted.

Neelix gulped while his brain scrambled for a solution, anything, that might help. His hands gripped the armrests of his chair so tightly that his knuckles were white, and he couldn’t breathe, as if a large and heavy hand had taken hold of his ribcage.

*Focus.*

“Release the ship’s torpedoes,” he suggested through clenched teeth, heart in his mouth. “With shields at maximum, we might be able to ride the shockwave. And it might slow down the Darkness.”

Nirax hesitated for only a moment before he entered the commands.

The torpedo launched just as B’Elanna’s voice said: “Negative! We have no idea what an explosion will do to the…” She trailed off when she realized that it was too late.
“We have no choice!” Nirax said as he punched the detonator.

The ship rocked sideways as it was hurled forward by the blast behind them.

Neelix closed his eyes and tightened his grip on the armrests.

---

Seven of Nine held her breath as she watched the Talaxian ship gain in speed on her large screen as a result of the explosion they had created. The darkness remained unaffected, but this small surge of speed might be just enough…

“The last vessel has now entered the wormhole!” Seven stated as she exhaled in relief.

It was short-lived, however, as the darkness closed in on the entrance of the wormhole and…

“Lieutenant Torres, the wormhole is…”

---

“…destabilizing.”

No, no, no! B’Elanna moved to the console. “Compensating for the surge of energy released by the explosion now,” she said, her voice trembling as her eyes traveled back and forth between the data panels and the monitor.

“No effect,” Seven stated.

B’Elanna cursed as she shifted to the next panel over and tried something else.

“Is Neelix through yet?” She asked frantically as her fingers moved quickly to enter various commands.

“Not yet.”

“Come on…” B’Elanna pleaded under her breath as she typed in new command codes.

“The wormhole has not regained a stable flux. It will disintegrate in 4… 3… 2…”

“WE HAVE A VISUAL!” Janeway’s voice shouted and sure enough B’Elanna saw the small dot representing the Talaxian ship on her monitor appear out of the wormhole, going much faster than the others had.

She chuckled with utter relief as she dropped herself back in her chair.

---

“Wait, something else is coming through,” Janeway said as she squinted at the swirling event horizon. Something large, much larger than the Talaxian ships, was affecting the surface, as if struggling to come through, or pushing against the membrane of the event horizon.

“Seven, why hasn’t the wormhole disintegrated?” B’Elanna asked, her tone suddenly concerned.

“Admiral, Captain, you need to get out of there, NOW!” Seven’s voice shouted at the same time that Kathryn realized what was going on.
They had opened the doors for Neelix and his people, not really imagining that the anomaly could follow them through. That had been a lethal assumption. But the fleet wasn’t unprepared for that eventuality.

“This is Uang, Aspire is almost within beaming distance, we will pick up the last of the Talaxian ship and the Delta Flyer,” Captain Uang’s voice chimed in. But at the same moment the event horizon seemed to rip open, and darkness – nothingness – seeped through like a gas or smoke through air. A cloud of it surged forward toward the Flyer.

Chakotay only had time to attempt one last frantic resurrection of the Delta Flyer systems before the nothingness extended one of its arms towards them. And then everything went dark.

oooOooo

A/N: Ta ta taaaaa… ;~)
“Seven, where did the Flyer go? Do you have a visual?” B’Elanna cried in panic as she stared at her monitors. The Delta Flyer had just… vanished in darkness.

“Negative.”

“The sensors do not detect their presence,” Tuvok’s voice added. “They appear to be inside the anomaly, which interferes with our sensors.”

B’Elanna swallowed her panic and tried to focus. “What about Neelix?”

“This is Captain Uang, we have Neelix aboard Aspire, we up picked his ship when we tried to reach the Delta Flyer. He and the other passengers are safe and sound. But we couldn’t make it to the Flyer in time.”

B’Elanna closed her eyes. Neelix and his people were safe, at least. “Seven, what’s going on with the anomaly?”

“It has spread further outside the bounds of the wormhole, but so far parts of it are still within the conduit. Whether that is voluntary or not is impossible to know. Whatever the case, its presence within the conduit seems to be keeping it open.”

“It’s sticking its foot in the door to keep it from closing…”

“Are you suggesting it’s a sentient being?” Harry asked over the comms and B’Elanna startled. She hadn’t realized she’d spoken out loud.

“I don’t know. What if it is?”

“Captain Uang,” Tuvok started, “I believe you are the highest ranking officer in this fleet, it therefore falls upon you to act out Admiral Janeway’s orders and decide on the next course of action.”

There was a short pause. B’Elanna could almost picture the tall woman on the bridge of Aspire take a deep breath.

“Yes, the admiral told me as much herself this morning. Voyager, hold your defensive position. With your improved armor, you’ll be the station’s last line of defense in case this goes awry. Everyone else, take your position as instructed by the admiral. Lieutenant Torres, I think you might be onto something. Let’s figure out if this thing really is sentient. Because if it is, it’s gotta either want something, or be afraid of something.”

oooOooo

Fear. Worry. Determination.

Chakotay slowly blinked to consciousness.

A new wave of emotions surged through him. Relief. Hope. Concern. They were so intense they overwhelmed any ability to think as his mind slowly awoke.

It took his eyes a moment to focus on Kathryn’s face as she leaned over him, tricorder in her hand. It was dark inside the Delta Flyer, but the emergency lighting weakly illuminated her features. Chakotay groaned as he became conscious of a blinding headache – it was as if there was too much
pressure building inside his skull. The beeping sounds of the tricorder didn’t help.

*The emotions shifted subtly back to worry. Concern. Fear.*

“Chakotay, can you hear me?”

Chakotay nodded slowly and she administered a hypospray to his neck. Chakotay barely felt it touch his skin, instead…

*Relief. Worry. And something else…*

She gently pulled him up in a sitting position and he sat still for a moment, holding his head in his hands. She quickly switched her tricorder back on and resumed scanning him for any injuries. “You have a fever, and there’s some unusual activity in your brain,” she stated, but Chakotay could barely process her words.

*Concern. Affection. Fear. Determination.* Too many feelings, too much noise, what the hell was going on with him? The fear he’d felt before as if it wasn’t his now added to his own. The feeling intensified in an endless escalation to the point of being physically painful. It seized him through his chest and around his ribcage, preventing him from breathing properly. And the headache…

“Stop! Stop!” Chakotay cried, clutching his chest with his fist, hoping it would pass.

Kathryn’s hand with the tricorder paused instantly and she edged closer to look into his eyes. “Chakotay, what is it?”

The fear and helplessness were almost unbearable, but just beneath it he could feel something else, the driving force of those emotions and it was… powerful. Beautiful. Unshakable. But also… constrained. His subconscious mind recognized it as familiar and safe. It gave him an anchor amidst everything else, something to hold on to amidst the confusion.

And underneath it, far deeper… *fear, instinct, need. Curiosity.* Such raw emotions felt alien to him, too powerful and wild to be his own.

The worry and concern that remained at the surface of everything intensified and it pulled him back to himself, to his senses. To what he knew, what he could touch. Kathryn was staring at him wide-eyed, her features etched into a mask of concern. The pain had subsided somewhat.

“Kathryn…What happened?” he panted through the tight squeeze that remained around his ribs, his voice sounding far and foreign to his ears.

*Cautious relief amidst the fear and worry.*

Her stare didn’t falter. “The anomaly overtook us before Captain Uang could get close enough to beam us out of the way… It’s all around us. We still don’t have power, and our comms aren’t working. We’re cut off from the fleet, but emergency systems are operational, including life support.” Her tone took a softer tone. “We both blacked out for a while. When I came to you were still unconscious. Had me worried.”

The headache was slowly abating, and Chakotay could now breathe easier. Wiping the cold sweat that dampened his forehead with his palm, he slowly stood. Kathryn gave him a lending hand, her expression still one of concern. When she noticed how much he was shaking, she gently led him back to his copilot seat and helped him settle down.

*Worry. Fear. And a little beneath it, determination.*
She sat on the edge of her own seat, though her eyes never left him. “How are you feeling?” She asked.

He let out a bark of laughter at the irony of the question and she recoiled. How was he feeling?

_The worry was now mixed with curiosity and a touch of indignation._

Chakotay’s laughter died abruptly as he realized what was going on. “How are _you_ feeling?” He asked, his breathing slowly returning to normal, as he met her eyes, more lucid now.

_Confusion._ “I’m fine, Chakotay,” she reassured gently.

“No, I mean, _what_ are you feeling, what emotions?”

The confusion intensified and became intertwined with concern. And fear, fear of revealing too much, fear of letting go of that tightly constrained force that had anchored him to himself earlier. Chakotay’s eyes shot to her face in surprise. Could those feelings actually be coming from her? Awe and wonder – his own – smoothed out the fear and worry that still lurked beneath.

Should he tell her about his suspicions? She would be embarrassed, but she needed to know… She had a right to know that he could feel whatever she was feeling. Including those emotions she was desperately trying to hide…

“How?” she asked cautiously.

“Because I think, whatever happened while we were out, the…anomaly, or whatever entity it is, did something to me.”

_A wave of fear tinged with curiosity flowed through him._

_Hers._

Part of him marveled at the realization.

“What did it do?” She asked softly, as if she could barely breathe. It was her fear that kept her from drawing air into her lungs. He could sense that now, as if he was feeling it himself. It was the strangest thing he’d ever experienced, to feel someone else’s feelings without being able to do anything about them. All he could do was let them flow through. He was just a conduit.

“I think it wants to use me somehow.”

“How? For what?”

The primal fear and hunger, the presence that he could feel at the root of himself, now motivated with a powerful instinct for self-preservation, sprang upwards, to the surface, and Chakotay groaned in pain again as it pierced through the layers of emotions until those powerful impulses raged to the surface and pulsed beneath his skull with an acute pain.

He could barely hear Kathryn speak his name over the buzzing inside his skull.

_Curiosity. Hunger. Fear. Guilt._

He realized through the fog and the pain that those were not Kathryn’s feelings – he’d known, subconsciously, somehow. They belonged to someone else. Something else. Whatever it was that had opened up his body to the abilities of an empath.
“What do you want from me?” Chakotay croaked through gritted teeth. The pain tightened its grip on his ribcage before suddenly vanishing as the feelings retreated back the way they’d come.

“Chakotay!” Kathryn’s worried voice reached his consciousness and when he opened his eyes again one of her hands was holding his tightly where he had them into fists against his chest while the other rested on his cheek. Her hands felt warm and steady, and he held on to the sensations.

“The darkness. It’s not just around us, it’s here with us. It… feels things.”

She blinked, but didn’t doubt the truth of his words. “How do you know?”

“Because I feel them too.”

*Surprise. Concern. Resolve.* “What does it feel?”

“Fear, worry, resolve…” Chakotay frowned as he realized that those were the emotions floating on the surface. “No wait, I think those are coming from you.”

She blinked at his words, her expression shifting to fit how the initial surprise that had assaulted him at his words quickly turned to a wave of embarrassment and doubt. The fear of being found out returned with a vengeance. But he already knew – he’d already seen what she was desperately trying to hide. But he couldn’t think about that now, not when he was already feeling so much, too much.

Guilt, Chakotay’s guilt this time, flashed to the surface at his invasion of Kathryn’s privacy. “I’m sorry, Kathryn, I can’t control what or whose feelings I feel, I’m just… a receptor.”

She nodded after a moment’s hesitation. Acceptation took over the fear. “I understand. I wonder to what purpose, if not to communicate with us.” She gave a small, wry smile. “I bet you’re wishing Tuvok had been the one to come with you now!”

Chakotay managed a smile before he focused his mind on that other presence, beneath it all, crawling under layers of feelings and closed his eyes. “It feels… fear. Curiosity. Hunger. Earlier it felt guilt too.”

She latched onto that. “Guilt? What about?”

Chakotay shook his head. “I’m not sure. Causing me pain, maybe.”

*Cautious hope.* “Can you talk to it?”

Chakotay shook his head. “I don’t know how.”

She studied his expression for a moment, her own expression the perfect outward manifestation of all that he was receiving from her.

“Alright,” she decided as she straightened back into her chair. “Rest a while, allow the hypospray to take effect. When you feel up to it, see if you can find a way to use your… ability… to communicate with the entity, and find out why it’s holding us hostage. It might be our best chance of getting out of here. In the meantime I’ll see what I can do to revive the Flyer. With any luck we can squeeze out just enough juice out of her to get us out of here when we need her to.”

oooOooo

Aboard the starship Aspire, Neelix promptly made his way to the bridge, Nirax on his heels. He only had a basic knowledge of what was going on from the chatter he’d overheard, but if there was a
chance that he could help the admiral and Chakotay... Because they couldn't be dead. Not like this. Not because of him. He had to speak to the captain.

“Permission to step onto the bridge,” Neelix asked when the turbolift doors opened and numerous pairs of eyes settled on him and his companion.

“You must be Neelix, please!” A tall, mature woman with jet-black hair greeted as she walked over to meet them halfway. “We’ve never met, but I’ve heard quite a lot about you. I’m Captain Uang. Welcome aboard Aspire.”

“Thank you. This is Nirax. Lieutenant Torres said our people are safe?”

She gave a curt nod. “They are. They are being escorted at a safe distance until we know it’s safe for them to return to the station. You’ll be able to join them soon, however our priority is to figure out what to do about this.”

Neelix and Nirax followed her gaze to the viewscreen, and Neelix gasped. The darkness had followed them through the wormhole, and though it had not fully crossed the event horizon, tendrils of darkness extended outward, like an evil mist. Was there any chance at all that the Flyer survived such a thing?

oooOooo

Chakotay had spent the last several minutes trying to meditate and, if possible, touch the feelings he believed belonged to the entity now holding them hostage. If he could perhaps jostle them, touch them with his own curiosity, it might respond. However it had come to naught, he just didn’t seem to be able to go down deep enough. And even if he did, there was no telling whether he would be able to interact at all. So far all he seemed to be able to do was host the feelings, not control them.

Maybe the solution lay in the logs and the time elapsed between the moment the entity seized them and the moment he and Kathryn awoke. So he was now looking through the emergency logs to figure out what exactly had happened while he and Kathryn had lost consciousness.

Lying on her back, head stuck under the primary systems panel, Kathryn was only visible from the waist down as she worked to try to resuscitate the Delta Flyer. He could still feel her emotions. They usually came in waves: worry, resolve, annoyance and, every once in a while, something akin to curiosity. Though he couldn’t tell what it was that was nagging at her and distracting her from her work. He tried not to think about it, or about what she’d unwittingly divulged to him through her feelings. It was too unexpected and wondrous for him to process in the state he was in right now. And part of him refused to let the hope take hold of his heart – in case he’d gotten it all wrong or the entity was playing tricks on him.

“According to this, we lost consciousness for about an hour,” he stated. “Although I suppose we could be dealing with a relativity paradox, since our last position was close to the wormhole.”

She didn’t move from under the console, but he could hear the sounds of screws coming undone. Annoyance resurfaced again. “Just what we need,” she muttered. “Something else to mess with the Flyer. Chakotay, pass me that tricorder again?”

Chakotay gingerly crouched down next to her as he handed her the device. “It occurred to me we might need to reroute power from emergency controls if replacing the power cell parts with the spare ones doesn’t work to reroute power from the shields to command. It’s not a lot, but it might give us what we need.”
She raised her head to throw him a look. She’d let her hair down so that the clamp that held her hair on the back of her head didn’t dig into her skull as she lay on her back, and she blew away a strand that had found its way across her face at the movement. “We’ll leave that for our last option, since it’s going to affect life support.” She paused and leaned up on her elbow to better look at him. “How are you doing?”

“Okay. Better.” He still felt feverish but his headache had faded somewhat. He was slowly getting used to the emotional jumble and teasing apart where each feeling came from – himself, Kathryn, or the entity. He thought he could now rather easily recognize his own emotions from Kathryn’s, though they often so paralleled each other that it made the task challenging. “Put me to work.”

Relief. Amusement. One corner of her mouth curved upwards as she finally pried the panel open. “Hand me those spare power cells, then, Captain.”

“Aye aye.”

They fell silent as they worked, and soon Chakotay was getting encouraging readings from the tricorder as she tried this and that. “Let’s give it a shot,” she said at last while putting back the panel back in its original place.

Chakotay felt the surge of curiosity and dread before she even opened her mouth. “I know this is hardly the time to discuss anything, but...You were going to tell me before… how long it’s been over…” She trailed off, her eyes resolutely focused on her task.

He didn’t insult her by asking what she was talking about. Her surge of intermingled emotions was enough of a hint that she meant his relationship with Seven. “About six months.”

Surprise. She deflected it with a sarcastic raise of the eyebrow. “Six months… You were right, it’s amazing the gossip hasn’t reached us at the DQU yet. There’s gotta be some cosmic phenomenon that would explain such delay.”

She slid from under the panel and he reached out to help pull her up. He felt a shiver course through him at the simple contact, but in this case he couldn’t tell where her feelings ended and his began.

“So her sudden request for a transfer… it wasn’t related? I’d wondered…” She asked as she pulled back her hand and pushed her hair back behind her ears.

“I don’t know. I don’t think so –we’ve been working together for the last six months and it’s never been a problem.” He shook his head. “But you’d have to ask her.”

She threw him a glance as she settled back in her chair and Chakotay sat in the copilot seat. “You didn’t discuss her motives with her?”

“I did, but since we… ended things, she hasn’t been particularly forthcoming with me when it comes to personal matters.” He shrugged, the guilt fully his own. “I can’t say I blame her. The way I acted, I was callous. Irresponsible. I should have been more mindful of her inexperience when it comes to human feelings. It wasn’t my intention, but I treated her badly. And I regret that more than anything else.”

She didn’t say anything but her jumbled mix of curiosity, dread, hope, hurt and a touch of disappointment spoke louder than words. She agreed with his assessment, then. Her emotions shifted slightly and something new wafted his way: betrayal. The emotion was fleeting and it disappeared almost as quickly as it had appeared, as if Kathryn had rationalized it to the point that she completely overcame the emotion. But he had felt it.
She felt like he had betrayed her.

And of course she was right. Without realizing, without meaning to, he had betrayed her.

Not on the surface – after all they had never promised each other anything, and she had always upheld the line between them, to the point where he’d simply believed that she didn’t feel about him the way he felt about her. That was the surface of their relationship, the part that was regulated by protocols and briefings and banter. But deep down they had a connection, a trust, that transcended Starfleet, that transcended distance and even disagreements or superfluous doubt. This special connection, this bond that he should have protected at all costs, had suffered from his decision to move on. And there, in that place, is where she felt betrayed.

He didn’t disagree – he felt he had betrayed himself – but was he the only one at fault, here? He wouldn’t have tried to move on if he hadn’t believed that she’d wished him to. If he hadn’t believed that she would only ever feel friendship for him. It took two to tango after all.

She cleared her throat and Chakotay tore his gaze away from her profile. “Alright, let’s give this a try.”

She punched the necessary commands and the power cells hummed for a second, lights flashed overhead and the control panel flickered. “Come on…” Kathryn encouraged under her breath and, as if the Flyer understood, the lights suddenly came fully on and the control panel came to life.

Relief, cautious excitement.

Chakotay exchanged a small smile with her before she returned her attention to her task. “Engaging thrusters, now.”

The engines hummed and the piloting sticks shook with the surge in power. But, they were not moving.

“The anomaly’s holding us in place, it’s like we’re spinning in mud,” Chakotay said as he pressed commands in the hopes of boosting power. To no effect.

Without warning, the emotions that lay deep within him, the ones that weren’t his or Kathryn’s, surged upwards at frightening speed and soared to the surface. The pain in his chest and in his head returned with a vengeance and Chakotay doubled back in pain.

“Chakotay!” Kathryn’s voice sounded far away through the humming inside his head and the fear, pain and anger that now overwhelmed him.

Chakotay tried to focus on those feelings, tried to find a way to convey some sort of communication through that bond. We’re not trying to hurt you. What do you want? Let us go.

Need. Hunger. Fear.

And just like that, the feelings vanished again. Chakotay panted as his muscles relaxed, eyes closed. He could hear the tricorder’s beeping sounds as Kathryn checked him over again. She had turned off power to the Flyer engines.

“Well, I don’t need to be an empath to understand that. Clearly it doesn’t like it when we activate the thrusters,” she reflected.

Chakotay nodded as he tried to get his breathing under control. He was shaking so badly his teeth were almost clattering. “Help me to the back of the compartment. I don’t think we’re going to
navigate our way out of here, so I suggest rerouting power from propulsion to the force field to contain me.”


“I don’t know what this is doing to me – I don’t know what it’s going to do with me. At least if I’m on the other side of that field, I’ll be contained. And look on the bright side, it might keep me from reading your emotions,” he added with a tight smile.

She opened her mouth to dispute, but he beat her to it, instinctively knowing what her complaint was going to be about. “You’ll be in control of the force field, you can deactivate it if you deem it necessary that I get medical assistance.”

Annoyance. Resolve. She pursed her lips before standing to her feet. “Fine. You know Chakotay,” she began while he stood on shaking legs and she grabbed his arm to support him, “I understand that this new ability of yours might be our best chance out of here, but I have to say – I find it rather annoying.”

He managed a small chuckle as he slowly made his way to the back. “Trust me, Admiral, annoying doesn’t begin to describe it. Although, I have to admit, it has some advantages.”

oooOooO
“Why isn’t it moving? What is it doing?” B’Elanna asked as she rubbed her temple, frustrated and confounded by the anomaly’s – the entity’s – behavior.

“I hate to be the pessimistic voice here,” Harry started, his voice sounding strained, “but has it occurred to anyone else that it might be buying its time? Feeding on the energy within the wormhole, and growing?”

“Its purpose is irrelevant,” Seven’s voice cut in. “What matters is figuring out a way to retrieve Admiral Janeway and Captain Chakotay.”

“Assuming they’re still in there,” B’Elanna retorted, the helplessness inside her growing at an exponential rate.

“We have to assume that they are,” Captain Uang calmly but sternly replied. “Commander Tuvok, you’ve been gathering data from this… entity since it appeared. What have you learned?”

“Very little. It interacts in the same space as we do, but it has no known organic or nonorganic molecule. It behaves like a gas – rather than a wave – yet its atomic and subatomic make-up remains unknown, including how that gaseous substance is contained into a fluid shape. Even more intriguing is how it moves through space. I believe it consists of a kind of matter, or perhaps even dark matter, yet it does not behave like any known matter.”

“Exactly like those stories… Extraordinary,” Neelix commented from aboard Aspire, almost wistfully, before shaking himself out of it. “I apologize, I just never imagined that so much of the story would turn out to be real.”

“I don’t suppose there’s anything in that story that can help us send it back the way it came?” B’Elanna retorted.

“Not that I can recall, but I can ask the others.”

“Please do,” Captain Uang agreed before returning her attention to the conversation. “If it’s sentient,” Captain Uang resumed, “as Lieutenant Torres suggested earlier, it might respond to stimuli. I think it’s time we test that hypothesis.”

The force field worked. Chakotay was no longer feeling Kathryn’s emotions. He felt like a weight had been lifted, as if he could see clearer– and yet, he missed it. He missed her presence there, the feelings that were so powerful he’d made them his anchor to reality. The feelings that were so powerful he didn’t dare label them.

But they were still there, he reminded himself. The only difference was that now Kathryn had to be willing to share them with him for him to be able to see them. Soon, once they were safely back aboard Voyager and it wasn’t inappropriate for him to do so, he would try to prove himself worthy of those feelings, worthy of her. But now was not the time, he reminded himself again.
Chakotay had resumed his meditation position as he sat on the other side of the force field, in the back of the Flyer cockpit. This time around he’d been able to reach a little deeper than before through his meditative state, and closer to that force that seemed to radiate from the entity. However he couldn’t quite get to it, no matter how much he tried to reach out and touch it.

It didn’t help that whatever it was that Kathryn was doing as she fumbled with the subspace transmission relay, it was making a ruckus.

He opened his eyes with a sigh and threw her a glance. “What are you doing?”

“You’re doing your own communication thing, I’m doing mine…” She drawled with a raised eyebrow. “I’m trying to boost the transmission signal to reach the fleet. Assuming they’re still out there.”

“How’s it going?”

“I’d have better luck if I were reassembling a shield modulator blindfolded. Where’s B’Elanna when you need her? I guess it’s ironic that I’m doing this so I can talk to her.”

Chakotay smiled at the all too familiar tone.

“You?” She asked, her attention still focused on whatever her hands were doing as they worked inside the open panel. Sitting on the floor with her brows furrowed at the challenge, she made an endearing picture. Her hair was still free from her hairclip and there was something enticing in the way it flowed freely around her face and on her shoulders, without any of the control she usually wielded over the strands to style them. It felt intimate to see her like this, somehow, because it was her, without any of the behaviors and affectations that usually came with the way she performed her rank. This was Kathryn. And she was beautiful.

“It’s hard to concentrate… with all the noise,” he replied with a teasing grin.

She took the bait and shot him an indignant look. When she saw that he was teasing she huffed her protest. “I see you’re feeling better…”

Chakotay smiled again. He was feeling better, although all things considered, it might just be that he was getting used to the sensations. The pain was still there, but was like white noise in the back of his mind and had been reduced to a dull, throbbing ache. The hypospray had seemed to help with the fever, though he still felt heavy. The entity had not made itself known for a while now.

“I haven’t had any luck either. I’m starting to think I might need some help in order to do what I’m trying to do. Maybe some medication could help me reach a deep enough meditative state.”

“It’s worth considering,” Kathryn replied distractedly, her attention still focused on what she was doing.

“Have you tried rerouting power from the plasma emitters?” He suggested as he watched her. He hadn’t done that in a long time, he realized, simply taken the time to watch her, and enjoy the way her features shifted with her emotions: the beautiful blue eyes that often spoke louder than her words, the delicate curve of her eyebrows when they rose sarcastically or furrowed in concentration, the enticing lips whose bright smile (all too rare these days) never missed making his heart beat faster… He’d missed her over the last few months, so very much. There had been many a time when he’d almost contacted her, just to talk, just to hear her voice. He’d even written to her a few times. But then he’d remembered how dismayed she had been in his presence before he left for his first mission, and he’d stopped himself before calling or sending the letters.
Unaware of his thoughts, she gave a quick smile. Just a small twitch of her lips. “Great minds think alike. That’s what I’m doing right now. I think I’m almost there…” She trailed off as she put in the finishing touches and rose to her feet. She threw him a hopeful smile before she walked to the primary controls and sat down in the pilot chair. Chakotay rose to his feet as well, but remained where he was, mindful of the force field.

“This is Admiral Janeway, can anyone read me? Voyager, Aspire, this is Admiral Janeway, can you read me?”

There was some static and Kathryn touched her lips anxiously as they waited 5 seconds… 10 seconds… 15 seconds…

“Something else must be dampening the signal—”

“Thi… i…. ven of Nine, we ..ead y… It is a reli….. ear your voice.”

Kathryn perked up and sent Chakotay a triumphant grin and he couldn’t help but reciprocate.

He gave her a teasing smile. “Blindfolded, huh?”

oooOooo

“This is Seven of Nine, we read you. It is a relief to hear your voice,” Seven replied. “What is your situation?”

“Seven! We ap….ear to be … within the dar.. ent….y.”

Seven pressed her combadge. “Commander Tuvok, is there a way to clarify their signal?”

“I am attempting to do so now… Try it now, Admiral, you were breaking up, please repeat,” Seven instructed.

“I repeat, the Delta Flyer appears to be trapped within the dark entity. We’re both safe for now, but something’s going on with Chakotay. We think the entity, whatever it is, gave him some… unusual abilities.”

Seven gave a satisfied nod at the improved quality of the transmission, then quickly patched the open transmission through to the sickbay in addition the network of starships, so that the Doctor could monitor or ask the appropriate questions to determine the state of Chakotay’s health. After the Doctor had received the appropriate information regarding Chakotay’s symptoms and tricorder readings, which included instructing Janeway to use the device to make sure that the entity was not actually parasitical, they returned to the topic at hand.

Janeway informed them of their hypothesis that Chakotay might be able to communicate with the entity through his newfound empathic abilities, though he had yet been able to do so.

“Doctor, do you have any suggestions to help me attain a deeper meditative state?” Chakotay asked.

“There are a number of options, of course. Did you have anything in particular in mind, Captain?”

“I thought that perhaps a mild sedative might do the trick, it’s worked in similar situations before,” Chakotay’s voice replied. Seven was impressed at how calm his tone was. His poise under pressure had always been a trait she had admired in him, as few humans seemed to possess it. A few months ago, a thought such as this would have triggered a strange malaise within her, but she now realized
that it was no longer the case. Now her admiration of him was that of a friend, nothing more, nothing less.

“That might help, and you should have a number of options in the Flyer medical kit.” The Doctor went on with his recommendations and the risks associated with each of the treatments until Janeway, Chakotay and the Doctor were satisfied. The Doctor went on. “Admiral Janeway will have to administer it.

Captain Uang joined the conversation.

“Admiral, Captain Chakotay, allow me to say that it is a great relief to hear your voices. The fact that the anomaly is some form of sentient being confirms our own hypothesis based on its behavior thus far. We have come up with a number of ideas to figure out its behavioral patterns – if we could coordinate with Captain Chakotay’s abilities to communicate with it, we might be able to get an even better sense of what our next course of action should be.”

“What did you have in mind?” Janeway asked.

“Admiral, this is Neelix speaking. I have to second Captain Uang, it’s really good to hear your voice!”

“And yours as well, Neelix.”

“I’ve been discussing the Legend of the Living Stars with my fellow Talaxians. Even though most of them were unfamiliar with it, I did talk with a number of elders who remember a different version of a similar story, in which the Darkness is reasoned with.”

“How?” Chakotay asked.

“By coming to a compromise by which the living stars provide the darkness with enough light to sustain its appetite long enough for it to travel to another system.”

“What do you make of it?” Janeway asked, an open-ended question to all those monitoring the discussion.

“One of the common item in both stories is that the entity feeds on light,” Tuvok commented.

“So if it feeds on photon particles, maybe we should give it what it wants,” Icheb suggested – his first words spoken as part of this discussion.

“Well, careful you don’t end up domesticating it.” B’Elanna replied, her tone cynical. “We wouldn’t want it to come back for more. Or get angry when it doesn’t get it.”

“If we can find out whether it is actually feeding on photons,” Icheb went on, and Seven was pleased to hear that he didn’t let counterarguments defeat him, “then perhaps we can figure out what it dislikes. Why hasn’t it fully come through the event horizon, for instance?”

It was Janeway who replied. “I agree that we need to learn more about this thing, hopefully Captain Chakotay can help with that as well once he’s able to sense it better. One thing we do know, it didn’t like the Flyer’s thrusters when we activated them earlier.”

Seven committed this information to memory before she spoke again. “It might be related to the matter-antimatter released, but in order to test that, logic dictates that we first need to test our first postulate: that it finds sustenance in photons.”
“Alright,” Janeway conceded, “once Chakotay has achieved the desired meditative state, we’ll release a photon beam, and see how the entity reacts. We should probably make sure that the Deep Space station is evacuated.”

“We anticipated your order, Admiral,” Tuvok replied, “it has already been done. We have also relocated the Talaxians, with the exception of Neelix, to the Cousteau. It is ready to depart at warp speed at a moment’s notice, should the need arise.”

“You read my mind, Tuvok. Alright, let’s do this. We’ll keep you posted. Janeway out.”

Seven let out an anxious sigh as the transmission was terminated. She busied herself with adjusting the sensors and creating alarms that would indicate any changes in both the entity and the Entraport and the still connected wormhole.

Her mind wandered of its volition to the situation aboard the Delta Flyer. She briefly wondered whether this time alone, with their lives in the balance, had provided Janeway and Chakotay with an opportunity to bring an end to the romantic tango – to use a common metaphor that related to a specific dance rhythm and motions from Earth – they had started years before.

Even though Chakotay’s decision to end their relationship months before had caused greater emotional turmoil than Seven had anticipated, she had also moved on from it more quickly than what she had expected considering what she had observed was the average recovery time in her fellow shipmates. But perhaps this was a sign – much like the fact that she had felt no resentment or jealousy toward either Chakotay or Janeway – that what she had felt for Chakotay had not truly been romantic love. Perhaps, as she had once heard Tom Paris describe Lieutenant Kim’s amorous disasters, what she had been in love with, was the idea of a romance, or perhaps even love itself.

oooOooo
Chapter 13

As Kathryn prepared the sedative solution for Chakotay, her mind was busy trying to ignore all the ways that this could go wrong. What if the sedative put Chakotay too deep under, or what if he couldn’t do whatever he was planning to do? What if they were wrong and the photon beam hurt the entity instead of feeding it? Would it take revenge upon them? Or, then again, what if, upon receiving some photons for dinner, the entity’s hold on Chakotay’s body grew so much that his pain became unbearable? Would his body and his mind be able to take it? The fever that had affected him before worried her – his body was clearly reacting to something, yet that presence remained invisible to her scans.

Ever since she had regained consciousness, she’d battled her concern for Chakotay and the fear that there might not be a way out of here. It was reassuring to know that the others were also putting their heads together to help them, but their real hope lied in Chakotay’s ability to reach the entity somehow, in ways that she couldn’t even begin to fathom. She was a fairly good communicator when it came to verbal diplomacy, but how did one communicate using only emotions? As a scientist, she’d always been taught to be conscious but wary of her emotions. And as an officer, she’d always been taught to keep them in check – while not dismissing her instincts – lest it affected her judgment in life or death situation. So it was probably a good thing that the entity had chosen Chakotay over her to do this. He might be as private with his emotions as Kathryn was, but his spirituality and open-mindedness would play in his favor. If anyone who was not Betazoid could do this, it was him.

Chakotay presently kneeled on the other side of the force field, eyes closed. She’d expected him to be relaxed, confident, but his brow was furrowed in concentration and Kathryn noticed that his fever had returned. His face was flushed and his body trembled with quick and brief tremors. Her concern and fear skyrocketed.

The hypospray solution was ready so she approached the force field quietly.

“Chakotay,” she said softly so as not to startle him.

His eyes opened and they found hers, and he gingerly stood to his feet. He paled with the motion and had to place a steadying hand against the wall before he straightened to face her, his lips tight together. For a moment Kathryn wished she could be able to feel what he was feeling, and share his burden.

“Are you ready?” She asked, her voice barely above a whisper. Oh how she hated this! How much she wished she could switch places with him!

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” he replied before he took in a deep breath. But then his hand reached out towards her, just short of touching the force field and he frowned. “No, wait. Before we do this, there’s something I have to say,” he started breathlessly, his tone urgent. “This isn’t quite how I intended to tell you, but I might never get another-”

She shook her head to interrupt him, anything to keep him from believing that he was going to die, to keep him from telling her goodbye. Because there was no way in hell that she would let them die here. “We’re going to be fine, Chakotay.”
“But if we’re not-”

“No!” She interrupted forcefully, almost angrily, “you sound too much like someone who’s getting ready to say goodbye, and I won’t accept that!”

“Kathryn, for once just listen! Please.”

His tone stunned her into silence. She almost felt his panic as his eyes searched hers, pleading. She rubbed her face but eventually nodded. “I’m listening, but,” she added as she leaned forward and gave him a threatening look, “this better not be goodbye, Chakotay.”

“Trust me, I don’t want it to be,” he sighed before licking his lips nervously. “A few days ago, you told me I should follow my heart’s desires, you told me that it’s not too late for me to do what I truly want with my life. For a while after I got promoted I truly believed that Starfleet and commanding Voyager could do it for me.” He paused to catch his breath and Kathryn watched him with a mix of curiosity, dread and surprise. This was not the goodbye speech she had anticipated, yet the urgency in his voice was enough to tighten her stomach into an uncomfortable knot of dread.

“But you see, the thing is,” he went on, stammering rather uncharacteristically, “all this time, there’s been something missing, like, like a part of me was left in the Delta Quadrant… I didn’t understand it at first. But then I realized, it wasn’t a part of me that was missing. It was you, Kathryn. I realized, you are the x factor to my happiness; not Voyager, not the pips on my collar, and not being back home. You could give me the best archaeology job on Earth right now, and still it wouldn’t be enough. Not unless you were part of my life too!”

Kathryn could only stare at him, wide-eyed, at the unexpected turn of events. Could this be true? After months of misery and wishing that she could have told him how she truly felt, he was telling her what she had dreamed he would tell her one day: that his feelings for her had not gone forever. Kathryn’s eyes filled with moisture as she stared up at him, too surprised and amazed at his words, so passionately spoken, to formulate a coherent response.

The scientific part of her couldn’t help but issue a warning at the back of her mind, that maybe this was too good to be true. That maybe this was a trick that the entity was playing on her. But she quickly dismissed it – if this was a dream, she didn’t want to wake up anytime soon.

“I have no expectations, Kathryn,” he went on, the force field between them leaving him unaware of her sudden rush of feelings at his declaration. “I just… I just needed you to know what you mean to me.” He took in a deep breath and his expression shifted from desperate urgency to a calm determination. As if, now that he’d spoken the words, he could breathe easier. His gaze softened and Kathryn blinked, not caring if it meant letting the moisture escape her eyes. “But,” he continued with renewed resolve, “a long time ago, I vowed to myself, and to you, that I would always put your needs first, no matter what. I intend to keep honoring that promise, so…” He swallowed again and blinked back some moisture from his own eyes. “If what you need is for me to never speak of this again, I’ll respect your wishes.”

Kathryn gasped, her heart too full, her emotions too raw to be able to speak or make sense of them. So she did the one thing that made sense. Holding his eyes, she wordlessly extended her hand toward the control panel to the side. Her hand reached inside and with one flick of her finger, the force field disintegrated between them with a familiar whoosh.

It was as he’d said: this ability of his had some advantages.

She stopped thinking and let her emotions roam free, knowing that he would be able to feel them, aware of the extraordinary circumstances that allowed her to communicate with him at a depth that
very few humans could achieve.

Chakotay startled when her jumbled mix of love, joy, hope, anticipation, excitement, relief, desire, affection, fear, admiration, certainty, reached him. What she needed was to be by his side, to be able to touch him, to share his life, to honor the connection that was slowly starting to heal. She needed him and, for the first time since she knew him, she wanted him to know it. She was ready for him to know it, and to embrace the feelings and the potential between them. Suddenly breathless, she gave a small shrug. Would he take what she was offering?

Dark eyes wide and incredulous as they held hers, Chakotay let out a breath, but then bridged the gap between them with one step. His hands reached up to cup her cheeks when their bodies stopped just short of clashing together. Breathing heavily, he touched his forehead with hers and closed his eyes – his feverish skin felt warm against hers, reawakening her concern for him. “Kathryn…”

Her name on his lips sent a shiver down her spine. She rested her hands against his chest, feeling the heartbeat drum madly below her fingertips. “I’ll be damned if I let this thing keep you from honoring your promise, not now that you know it’s you I need,” she whispered, her voice raw despite her attempt at lightening the mood.

His raspy smile mingled their breaths and Kathryn leaned into him. Now that she was this close to him, his presence was overwhelming and the intensity of her need surprised her. It was as if her body had come alive with the new awareness she’d felt of late – that every movement, every breath, every touch of his made her skin tingle, sending tremors of delight through every fiber of her body.

Heady with this new realization, she took the leap. It took only a slight tilt of her head for her to reach up and graze his lips with hers. Chakotay sighed and shivered at the contact. It took him only a fraction of a second to respond, and before she could even pull away further than half a breath, his lips were on hers. There was no hesitation and no playfulness in his kiss, just intent, passion and maybe even a tad of despair. Kathryn responded in kind, grazing her fingers through his hair prompting him to gather her more fully in his arms, unsure whether the moan that ensued came from her or from him.

After a small eternity that felt way too short, his kisses slowed down to something more reverent, and he caressed her lips one last time before he pulled back. He took a moment to catch his breath before he looked into her eyes.

“I’d say so far this thing has been rather instrumental in getting me to honor that promise,” he finally replied, giving her a teasing grin as he caressed her cheek with his thumb. “It’s time I try to convince it not to ruin it.” With a gentle smile, he reached out around her and grabbed the hypospray with the sedative she had left by the medkit, and handed it to her.

Kathryn nodded in understanding as her hand came up to rest on his chest, the drum of his heartbeat strong and steady, but a little too fast, beneath her palm. She gazed at him for a long moment, her feelings still probably going at him in strong waves – all of her dread, amazement, fear for what he was about to do, and once again, her resolve to get it done. She looked down at his hand and took the hypospray. Her eyes met his again before she reached up and injected the sedative into his neck.

“I love you,” he said simply, powerfully.

It was ridiculously easy to whisper it back to him, as if her heart had always meant for her to say the words. “I love you.”

She stepped back, still holding his eyes, and reached out to reactivate the field.
Interlude

Chapter Notes

A/N: The last of those little “interludes.” This is a short little one, and somewhat more lighthearted than the others!

Just a little over three months ago, on the Cardassian Border

Chakotay sat at the desk in the ready room aboard Voyager, words and ideas flowing from his mind to his fingers as he attempted to convey what being here was like to B’Elanna. There were times when he wished she had decided to come with them. He understood why she hadn’t, but maybe she would have been able to help him make sense of the senseless hollowness that he felt being back here.

“Since I’ve been here,” he typed, “I have felt like a stranger in my own body, as if the memories that swirl through my mind right now aren’t actually mine, but those of a stranger, or of a man I once knew. I’m not sure what I expected to find here, but it’s not there. The star systems divided by the new Border seem barren of any life – it’s like all sides have fled it after the decimation of the Maquis. Since Voyager has arrived, we haven’t come across anyone, with the exception of one or two Federation patrols. Not even commercial freighters. It’s as if this corner of space is still trying to recover from the trauma of war. Barely breathing, just… surviving. Maybe the process at play here is something akin to the way a forest regenerates after a fire: at first there’s no sign of life, just barren land, but then, slowly, with sunshine and rain, trees start taking root again, insects crawl back into their former niches, birds return, and slowly, flowers start blooming again, and with those, comes the return of larger animals. I was hoping to find closure here, but until the desolation makes way to bloom again, I don’t think I’ll find anything at all. In spite of all that, I don’t regret asking for this assignment. Despite the fact that it’s not quite what I had in mind, it does feel like I’m coming full circle somehow. Especially being so close to the Badlands, the place that turned all of our lives upside down in the most impossible way, and with the most extraordinary consequences. But that’s old news, so I won’t bore you with my thoughts on that.”

He shifted the tone of his letter to something lighter as he described how uneventful their mission had been so far. He couldn’t help but imagine how Kathryn would have reacted to being in his situation – nothing to explore, no one to interact with, just routine scans and weekly maintenance. She’d always hated stagnancy, and it cheered him up to think of her, even if the delight was bittersweet. He’d tried writing to her a couple of times, but in the end had always deleted the letters, not quite knowing where he stood where she was concerned. Maybe he could ask B’Elanna to forward his best wishes.

He was distracted by the door chime. “Come in.”

Harry walked in, a PADD in his hand, and stepped to the desk to give it to Chakotay. “Our latest results on the scans of Lykin 5. Nothing unusual to report. As usual.”
Chakotay threw him a wry glance before taking a look at the report. “Trying to tell me something, Mr. Kim?”

“Permission to speak freely, sir?”

Chakotay leaned back into the chair and nodded.

“What are we doing here, sir? We’ve been here for three months, scanning, patrolling, surveilling, looking for…what? I understand that this assignment is personal for many members of the crew, yourself included, but as first officer it’s my duty to keep you apprised of the crew’s morale, and I’m sorry to say that even the former Maquis don’t understand why we linger. They feel like we should be doing something else, something more. After the Delta Quadrant experience, everyone finds it really difficult to sit still. Which is what it feels like we’ve been doing recently.”

Chakotay stood and walked around his desk to face his first officer. Harry’s expression was one of dread, but also stark determination. Good. He was learning to stand his ground. Chakotay crossed his arms and met Harry’s eyes. “I agree. Which is exactly why I’m going to ask Admiral Janeway for Voyager to be reassigned to the Exploration Division.”

Harry startled in surprise. “You are?”

“I think it’s about time we moved on from this place, all of us, but especially myself. Let’s put Voyager to better use.”

Harry grinned in relief. “The crew will be happy to hear that.” He relaxed his posture and stared up at Chakotay excitedly. “I heard the new Deep Space station they’re building is going to be amazing. A true feat of integrated technology. I’d like to see it when it’s done.”

“Well, if Admiral Janeway consents to my request, there’s a good chance you will.”

“I doubt she’ll say no. She loves this ship too much not to want it back within her grasp!” Realizing how that sounded, Harry’s smile froze and he stammered. “I mean, not that she can do with it as she pleases, well I guess she can, actually, but what I mean is, you’re the Captain, so she-”

“Harry, stop before you dig yourself in deeper.”

“Yes sir.” He cleared his throat and clasped his hands together behind his back. “When you communicate with her, please send her my best, and tell her we all miss her. Not that you’re not a great captain, you are, it’s just-”

“Harry!”

“Right. I’ll stop talking now, and just return to the bridge,” he said, pointing in the direction of the bridge with his thumb, his desire to leave the room almost palpable.

Chakotay nodded, trying to keep a straight face at Harry’s embarrassed retreat. “Good idea.”

“Good night, sir.”

Chakotay smiled to himself as he returned to his chair. Despite his rank of Lieutenant and his tendency of being easily intimidated, Harry made a rather competent first officer. He was a quick learner, and was quickly building self-confidence in his abilities to lead and to make decisions. Chakotay was glad that he was able to give him the command experience he needed – that had been one advantage of this assignment, at least. He was actually considering recommending him for another promotion soon – it would make up for the lack of opportunities he’d had for advancement
while in the Delta Quadrant.

Harry’s words about Kathryn echoed in Chakotay’s mind as he stared at the monitor without seeing. He didn’t take it personally that the crew missed her — he probably missed her most of all and it was a daily struggle not to wish she were here with them. The urge to make a call to the admiralty right now and speak to her, see her face, hear her voice, was suddenly so powerful, he asked the computer to open a transmission, but then hesitated, the command on the tip of his tongue.

What if she still needed space? She hadn’t contacted him in months, and he attributed it to the fact that she was either too busy, or she was still recovering from whatever had made her distance herself from him.

He closed the transmission window with a sigh, and returned to his letter to B’Elanna instead.

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Chapter 15

Kathryn monitored Chakotay’s vitals carefully while he sat on the floor of the Flyer, eyes closed. The tricorder data notwithstanding, she could tell by the way his posture and face muscles relaxed that the sedative was slowly taking effect. She reopened a channel with Voyager and made sure that the Doctor was also listening in case she needed to intervene medically.

Her mind reeled and her lips still tingled from their kiss, and her hands itched to touch him, to feel his warmth, feel his skin and muscle underneath, to reassure herself that he was real. But Kathryn tried to ignore the sensations and forced herself to focus on the task at hand. The sooner they got themselves out of this situation, the sooner they would be able to continue their conversation. Now that she knew how he felt and what he wanted, there was so much to talk about, so much about the future to discuss, so much to discover about him, and she was impatient to take on the exploration.

*Focus.*

The Doctor had told them that this particular sedative would relax Chakotay into something akin to a hypnotic state, so that part of him was still conscious of his surroundings. The Doctor had urged Kathryn to talk to him and, with Tuvok’s help, guide him toward the answers they sought.


“What does it feel?” Tuvok asked through the comms, his voice calm.

“Fear. Hunger. Curiosity.”

“What does it want?”

Chakotay frowned a little. “I don’t know.”

Kathryn took over. “That’s okay, Chakotay. Is it aware you’re there?”

“I think so. Its curiosity increased when I touched it with my own. I think it’s curious about us. But also afraid.”

“Afraid of what?”

“I don’t know. I just know that it feels fear. It’s an instinctual reaction, a basic need to survive.”

“We’re going to send out the photon beam now.”

“I’m ready.”

Kathryn moved to the controls and entered the commands. The beam pulsed out of the Flyer, but it was almost immediately absorbed by the darkness around them.

Chakotay grunted in the back and Kathryn rushed back to the force field, wishing she could do something to alleviate his pain. He was holding his head in his hands, but hadn’t woken up.

“What does it feel now?” Kathryn asked softly.

“It wants more. If you do it again, I’m going to try jostling it with my own feelings.”
“Releasing the second beam, now.”

This time Chakotay tensed and doubled in pain before falling to the side. Kathryn rushed to him but didn’t dare lower the force field for fear that her emotions would only make it more difficult for him to focus on what he had to do. “Chakotay!”

He writhed in pain but shook his head even as his fingers curled into fists by his temples. “No—I’m … almost there, just … a little more…”

Suddenly he stiffened and fell eerily still, his head falling to the floor with a painful thud. No, no, no! Spurred on by fear, Kathryn jumped to her feet and deactivated the force field before she knelt by him and frantically felt for his pulse. The half-second it took for her to feel it felt like eternity, but when her fingers felt the throbbing beneath his skin she slouched back onto the floor with a relieved sigh.

Chakotay suddenly moved again, startling her, as he quietly, strangely, sat back up. His eyes were still closed, but he wasn’t shivering anymore—he looked perfectly in control, in a way that clashed uneasily with his previous behavior. Kathryn stared at him as she slowly put some distance between them. There was just something eerie about his movements.

“Chakotay?” she asked softly, cautiously.

“I’m still here,” he replied, his voice sounding so normal Kathryn almost laughed with relief. “I understand now. The entity. It’s trapped. It’s afraid.”

“Where is it trapped? In our space? Can we help?” Kathryn asked gently as she slowly returned to the front of the Flyer to reactivate the force field, her eyes never leaving Chakotay’s form as she backed up. Just in case.

Chakotay frowned in concentration at her question. “No. It’s trapped. In-between.”

“In-between what?” It was Tuvok’s voice and Kathryn almost startled. She’d forgotten all about the others.

“It’s trapped inside the wormhole?” Icheb suggested and Kathryn sighed. Of course. That was why it hadn’t been able to fully come through. Its paw was stuck in a trap. No wonder it had felt fear and had sought help from them.

“Yes,” Chakotay confirmed.

Kathryn nodded. Finally, they were getting somewhere! “Okay, how do we release it from the trap? Ideally on the other side of that event horizon…” She asked the others.

Silence was the only answer, and she rubbed her face anxiously.

“What do we know so far?” Kathryn prompted as she paced the small space of the Flyer. “It feeds on photons, it didn’t like the thrusters, something about the Neutrino Entraptor is containing it. B’Elanna, is it possible that it’s made of a different kind of lepton, a kind that we’ve just never identified before? It might explain why the containment field you used for trapping the neutrinos is having a similar effect on it.”

“I guess, but we have no way of knowing!” B’Elanna replied.

“It would be consistent with my analysis of the entity,” Tuvok commented.
“Okay, so how do we release it?”

“We need to force the devices to shut down,” Seven stated. “The containment field will dissolve, and the entity will be free.”

“Or be destroyed,” B’Elanna countered. She gave a loud sigh. “The truth is, we have no way of knowing, Admiral.”

“Based on the data we have so far,” Icheb commented, “it’s obvious that it’s only stuck in the wormhole because the gravitometric energy released at the exit of the wormhole is disproportionate to the energy created at the entrance and the flux of neutrinos within the containment field doesn’t allow for the energy to escape the conduit. You should fly the Delta Flyer through the wormhole back to the Delta Quadrant. The entity will follow you and will be released once the devices are shut down,” Icheb stated matter-of-factly.

A heavy silence filled the comms and Kathryn’s blood froze. She didn’t fully understand Icheb’s reasoning, but, she told herself, it was exactly why B’Elanna had insisted he come along. He comprehended things the way few people did. What if he were right and they had to return to the Delta Quadrant?

God, what if he were right?

Seven recovered first. “Icheb, do you realize what you are suggesting?”

Kathryn shook her head to dismiss the uneasiness gripping her heart. “Even if we wanted to go back, we seem to be stuck, we didn’t move an inch when we activated the thrusters earlier.”

“Perhaps Captain Chakotay can convince the entity to let you escort it back, if it knows we’re trying to help…” Icheb suggested.

“It is far too risky, we have no way of knowing whether the entity will follow,” Seven countered.

“If Admiral Janeway releases a steady pulse of photon beams, there’s a chance the entity will follow the Flyer back through as well. So far it’s been acting like a wounded animal, it is but a short leap to assume that it will respond to the offer of sustenance much in the same way as well.”

“Perhaps, but Janeway and Chakotay risk getting stranded in the Delta Quadrant—we have no way of knowing if the Entraptor will function a second time, let alone what the forced shut down will do to it.”

“No, Icheb is right,” Kathryn conceded, putting an end to the debate. A strange kind of calm settled over her, and she walked closer to Chakotay. She crouched as close as she could to the force field, but he didn’t react. He was still sitting eerily still, the slight raise and fall of his chest the only sign that he was in fact breathing. She knew, some instinct, perhaps, that he wouldn’t be able to sustain the entity’s presence for much longer. They had to act now, and so far, returning to the Delta Quadrant—returning to the Delta Quadrant—was the most logical option she had been presented with. It relied on several untested assumptions, but she didn’t have the luxury to do anything about it. And her instincts told her it was the thing to do.

“Admiral…!” B’Elanna pleaded.

“It’s settled,” Kathryn replied before disintegrating the force field and reaching out to take Chakotay’s hand from his thigh. It was icy cold. The urgency in her gut returned in full force.

“Chakotay, I need you to tell the entity something for me. Tell it that we need it to follow us, we’re
going to help it.”

“Kathryn. You’re going to release it from the trap?” Chakotay asked, his tone sounding almost childlike.

“Yes. Can you tell it to allow us to fly our ship? It’s only going to be for a moment. Then it’ll be free.”

“Okay.”

Kathryn squeezed his hand and tried to swallow the lump of fear in her throat. Her free hand reached out to touch his face, but she let it fall back to her side before it made contact. “Thank you.”

Summoning all of her willpower, she stood to her feet, reactivated the force field, and moved back to the pilot seat. “Seven, will you still be able to monitor the entity once it goes through the wormhole?”

“So long at the wormhole remains open, I believe so.”

“Good. As soon as we’re on the other side, shut the door. And if all goes well, when you reconnect the devices, we’ll be there ready to come back home.”

oooOooo

B’Elanna couldn’t stop herself from sending an angry glare at Icheb. “Why did you do that?”

Icheb frowned in confusion. “Occam’s razor theory dictates that most of the time the simplest idea is the one most likely to succeed.”

“Since when are you so well versed in Earth philosophies? Now they’re going to go through that wormhole, and we don’t know… God! There are so many unknowns right now I don’t even know where to start!”

“Then perhaps we should start with the things we can know,” Icheb replied, and B’Elanna wasn’t sure whether she was mad at him for sounding so calm, or proud of him for sounding so calm. “How do we restart the Neutrino Entraptor after it’s been shut down? And can we do it from Voyager or the station?”

B’Elanna let out a long breath, rubbed her fatigue out of her eyes, and focused. “Right.”

oooOooo

From her position in Astrometrics, Seven kept an open channel with Admiral Janeway while she monitored the Flyer’s progress.

“I’m ready to engage thrusters,” Janeway stated. “Hopefully the entity won’t retaliate by hurting Chakotay.”

Seven was glad that Janeway couldn’t see her own concern. The thought had crossed her mind—if the entity had somehow taken possession of Chakotay’s synaptic connections... “The photon beams will keep it distracted,” she stated, hoping her certitude would reassure Janeway.

“Right. Engaging thrusters.”

Janeway fell silent and Seven redirected her attention to the screen where she could still see the entity in real time, as well as the interdimensional conduit created by the Entraptors. Even though the Delta Flyer, trapped within the entity, still escaped the sensors, Seven could tell that the entity appeared to
be moving, slowly so, but moving. Slowly shrinking back into the wormhole.

“It appears to be working, Admiral. What is Chakotay’s status?”

“He seems fine, which worries me. Earlier he doubled in pain when we tried this, but now he’s just sitting still. I don’t like it. I’ll try accelerating a little. The sooner I get this thing through the better.”

“Agreed.”

“Seven, are we alone on this channel?”

Seven frowned in confusion. “Yes.”

“Then can I ask you something? Why did you really ask for reassignment?”

“You wish to discuss this now?”

The entity was reverting into the wormhole at a slow but efficient rate.

“I might never get another chance.” Even though the situation hardly warranted it, the admiral’s tone was sarcastic, almost amused. Seven realized that it was Janeway’s way of coping with the uncertainties. “And I’ll be damned if I’m gonna get stuck in the Delta Quadrant again, destined to endlessly wonder what made you change your mind. It’s been on my mind since I got the paperwork.”

“Very well. I was hoping to participate on this project.”

“The Entraptor project? Why this one?”

Seven hesitated, but remembered that Janeway had always been kind and understanding toward her, even when they’d had disagreements. She would understand this, perhaps better than anyone. “I was hoping that, should it succeed, it would help me find someone who is … far away.”

There was a pause. Seven should have known that the admiral would know exactly whom she was referring to. “That man you connected with in Unimatrix Zero. The drone, Axum. You want to go looking for him.”

Seven inhaled. “Yes. However, my wish is not entirely selfish, for I also hope to provide assistance in his resistance movement and help them regain their individuality. The way you have helped me.”

A light blinked on the screen, and Seven’s attention shifted to it. “Our sensor momentarily picked up the Delta Flyer within the entity. I can now pinpoint your location based on the last reading and the entity’s current speed.”

Janeway cleared her throat, as if to recover from a surge of emotions. “Good, cause I’m flying blind here, how long till we get to the wormhole?”

“At this speed, approximately twenty seconds.”

Seven waited anxiously while her eyes scanned the screen and her monitors.

“Whatever happens, I hope you find what you’re looking for, Seven.”

Seven swallowed her own sudden rush of emotions and shook her head, as if to dismiss them. “You will be reaching the wormhole in 15 seconds. 10 seconds. You will soon be back here to help me find it, of this I have no doubt.”
“You bet I will. Janeway out.”

Almost at the same moment that her voice faded, the entity completely retreated through the wormhole. Seven tracked its journey through the conduit until it reached the second event horizon. Seven hit her combadge. “Lieutenant Torres, deactivate the Entraptors, now.”

“Alright, here goes nothing…”

The lights flickered aboard Voyager, but moments later the Astrometrics screen went dark.

“Wormhole successfully disengaged,” Seven stated.

oooOooo

Kathryn held on tight while the Flyer was jostled in every direction for a long moment until, suddenly, the shaking stopped. The thrusters stopped screeching as if they were one of Tom’s automobiles put in overdrive. Kathryn looked up and saw the darkness surrounding the Flyer dissipate almost as quickly as it had surrounded them what felt like ages ago. It took only a few seconds of it retracting before she could start seeing stars, and then the dark entity took off at impressive speed, retracting its tendrils onto itself until it looked like a ball of darkness. Trying to ignore the fact that she was back in the Delta Quadrant, she nodded to herself, relieved that they had succeeded in helping the entity at least, and keeping it from reaching the Alpha Quadrant. Her sensors indicated that the Talaxians’ asteroid field had been pretty much destroyed. It was a good thing the Talaxians had been evacuated when they had.

There was a thud coming from the back of the Flyer. Chakotay was now lying on his back, inert. Kathryn rushed to deactivate the force field before she knelt down next to Chakotay. With some anxiety she felt for his pulse again, and let out a breath when she found it. It was faint and fast, but it was there. She fumbled through the medkit for the tricorder and scanned him. The unusual brain activity that she had detected before appeared to have returned to normal—which was a good sign that the entity had left him entirely. But his vitals were all over the place and his skin was cold. So cold. He was in shock. Her hands shook when she grabbed the hypospray and injected him, hoping that the Doctor’s special concoction for such cases would be enough to stimulate blood circulation. Once that was done, she elevated his feet using the medkit box and tucked him inside the emergency blanket.

Then she gingerly lay down next to him, hoping to transfer some of her body heat, her head on his shoulder rising and falling with his shallow but regular breathing.

Now all she could do was wait.

oooOooo
Chapter 16

After some debates between B’Elanna and Seven regarding whether or not it was safe to reactivate the Entraptor remotely from Voyager, it was decided that it would be safer for everyone if the Entraptor was retrieved from space, recalibrated, and re-launched from another shuttle.

B’Elanna was exhausted, she hadn’t slept in… well, too many hours, and no matter what the Doctor prescribed, there was no getting rid of that stupid headache that had settled in over the last few hours.

“It’s going to take a while before we can ascertain that it’s safe to use the Neutrino Entraptor a second time,” B’Elanna finished her recommendations as she and Icheb stood in Captain Uang’s ready room.

They had re-contacted Tom, who had been in turns relieved to hear from them, thrilled that they had succeeded, anxious about the Flyer and its officers, and concerned for B’Elanna’s wellbeing. But in the end he had agreed to resume his work on the simulations, so he was now working with Seven on the parameters to input into his programs.

Uang nodded somberly. “Even though I hate the idea of Admiral Janeway and Captain Chakotay stuck once again in the Delta Quadrant for an indeterminate amount of time, I would rather we do this right and augment our odds of success at bringing them back, than rushing into something that might have catastrophic results. We’ll do as you suggest, Lieutenant.”

B’Elanna nodded. “Thank you. We’ll work as fast as we can.”

“May I make a suggestion?” Uang asked, halting B’Elanna just before she crossed the threshold.

“Of course,” B’Elanna replied.

“Get some rest.”

B’Elanna scoffed. “I can’t. There’s too much work to do, I-”

“Let me retract what I said – it’s not a suggestion. It’s an order. I’m afraid “doing this right” also includes not letting engineers in charge make mistakes because they’re sleep-deprived. You’re much better help to Admiral Janeway and Captain Chakotay if you’re rested and at your best.”

B’Elanna bit back her retort and nodded. She hated being benched – to use one of Tom’s sports metaphors – but she had to admit, Uang was right. She was exhausted, and much more likely to make mistakes. “Understood.”

“Seven and I will recalculate the Entraptor while you regenerate,” Icheb said as they left the office and walked toward Aspire’s transporter room. “That way all you’ll have to do is check our calibration, and prepare the Entraptor for re-launch.”

B’Elanna patted his shoulder. “Thanks, Icheb.”

“Are you still angry with me for suggesting sending the captain and admiral back to the Delta Quadrant?”

B’Elanna sighed and rubbed her face. They turned into the transporter room and stepped onto the platform with a nod at the officer on duty.
“No.” She gave him a small smile. “You have good instincts, Icheb. I should learn to trust them. But next time you have an impulse to send my friends to the other end of the galaxy, run it by me or Seven first. Energize.”

Seven volunteered to launch the re-calibrated device and no one objected this time, not even Lieutenant Torres. While the two hours she had spent regenerating appeared to have provided her with some renewed energy, it had done little to reduce her anxiety. Nevertheless, she had returned determined to see this second launch through and to retrieve their colleagues safely.

Luckily, they were able to recreate a launching station quickly, so that when Seven launched the device from the shuttle, uneventfully this time, only 3.5 hours had passed since Janeway and Chakotay had crossed the event horizon and found themselves once again in the Delta Quadrant.


Yep, this was Tom Paris’ ship all right, Kathryn thought wryly as she skipped through the replicator food programs in the back room of the Flyer, trying to figure out what she was hungry for. She was famished, but her anxiety was knotting her stomach into a tight ball of nerves, and she didn’t feel like anything, especially not the kinds of foods Tom had programmed in there. In the end, she went with the usual.

“Coffee, black.”

Chakotay was still unconscious, but his body temperatures were slowly returning to normal, as were his vital signs. It was a good sign. Nevertheless, Kathryn had left the tricorder in scanning mode while she went to fetch food, just in case his condition changed suddenly.

During the last few hours, she’d had a lot of time to think, and she desperately needed Chakotay to wake up now so she could share her thoughts. And her hopes. And her questions.

For instance, assuming that they were able to return home soon (because really, the alternative was unimaginable), he’d mentioned before that he was considering leaving Starfleet. Was it a serious possibility? Or just something he liked to think about, a fantasy? A few days ago he’d told her being captain weighed on him, but also that he wasn’t quite ready to give up what he considered to be a challenge. Which would it be?

What if he decided not to leave Starfleet just yet? Even though Starfleet had always been reluctant to regulate its officers’ personal lives, there was no denying that a relationship between an admiral and a captain would be unconventional, if not frowned upon, especially now that Voyager was under Kathryn’s jurisdiction. And Kathryn wasn’t ready to give up Starfleet; it had been part of her life for so long, part of her, that leaving it was unimaginable.

Chakotay was different – his ambitions were not attached to Starfleet, but to the goals he set for himself: self-improvement, wisdom, discovery. For Chakotay, Starfleet was but a means of achieving these things, whereas for Kathryn Starfleet was a lifestyle, a doctrine even, with a set of values and rules by which she conducted her life. She couldn’t imagine living without it. But, as she’d found out over the last few months, she had a pretty hard time living without him too. Would she be happier in her new life if he was there to share it?
The answer to that was a definite yes.

Was there a way for both of them to get everything they wanted? Was life ever that generous? She wanted to believe that she could get it all, but a part of her was waiting for the other shoe to drop.

And this was why she needed him to recover, and soon. She needed him to flash her a smile and tell her to slow down, that they would figure it out together. Otherwise her overactive imagination would amplify her fears and-

A beeping sound coming from the sensors shook her out of her thoughts and she quickly made her way back to the front, checking up on Chakotay on the way. No change.

The sensors were detecting some elevated neutrino activities. Finally. Kathryn promptly sat down at the commands, and put some distance between the Flyer and the drifting Neutrino Entraptor that Neelix had built. She wanted to keep a visual on it, as well as make sure that the Flyer wouldn’t be pulled into the initial gravitational flux.

As if on cue, the sensors beeped faster just as the device started emitting a blueish light and Kathryn buckled her seatbelt. She opened a channel, in case Starfleet needed to communicate with her. She would wait for their green light before going through, anyway.

The second time witnessing the wormhole form was as astonishing as the first, and Kathryn couldn’t help but wish she’d brought a holocamera with her to record this. It was extraordinary. The space around the Entraptor started spinning, siphoning, and with a soundless pop that she felt more than heard, the wormhole formed. Kathryn held her breath as she counted the seconds. The surface of the event horizon flickered for a moment, but then stabilized.

“Delta Flyer, this is Captain Uang, do you read?”

Kathryn let out a relieved sigh. “This is Admiral Janeway, we hear you loud and clear, Captain. I was starting to think you’d forgotten about us.”

“We desired to make sure that our odds of succeeding were substantial enough to attempt reactivating the devices,” Seven replied.

“And?”

“The wormhole is stable. The way is clear, Admiral,” B’Elanna’s voice replied. “You have a go.”

“Well done B’Elanna, Seven. All of you. I’m engaging thrusters now. ETA is 2 minutes.”

“What of the entity and Captain Chakotay?” Seven asked while Kathryn maneuvered the Flyer.

“The entity has left, it just flew away as soon as the wormhole disengaged–like Icheb said it would – and Chakotay…” Kathryn threw a concerned glance over her shoulder to reassure herself that he was still comfortable. “As far as I can tell, he’s free of the entity, but he’s not out of the woods. Make sure the Doctor is ready for us.”

“I already am, Admiral,” the Doctor’s voice replied and Kathryn couldn’t help a grateful sigh. “Can you describe Chakotay’s symptoms?”

Kathryn did just that, and before she knew it, she was at the event horizon. Instinctively taking a deep breath, she took the Delta Flyer in.
Chapter 17

There was a humming sound.

It was faint and familiar and Chakotay focused on it, tried to remember why he found it so soothing.

There was a slight pressure on his arm and he suddenly became aware of his body, his limbs, and then he knew what the sound was: Voyager’s ventilation system and humming of consoles. He blinked his eyes open and closed them again when the sickbay’s ceiling lights blinded him.

The slight weight on his arm lifted and went to his rest on his chest. He felt her presence hover nearby before he could get a whiff of her perfume. Kathryn.

“I see our patient is finally waking up.” The Doctor. The slight pressure on his chest retreated.

Chakotay blinked his eyes open again and winced when the Doctor flashed a light into his eyes.

“Good, good,” the Doctor mumbled as he moved on to scanning him with the tricorder. Once the bright spots that the Doctor’s light had left in his vision faded, Chakotay didn’t lose a moment before looking for her. He didn’t have to search for long, she was still standing nearby, leaning on a nearby console while the Doctor did his exam. Chakotay met her eyes and what he saw there – the hope, the concern, the relief – reassured him that it hadn’t all been a dream. He moved his hand in her direction – it felt heavy, really heavy, why did it feel so heavy – and she strode back to his side and took it, folding his fingers around hers.

“We made it,” he croaked. His voice sounded raspy, as if unused for too long.

She gave him a wry smile. “Did you ever doubt it?”

He gave a tired grin.

“How are you feeling, Captain?” The Doctor asked as he came to stand on the other side of him, distracting him from Kathryn’s eyes.

The feelings that he had come to associate with the entity were gone. As were Kathryn’s. “I’m feeling… kinda lonely, actually.”

Both the Doctor and Kathryn gave a smile, but hers was knowing. Understanding of what he couldn’t say in front of the Doctor. He was lonely without her vibrant feelings beating next to his own, with his own.

“We’ll take that as a confirmation that the entity has indeed completely left your body,” the Doctor commented.

“How…?”

“I’ll let Admiral Janeway bring you up to speed,” the Doctor said as he brought a cup of water and helped Chakotay drink from the straw. “But you went through quite an ordeal, Captain, so make sure you don’t overexert yourself. I want you to stay here for the time being, where I can monitor you better.”

Chakotay nodded at the Doctor. He was still too tired to even consider getting up anyway.
Chakotay looked at Kathryn expectantly once the Doctor had disappeared into his work area.

“What’s the last thing you remember?” She asked softly as she leaned over him.

The kiss. The taste of her lips, her breath hot against his chin when her lips parted, his fingers tangled into her hair. Her body against his. At last.

Was it wrong of him to bring that up now? He desperately wanted to, but now that they were back on Voyager, it felt inappropriate. Especially now that her hair was pinned up again and she had donned the Admiral uniform jacket that she had taken off while they’d been stuck in the Flyer. Kathryn was no longer just Kathryn, but Admiral Janeway as well. He had navigated this paradox for seven years, walking the line between friends and officers, but now that their feelings had been put out in the open, his old landmarks felt off course. He’d have to create new ones, he decided.

“You gave me the sedative,” he replied at last. “Things after that get blurry, just flashes of emotions, no sense of time, really. I remember the entity’s presence inside my head, trying to communicate with it. How did we get out?”

“You did it, I don’t know how, but you were able to communicate with the entity, and tell it to let us help. How did you do it?” Her blatant curiosity was endearing and he smiled tiredly. Just keeping his eyes open was a constant struggle. But he couldn’t succumb to sleep again, not yet.

All he could remember were the feelings: the fear, the need, the instinctual desire to survive. “I don’t know. I think, I think I merged with the entity, somehow. My body, everything around me, sort of just disappeared for a while, as if all of it was nothing but an illusion. I remember being scared, but I can’t tell whether it’s because I was conscious of this shift, or because I was feeling what it was feeling. What did I tell it to do? How did we get rid of it?”

She gave a wry smile. “Believe it or not, we went back to the Delta Quadrant for a while.”

She told him about Icheb’s hunch and how they were able to lure the entity back where it came from, and how it had come loose once the wormholes were disengaged. Chakotay listened quietly, all the while taking in her features, the way her speech lit up her eyes, amazed at the story, at her courage, at B’Elanna’s perseverance and Icheb’s ingenuity. The sound of her voice was soothing, and soon he found himself struggling to stay awake. His eyes closed of their own volition.

Her voice halted and he felt her lean closer. “Chakotay,” she whispered softly next to his ear. “Hmm,” was all he could manage.

“I’m going to help the Talaxians deal with their situation, but we can’t do it from the Deep Space Station, so I have to go back to Earth. But, please tell me you meant what you said, and that it wasn’t just the fever and the fear talking.”

Chakotay managed a lazy smile, though his eyelids were too heavy for him to open his eyes. “It was the most honest moment of my life.”

“Good.” He felt her lips touch the corner of his mouth gently, almost shyly. “I’ll see you soon. Sweet dreams.”

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When Chakotay next awoke, Kathryn was gone and he could hear the Doctor hum to himself in the next room. Right. He vaguely recalled her saying she needed to go back to Earth. He sighed and lifted a hand to rub his eyes.
“The Doctor said you were recuperating at an adequate rate. I came to see for myself.”

Seven was standing at the foot of the bed, her hands clasped together and looking at him appraisingly, as if her eyes were performing a tricorder scan. Chakotay felt better, though his head still felt somewhat heavy, so he slowly sat up on the platform. He groaned at the movement.

“I’ll take the Doctor’s word for it,” Chakotay replied as he slowly stretched and grimaced at how tight his muscles were.

“Do you need any medical intervention?”

Chakotay smiled at her concern. “No, I’m fine – better. Thank you.”

She gave a curt nod.

“What’s the latest report? I see Voyager still appears to be in one piece, so that’s good. Harry must have behaved,” Chakotay said as he reached out for the cup of water by his bed. Seven moved to hand it to him. He nodded his thanks.

She gave a small smile. “As a matter of fact Acting Captain Kim acted with surprising competence. I believe you will be proud of his accomplishments. Admiral Janeway has ordered Voyager to retrieve the Neutrino Entraptor for further study and to help set up a permanent location for it aboard Deep Space 12. Since the station is not completed, there are certain precautions we need to take – in the unlikely eventuality that someone in the Delta Quadrant activates it. She has left instructions for Voyager to report back to Earth whenever you deem it appropriate.”

Chakotay nodded, trying to hide the way his heart somersaulted at what that order might imply for them personally. “The other ships?”

“The Cousteau is on its way back to Earth with the Talaxians. Janeway, Lieutenant Torres, Icheb and Tuvok were aboard as well. Aspire and the others were ordered to resume their earlier mandates, now that this crisis has been averted.”

Chakotay nodded again. “I’m sorry I didn’t get a chance to see Neelix and see everyone off.”

Something suddenly occurred to him and he looked up at Seven questioningly. “You didn’t go with them? What about your reassignment to the Delta Quadrant Unit?”

“I told the Admiral that I would join her once I was assured that you had recovered. Someone needs to ensure that Lieutenant Kim does not ruin his earlier performance,” she said with humor and Chakotay smiled. She paused and her gaze turned tentative. He knew from experience it usually meant she wanted to say something of a personal nature. “Janeway implied that you might be accompanying me to Earth ahead of Voyager when you are ready. That you are considering leaving Voyager. Starfleet.”

There was a question in her statement, so Chakotay nodded, watching for her reaction. “That’s right. I’ve been thinking about it for a while, and now…” Yes, now he was ready to truly look for options. It was time to finally set up that meeting with Commander Elmridge, an instructor at the Academy. And he should probably talk to someone from Starfleet as well… Normally he would go to Kathryn for this type of thing, but he felt he needed an outsider’s perspective on this particular issue. Admiral Hayes had always been fair-minded and considerate, maybe Chakotay could discuss his options with him.

Seven nodded as her eyes traveled around the sickbay, as if seeing its walls and bulkheads for the first time. “This vessel has seen many changes recently. Metaphorically speaking, of course.”
Chakotay gave a small smile. “That it has, but it doesn’t follow that all changes are for the worst.”

“True.” She inhaled and returned her analytical gaze to him. “In any case, Admiral Janeway has asked me to relay that she will be expecting you on Earth soon, so you could – and I quote – finish what you started. Since I am transferring there myself, we should coordinate our travels.”

Chakotay’s eyes widened and he almost choked on the water he’d just sipped. There was a lot he found surprising about this statement: the fact that Kathryn had asked Seven to relay that message, the innuendo behind the words, and Kathryn’s candid turn of phrase.

Seven smiled at his expression – adding to his surprise. “I am happy for you.”

Chakotay gave up trying to figure out just how Seven knew about this, and how much she seemed to know. “Thank you. That means a lot to me.”

“What do you have any orders for Lieutenant Kim?”

Chakotay shook his head. “He seems to have things under control. Do tell him to stop by when he gets the chance though, I’d like to hear his report on what happened while I was in the Flyer and out of commission.”

“I’ll tell him.”

She gave a nod and turned on her heels.

“Seven,” Chakotay stopped her and she turned back around. Chakotay hesitated as he watched her for a moment. She was looking at him expectantly, but without any of the dread he’d half anticipated. “I hope that one day you can forgive me for the way I acted toward you. I truly didn’t mean things to go the way they did, and I am sorry for causing you pain.”

“If by ‘forgive you’ you mean that I put the past behind me and maintain a friendly affection toward you, then the answer is: I already have.”

Chakotay let out a slow breath, more grateful than he could say. “Thank you.”

She gave another nod. Her expression was unusually open and Chakotay was relieved to see that her smile was genuinely kind. “I will send Lieutenant Kim to you now.”

She left and Chakotay gingerly tested out his muscles again. His body still felt heavy and stiff, but he felt stronger than before. He slowly slid off the bed, making sure that his hands stayed propped up in case his legs buckled. His legs felt stiff when his feet reached the floor and he put his weight on them, but they felt strong enough to support his weight. He gingerly let go of the bed.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

Chakotay rolled his eyes as the Doctor rushed to his side. “Just stretching my legs. I can’t lie still anymore.”

“Oh,” the Doctor replied as he scanned Chakotay with his tricorder. “For a moment there I thought you were going to pull a Janeway on me.”

“Excuse me?”

“A Janeway: a secretive attempt at escaping the sickbay with the pretense that a captain doesn’t get sick days. She was always one of my worst patients, and that says a lot considering I’ve treated
Chakotay grinned at the image the Doctor was painting and his impression of her tone. “It’s a relief to know there’s something she’s not good at.”

“Yes. Well, Captain,” the Doctor went on as he shut his tricorder, “your patience may be rewarded. If all continues to go well, you should be back on your feet – metaphorically as well as literally,” he added with an amused smile at his pun, “in a few hours.”

“Good.” Because he had a rendezvous on Earth he was eager to get to.

The EMH returned to his work area, humming to himself, and Chakotay took a few tentative steps around his bed. It felt good to be active again. His muscles gradually loosened as he walked and the stiffness slowly abated. He wasn’t quite ready for a friendly boxing match, but he was determined to be, and soon.

His mind wandered back to Seven and Kathryn’s message as he slowly paced the floor of sickbay. He couldn’t quite contain his emotions and he grinned to himself, relieved to know no one was there to see the ridiculously smitten expression that was probably all over his face. He could hardly believe that this was really happening, that Kathryn returned his feelings and wanted him in her life. He hadn’t dared hope for so long… It was too much emotion to process, his mind was having trouble catching up to what his heart already knew.

The time aboard the Flyer was blurry in his memory, but the feelings that had flowed through him were forever imprinted into his heart, especially those she had willingly shared with him. Her intent expression as she had lowered the force field flashed through his mind. The look in her eyes had been so raw, with joy but also something akin to vulnerability, like she had truly let go of all the walls and constraints she constantly put up around herself. It had taken his breath away even before he had felt the onslaught of emotions that she had kept hidden for so long.

He was impatient to see her again, hold her in his arms if she let him. And that was the crux of the matter: what now? What were her expectations? They knew how they felt for each other, but the relationship per se was uncharted territory.

For starters, she was still his superior officer. That was something he could easily remedy: he was willing to resign his commission, and in fact that was something he had been considering for a while – even before he’d had any hope. He had even been in touch with a number of anthropology departments, including the Academy’s, and most were eager to have someone with his field experience within their institutions. But getting everything settled could take a while, especially because he wanted to make sure that Voyager was in good hands before he even resigned. As good as an officer as Harry was, he wasn’t ready for the captaincy.

So how would it work in the mean time? How would they handle the shift in the power relations? Even though as a commander Chakotay had always told Kathryn when he disagreed with her, in the end as the captain she had always had the last word. Chakotay the civilian was not so easily pacified, and they could both be stubborn. Would she be able to cope with this side of him?

Well, he stopped himself sternly, he was getting ahead of himself. First things first, he had to ensure Voyager completed its mission here so that he felt free to take a leave of absence and travel to Earth with Seven. Only then would he get the answers he was looking for.

“It’s good to see you up and about, Captain,” Harry said with a friendly smile as he walked in, distracting Chakotay from his thoughts. “You wanted to see me?”
Chakotay smiled. “Yes, pull up a chair, Harry,” he said as he returned to his bed to sit. “Let’s start with your report on what happened. And once that’s done, it’s time for our post-mission analysis. Tell me what you would have done differently if you’d been in charge.” It was an exercise Chakotay often did with Harry, to prepare him to think like a captain.

Harry nodded with an excited lopsided smile as he took a seat. “Aye aye, sir!”

Neelix sat in the mess hall aboard the starship Cousteau, lost in thought. Most of his people, including Dexa, Brax and Nirax, were catching up on some sleep in their temporary quarters aboard the starship.

It was strange to be here, he mused as he sipped on his tea. This ship was so similar to Voyager in its design, that it made the small differences uncanny. As if they were tricks of his imagination; that panel shouldn’t be there, or that wall shouldn’t be that color. It always took his brain a fraction of a second to process what his eyes actually saw instead of what they expected to see.

Oh everyone was very nice, and he had to admit, it was exciting to be back onboard a Federation starship. He hadn’t realized it until now, but he had missed it. The space travel, the protocols, the excitement. And it was wonderful to see his friends as well – Admiral Janeway, B’Elanna, and Mr. Tuvok. He was excited to see Earth for himself, and reunite with Naomi and meet her father. But, part of him was also anxious. What would happen to his people now? He had yet to discuss the possibilities with Janeway and the others. Would they be welcome here, if they decided to stay? Was there even a possibility of using the Enraptor again to send them back, if that’s what his people wanted? Those Talaxians had always been particularly ticklish when it came to making contact with outsiders, and they’d had so many bad experiences on other planets, Neelix couldn’t really imagine a scenario in which his people decided to stay on Earth. Let alone in the Alpha Quadrant.

The admiral had told him that the asteroids had been destroyed by the entity’s passage through that area by the time she’d gone back through the wormhole. So it was a good thing that they had acted so quickly and evacuated everyone. But so many lives had been wrecked in the process. And so many lives had been risked. If one thing had gone wrong, if one mistake had been made, or if any one of his friends had not been there, the outcome could have been very different. He was extremely grateful to them all for being who there were, and for helping his people get through this.

“May I join you, Mr. Neelix?”

Startled, Neelix smiled up at Tuvok. He was even grateful for the Vulcan’s blank expression: it was a beautiful sight! “Mr. Vulcan, why of course! Looking for a midnight snack, are you?”

Tuvok raised an eyebrow while he sat at the table. “I merely came for some tea,” he replied, showing him the steaming mug in his hand. “The replicator in my quarters appears to malfunction. Nothing it replicates has the proper flavor.”

“Of course, of course,” Neelix nodded knowingly. He had a suspicion that Tuvok was suffering for a similar affliction as he was – being here brought back memories, but somehow couldn’t quite match them. But of course as a Vulcan he wouldn’t acknowledge it.

“Are your people settled for the time being?” Tuvok asked before taking a sip of his beverage. The way his mouth twitched was the equivalent of a human grimace. Clearly even the tea in the mess hall was not up to his standards.

“Yes, for now. I confess, I’m a little nervous about going to Earth. I’ve heard so much about it…”
Tuvok nodded in acknowledgement. “I myself am not particularly fond of it.”

“Oh?”

“You may have noticed, humans do tend to let their emotions run high. As a result I find Earth to be a chaotic, loud and unpredictable place.”

Neelix smiled at the description. “Oh, that doesn’t sound so bad to me.”

Tuvok glanced at him. “No. I am certain you will enjoy it.”

Neelix was too used to the Vulcan’s condescending manner to take comments like that personally. In fact, it kind of amused him. “Thanks, I guess. So, how is your family? I understand you went back to the Vulcan system for a while. It must have been nice to go back home!”

“Yes. Although my motive for going there was primarily medical.”

Neelix’s face fell in sympathy. “Oh! I didn’t know that. I hope all is well, now?”

Tuvok almost smiled. Almost. “It is. Though, I have to admit, this was a peculiar assignment for me to return to.”

Neelix chuckled before taking a sip of his own tea. “Leave it to Janeway to find the most opportune ways to rattle you!”

“I was not rattled,” Tuvok replied, a tad defensively, “merely… Rusty. Perhaps.”

Neelix nodded knowingly again, touched by Tuvok’s willingness to confess as much. “Well, Mr. Vulcan, I’m glad you came back when you did. I’m grateful for your presence here.”

“What are you two conspiring over there?” B’Elanna’s voice distracted them and Neelix smiled up at her while she approached, her own mug in her hand.

“The usual. Coming up with ways to pull a prank on the captain. He’s too serious for his own good, that Captain Lionar.”

Tuvok looked appalled. “We were discussing no such thing.”

B’Elanna laughed and grabbed a chair. “Maybe we could change the console alerts to farting sounds.”

Neelix laughed. “Tom is rubbing off on you, B’Elanna!”

“He would be so proud,” she joked.

“Need I remind you that such an interference would be against regulation number-”

“Oh, we could change his music selection to an assortment of Klingon battle songs! Some of them have some real beat to them!” Neelix suggested with a chuckle.

“That’s not a bad one!” A familiar voice chimed in from behind, and they all turned to look at Admiral Janeway as she made her way to the counter and poured herself some coffee. Her expression was playful and mischievous when she walked to their table, and Neelix relaxed. “But I got one better,” she added as she slid her arm over Neelix’s shoulder and leaned forward conspiratorially. “It’s something we did to one of our teaching assistants when we were at the Academy: we should rearrange Lionar’s quarters to make it look like they’re somebody else’s.”
“Why Admiral, I didn’t know you had it in you,” B’Elanna replied with newfound admiration, “there is some real evil genius there! Impressive.”

“Admiral,” Tuvok objected while the others laughed, “that would be highly unadvis-”

Janeway patted his arm before she straightened and took a seat. “You can relax, Tuvok,” she reassured before taking a sip of coffee. “We’d be very bad pranksters indeed if we included you in our planning!” She added teasingly and Tuvok sighed.

“That is far from reassuring,” he commented and Janeway chuckled.

There was something different about her, Neelix observed. But he couldn’t put a finger on what it was. It was subtle, like a kind of happy restlessness in her movements, which made her expression come alive and her eyes twinkle. Hopefully they would be able to catch up, and he would find out what had brought on that glow. Someone in her life, maybe? Whatever it was, it suited her.

“Now I’m curious,” B’Elanna started as she redirected her attention at Janeway, “how did the teaching assistant react when you switched the quarters?”

Janeway grinned and leaned forward again. “Oh, you should have seen her face! You see she was in charge of monitoring our floor in the residence, and she’d been on our case since the beginning of the semester, so my friends and I decided to…”

Neelix couldn’t help but sigh happily as he leaned back into his chair to listen to the story. Watching his friends in turns, he was just grateful to be able to sit with them once more, and glad to see them so happy.

He had missed his Voyager family.

oooOooo

“B’Elanna!”

B’Elanna was distracted from her conversation with the admiral when she heard Tom’s voice. It echoed throughout the hall of Starfleet’s terminal where passengers from docked ships transported down, either by shuttle or transporter, and she took a second to find the real source. Janeway pointed to their right with a knowing smile and B’Elanna followed her indication until her eyes found Tom amidst the crowd. She grinned, her heart filling up with warmth, at the sight of him walking towards her with Miral in his arms.

B’Elanna forgot all about Janeway and everyone else as she dropped her bags to the floor and ran to meet with them. She stopped only when she was in Tom’s arms and she felt him laugh into her hug. B’Elanna pulled back to kiss him happily, then turned her attention to Miral.

She was wide awake and made excited sounds and B’Elanna couldn’t help but chuckle in pleasure. Tom transferred her to her arms and B’Elanna hugged her daughter as tightly as she dared.

“I’ve missed you so much!” She kissed the soft hair and the small fingers before returning her attention to Tom.

“We’ve missed you too,” he said, his expression warm. He looked up above B’Elanna’s shoulder. “Admiral,” he greeted and B’Elanna turned to see with some guilt that Janeway was carrying the bags B’Elanna had so carelessly dropped. Janeway set them down before reaching up to and kiss Tom’s cheek in a friendly greeting.
Janeway pulled back and smiled into his eyes. “Tom, how are you?”

“Relieved to see everyone is safe. Is Neelix with you?” He asked as his eyes scanned the crowd of officers, diplomats and traders that filled up the Starfleet terminal. Janeway, meanwhile, had redirected her gaze to Miral and was making faces at her, earning spontaneous smiles. B’Elanna grinned at their interactions.

“Yes, he can’t be too far behind us,” Janeway replied distractedly. “In fact, I should probably go and make sure the Talaxians get settled without any problems.”

“Now that you’re all back, we should do dinner sometime,” Tom suggested. “Too bad Voyager didn’t return with you, it could have been a real reunion.”

B’Elanna glanced at Janeway. The admiral momentarily froze, but then a blush crept up her neck. B’Elanna frowned curiously at this reaction. Did their time stuck in the Flyer allow Janeway and Chakotay to finally admit how they felt? Maybe she really should have gambled, all those months ago.

Janeway recovered quickly. “That’s a great idea, we should do it when Voyager comes back to the neighborhood. In the meantime, dinner sounds lovely. I’ll leave it to you to organize. Until then, I’ll get out of your hair.” She met their gazes in turn, then nodded her goodbyes.

B’Elanna returned her attention to Miral while Tom grabbed her bags and they started walking.

“So, how was it? Being back on board Voyager?”

B’Elanna sighed and she met his eyes. “It was… something.”

His expression sobered a little. “Was it… I mean did it help you find what you were looking for?”

B’Elanna considered it for a moment. “You know, I think it did. It was exciting, and challenging, and even fun to be back in the action, but,” B’Elanna shook her head. “I’m so very glad to be back!”

Tom nodded, a small relieved smile turning his expression into the boyish face she adored. “I’ve been thinking, B’Elanna. If it makes you happy, then you should talk to the admiral and have her assign you to exploratory missions every once in a while. While you were away, I realized that it doesn’t have to be one or the other, you know? I know you love your work here, and we love having you around, but I also know you love it out there. So, there has to be a way for you to do it all.”

B’Elanna stared at him in wonder. “You’d be okay with that?”

“B’Elanna, I want you to be happy, so yes! I would be okay with that. Especially if I get to join you every once in a while,” he added as he nudged her shoulder with his.

B’Elanna stopped walking to face him and stared up into his eyes. “I love you.”

He stepped closer, reaching out his fingers for their daughter to grab. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

He kissed her softly. His expression turned into a mix of mischief and guilt when he pulled back. “That’s good, because there was a little – shall we say incident at the house. You see, I was trying to fix the shower – you know you’ve been complaining about it, so I decided to get to it, but when I pulled the panel open, there was this…”
B’Elanna smiled to herself as she listened to his voice, pretending to be discouraged with his behavior, when in fact she wouldn’t have it in any other way.
Kathryn had to admit, it was good to take a bath, and sleep in her own bed. Unfortunately she didn’t get to enjoy it for too long, because only a few hours after her head hit the pillow it was morning again, and she had to get ready for the meeting with the Talaxians.

When Kathryn entered the meeting room, it was filled to the cracks with the refugees, and she realized that pretty much every Talaxian was present. While she admired a democratic process, having everyone here might make things a little harder – especially as the designated room appeared way too small to hold everyone. She searched for Neelix and soon found him in an intense conversation with a Talaxian man, Dexa, and Nirax, whom Kathryn had met aboard the Cousteau. She made her way to them, and Neelix threw her a relieved glance when he saw her.

“Admiral,” he greeted and the others gave her a courteous nod.

“Neelix, Dexa, Nirax.” She turned to the other man. “I’m Admiral Janeway, welcome to Earth.”

The man scowled but took her hand nonetheless. She spied Dexa and Neelix exchange a look. “I’m Xar. We appreciate your hospitality.”

Kathryn nodded and returned her attention to Neelix. “I have to admit, I was only expecting the Council to attend this meeting, we’ll need a different venue if everyone wants to be there. Neelix, can you coordinate—”

“Neelix doesn’t speak for us,” the man, Xar, interrupted and Kathryn blinked in surprise at the tone, an acerbic reply quickly forming on her tongue. Clearly those two had a history, and Kathryn hated to step into something she didn’t know anything about, but no one spoke so disrespectfully of her crew and friends without facing the consequences.

Neelix touched her arm before she could retort. “No, he’s right, Admiral. I’m not the right person for this job, but… Dexa has been on the Council for a few months now.”

Kathryn met Dexa’s eyes and at the woman’s nod, she nodded as well. “Good, I’ll need your help moving everyone to a different location. An auditorium at the Academy should do the trick Neelix, I need you to reprieve your job as our ambassador,” she said, throwing Xar a pointed look.

Neelix’s eyes lit up. “Well, of course, Admiral.”

“Good. Let’s get organized here.”

It took a few hours just for everyone to get settled in the new room, serve lunch for that large a crowd on relatively short notice, and figure out just how to conduct the meeting with so many in attendance when she’d expected to only deal with the Council, maybe even the Council Regent. In the end it was decided that Kathryn and Lieutenant Wildman – who had been working out a few options for the Talaxians and even prepared a little show and tell – would present everyone with the different choices. On the bright side, having everyone present meant that there would be no misinterpretation or errors in the transmission of the information.

Things went relatively well, but at an almost excruciating pace. The Talaxians were quick to ask questions and talk to each other across the room, and it took all of Neelix’s abilities as a mediator to keep the meeting going.

One of the hardest parts for Kathryn, however, was relating to them what she had found on the other
side of the wormhole and telling them that their homes had been destroyed. The room had gone eerily silent at this announcement, but Dexa had quickly recovered and brought them into solution mode.

So now the choice was before them: the Neutrino Entraptor made it possible for them to return to the Delta Quadrant if they wanted (though both B’Elanna and Seven insisted for further testing before ever using it again), or they could settle here in the Alpha Quadrant. Samantha then showed them a number of planets that they’d thought would be suitable, as well as introduce Earth itself.

There were questions about Earth, the solar system, and the other planets in the Federation. There were questions about their status – would they be part of the Federation? What did that entail? Would they have a planet to themselves or have to share? Would they be allowed to trade freely or would the Federation regulate their trade? What were the advantages of joining?

Those were all valid questions and Kathryn, Sam and Neelix answered them as honestly as they could. They could be part of the Federation, but only if they wanted to join unanimously, as a unified people. Being part of the Federation did entail agreeing to a number of laws and trade agreements, but the Federation had always strived to maintain some fluidity. Depending on where they decided to go, they may or may not have to share a planet.

By the time most of the questions had been answered and the meeting tapered to its end, it was late evening and Kathryn was exhausted and hungry. After a moment of silence heavy with the decisions that the Talaxians faced, Dexa rose from her seat in the front row of the auditorium. “Thank you, Admiral Janeway, Lieutenant Wildman, for taking the time to help us and answer our questions. As you can no doubt imagine, there is a lot to consider. I think I speak for each of us when I say that we need some time to think about our options, and your generous offer to relocate us.”

“Of course. Once you’ve made your decision,” Kathryn spoke to the crowd, “Dexa will relay it to me, and, on behalf of Starfleet and the Federation, I will do everything in my power to accommodate your wishes.” Kathryn almost said ‘dismissed’ out of habit but stopped herself just in time, and instead smiled and bid them all good night.

As the crowd dispersed, Neelix quickly fell into conversation with Samantha, and Dexa soon joined them. Kathryn gathered her PADDs and approached them to bid them good night. “Thank you, all of you, for your help today,” she told them on her way out.

They thanked her in turns and invited her to join them for dinner, but she politely declined. As much as she wished she could catch up with Neelix and get to know Dexa and her son a little better, tonight she was hoping for some alone time to recharge from everything that had happened recently.

Plus, before she had left this morning she had found that Chakotay had transmitted her a letter overnight, but she’d decided to postpone reading until she was back at her house, in order to really savor the words. So now she was impatient for a glass of wine, a hot bath, and his letter. Ideally all at once.

With one last goodbye she made her way outside, and took in a deep breath from the soft breeze that blew from the Bay. It was getting dark; the sun was almost below the horizon, casting the last of orange and pink rays against the high rises of the San Francisco buildings, but artificial lights were already on around the Academy plaza. Taking another deep breath, she walked down the steps as she took in the world around her. The Night Owl was but a few minutes away, so maybe she could-

She did a double take when a dark-haired man of Chakotay’s build appeared in her line of vision at the entrance of the next Academy building. The man stood with his back to her, talking to a tall, slender woman with golden hair… and a Borg optical implant? Seven!
Seven saw her first and the man finally turned around. There was no mistaking the tattoo, strong jaw and dimpled crooked smile, even from the distance. It was Chakotay.

Kathryn barely noticed how Seven nodded at him before walking away; her entire focus was on Chakotay. How…? When…?

The crooked smile brightened as he raised his hand in a small wave, and Kathryn’s heart leapt into her chest. She grinned and started walking to catch up to him. With a subtle tilt of the head, he gestured for her to meet him in the Gardens that occupied the main plaza, a short distance from both their current spots. Understanding that he was directing them to a slightly more secluded area (though probably not secluded enough), she followed him, never letting him out of her sight as she made her way.

When she finally joined him, he was waiting for her standing by a bench, his hands clasped together behind him. He cut a fine figure, dressed in his full uniform, and Kathryn drank in the sight of him. After the day she’d had, she couldn’t reach him fast enough. The dimpled smile that had always put Kathryn in danger of melting into a pool of mush reached his eyes and made them twinkle with pleasure.

“Admiral,” he greeted, his tone playfully formal. Still smiling, Kathryn didn’t stop walking until she was just short of touching him and looked up into his eyes. After a short pause, she threw her arms around his neck and pulled him down to her for a fierce hug. She was so relieved to see him fully recovered, so glad for the surprise appearance, and so wonderfully happy that he hadn’t taken weeks before joining her on Earth! Since they had left things rather open-ended between them, she’d almost convinced herself that their time in the Delta Flyer had not been real, or that he would change his mind once the entity left his body. But no, he was here, and from the way his arms tightened around her, he was just as relieved as she was.

She pulled back but stayed within the circle of his arms, taking advantage of his warmth, and looked up at him.

“Oh Chakotay, you’re a sight for sore eyes! How did you get here so fast?”

His devastatingly charming crooked smile turned almost shy, and Kathryn realized there was no stopping the melting now. “Didn’t you get my message? I wasn’t sure how you would react to a surprise, so I wrote to you to let you know I was coming.”

“I got your message, but I didn’t get a chance to read it until now. Chakotay, this is a wonderful surprise.”

His smile widened. “Good. Am I right in assuming that you haven’t had dinner yet?”

“You know me too well.”

“Shall we?”

Kathryn took his arm and they started walking. “I’m starving. How about the Night Owl? I think we’ll be comfortable there.”

“Sounds perfect.”

“How did you get here so fast?” Kathryn asked again, basking in his presence, in the way he tucked her closer into his side as they walked.

He grinned. “Well, as soon as we were done at the station, I requisitioned the Flyer and Seven and I
flew to Earth at warp 8. Knowing Lionar, I figured he wouldn’t travel faster than Warp 5 for a trip like this. So I knew we wouldn’t be too far behind you.”

“The man does tend to be a tad protective of his dilithium.” Kathryn grinned, loving the fact that they were back, that she could banter with him and not feel guilty or bittersweet or like it would break her.

She scanned his face as well as she could while walking. “You look well, are you well?” She asked with concern. The last time she had seen him, he had been lying on the bed in sickbay, looking eerily pale and barely strong enough to lift his hand.

As if he could read her thoughts – or her feelings – his hand covered hers on his arm. “I’m fine. The Doctor gave me a clean bill of health. Not quite ready to take you on at a game of velocity, but-”

“Were you ever?” She teased.

“Ha! Give me a few days and I guess we’ll find out.”

“I accept your challenge!”

He let out a chuckle at her old-fashioned accent, and Kathryn stared at him again. It had been a long, long time since she’d heard such a lighthearted sound from him. The desire to kiss him, his lips, that spot on his neck, his skin, was so powerful she had to consciously stop herself. This was not the place for such a display. With both of them in uniform, they were not exactly inconspicuous, and as much as she wished it weren’t the case, Kathryn cared what her peers thought. And with all the publicity that Voyager and the crew had received, Kathryn and Chakotay’s faces were well known at Starfleet Command. Just walking across the plaza constantly required her to nod or smile at a cadet or officer. And this new happiness was all too new, too exciting, too private to share with the world now. Let the two of them enjoy it for a while before having to share it.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” she repeated instead, just in case he still had doubts. “How did you know where to find me?”

“Actually, I didn’t. It was pure luck that we saw you just now. I was about to go search for you, and, just like that – there you were.”

“I’ve been practicing that appearing act for a while, maybe I’ll present it next time we have a reunion talent night.”

He chuckled again. “I’ve been anxious to see you again, especially given the way we left things, and the message you left with Seven,” he said with a sly sidelong look her direction and Kathryn grinned, “but I was actually at the Academy to talk to Commander Elmridge and Admiral Hayes.”

That explained the dress uniform, she mused, but… “Why?”

He nodded, but Kathryn felt him tense all the same. “To discuss my options for a future outside of Starfleet.”

They had just reached the Night Owl and Kathryn was glad for the distraction as they went in and chose a secluded table in a corner. No one would notice them there.

“And?” She asked at last as they sat side by side in the booth. Despite the fact that it made their relationship easier, she wasn’t sure why, but a part of her was sorry that Chakotay was considering leaving Starfleet. He was such a wonderful officer, and could contribute – in fact had already contributed – a lot to Starfleet. There was something very… final, about it.
“And, there are options,” he replied as he grabbed menus and handed one to her. “I was meeting with Elmridge to follow up on a conversation we’ve been having about me joining the Academy faculty as a civilian. He’s actually very supportive of the idea.”

Kathryn studied his face for a long moment: the kindness of his expression, the quiet authority in his bearing and proud features. “You’d be such a wonderful teacher, Chakotay, they’d be fools not to give you the moon if you asked for it.”

He threw her a playful glance. “The moon? Don’t be ridiculous, Mars has much better weather. It actually has weather.”

She giggled and tried to muffle the sound into his shoulder. His arm shook with laughter at her reaction. She was struck again by just how much she had missed his sense of humor and how easily he could make her laugh and smile.

“But seriously, though,” Chakotay continued once she had recovered, “they make a good offer.”

“Are you going to accept?”

He inhaled slowly. “I don’t know. It’s tempting. It’s pretty much everything I’ve been wanting: teaching about what we learned about first contact during our journey, free rein for archaeological research…”

They both input their food and drink orders into their menu PADDs and Kathryn leaned back to cross her leg while she threw him studying glances. “It sounds like an ideal opportunity,” she commented cautiously. If it was so wonderful, then why was he hesitating?

“It is. But I want to make sure that you have a proper replacement for me on Voyager before I make my final decision. I don’t want to leave you and the crew hanging.”

Ah. There it was. “You know I’ll support you whatever you choose,” she said as she rested a hand on his forearm and leaned forward to lower her voice. “But I think you’ve given enough of yourself to Voyager for a lifetime, Chakotay. You don’t owe it anything – you don’t owe me anything. This job sounds like a dream come true for you, and if it’s really what you want, then just take it, and don’t worry about Voyager and the crew. You know I wouldn’t let her go to someone I didn’t think worthy of her.”

He turned his head to meet her eyes and held her gaze, his chest rising and falling a sure indication that her words affected him. His hand rose to touch her cheek and his gaze wandered over her face, as if he was trying to commit her features to memory. He gave a half-smile. “You’re wrong about one thing, Kathryn,” he whispered, his eyes boring into hers. “I owe you everything: this opportunity, the person I’ve become, the chance to do something worthwhile with my life and find peace – none of it would have been possible were it not for you.”

Kathryn swallowed the sudden lump in her throat at his words and the raw emotion in his voice and eyes, and covered his hand on her cheek with her own. Humor. She had to lighten the mood with some flirtatious banter. She raised an eyebrow. “Well then, how do you plan on repaying me? Because I’ll be knocking on your door to collect. Soon.”

The corners of his mouth twitched upwards. He licked his lips as he formulated a reply, but in the end he inhaled and remained serious. “By endeavoring to make you as happy as I possibly can, for as long as you’ll have me.”

Kathryn moved her hand to the back of his neck as she held his gaze, her eyes as glassy with
emotion as his. “Then you better start kissing me now.”

He smiled, his eyes now burning with intensity. He leaned closer, but then stopped and he pulled back just far enough to look into her eyes, his brows knitted together in playful contemplation. “You’re not always going to tell me what to do, are you? Wait, don’t answer that.”

Before she could even fully smile at his teasing, he was kissing her at last and Kathryn sighed against his lips, sliding her hands further around his neck and shoulders, and opening her mouth to better taste him. His kiss was unhurried, sensual, intent, so very different from the desperate hunger that had driven his touches aboard the Delta Flyer. As if now they had all the time in the world to discover each other. A shiver coursed through as she realized that they did. Kathryn could feel the heat rise between them as one of his hands pressed the ends of her hair clip and Kathryn’s hair fell around her face. His fingers tangled through her hair and-

“Uh-hum.”

Kathryn sprang away from Chakotay at the waiter’s not-so-subtle announcement of his presence. She placed her fingers in front of her mouth to keep from laughing while the waiter set down their food and drinks onto their table, doing his utmost not to look at them directly.

She exchanged a look with Chakotay who was biting back laughter, his expression halfway between sheepish and amused – and a little desire-dazed, if she could judge by the dilated pupils – before he cleared his throat and thanked the waiter.

As soon as the young man left their tables, they both burst out laughing. Kathryn once again tried to hide the sound into his shoulder, while he did the same into her hair.

“Wow, I haven’t felt this busted since my sister walked in on me kissing Cara Velan in our parents’ toolshed when I was fifteen,” he whispered, chuckling, while he grabbed for his napkin and spread it across his thigh.

Kathryn laughed as she did the same and took a sip of wine. “Toolshed! How romantic.”

“Yeah, she wasn’t impressed either.”

They chuckled again, and Kathryn leaned her head toward him to maintain the conspiratorial tone of their conversation. “I got busted kissing a boy from the tennis program by Professor Romano, second year Earth literature, remember him? It was mortifying.” Kathryn tilted her head. “In retrospect I’m grateful to poor Romano, that boy could serve like no one else, but his talent, I’m sorry to say, did not extend to kissing.”

Chakotay, on the other hand…

Chakotay chuckled and attacked his food in earnest and Kathryn was reminded how hungry she was. She promptly picked up her fork.

“But anyway,” Chakotay started, his expression still mirthful, as if he was consciously looking for a more banal topic of conversation, “how was the meeting with the Talaxians? We stopped by the DQU earlier and Celes told me that’s where you were.”

“Oh it was alright!” Kathryn replied on a long sigh. “Don’t take me wrong, I’m thrilled to have Neelix with us again, but not all Talaxians are as adaptable as he is. And who could blame them? They just lost the one home they had been able to create for themselves.”

She told him about the rest of the meeting, and the different options that they had presented the
Talaxians with, and the tension she had noticed between Neelix and other Talaxians. They speculated about what it could mean for a while.

Then Chakotay told her about his recovery time from the dark Entity, and about his quick visit at the DQU with Seven before his meeting with Hayes and Elmridge. He’d hoped to catch Kathryn there, but when he found she wasn’t there Ensign Celes had given them a short tour.

By the time he’d finished relating the events, they had long finished their food and were coming to the end of their drinks, so of one accord they slid off the booth, took care of the service and exited.

“I have to say, the DQU is an impressive place,” Chakotay commented as they started walking. “I think even Seven was impressed with the efficiency and the organization.”

“I’m so glad to hear it’s up to her standards,” Kathryn drawled, even though it secretly made her proud. Impressing Seven was not an easy feat. “No, I’m glad she approves. I want her to have the best that Earth has to offer if we’re going to convince her to stick with us in the long run.”

“I know.”

They strolled in silence for a while as they left Starfleet grounds and leisurely started making their way uphill toward the residential areas. Kathryn took his arm again and one of her hands slid down to find his fingers and intertwined them with hers.

“Chakotay, there’s something that’s been on my mind for a while, I think we need to talk about it,” she started after a while. Part of her hated that she brought that up now, when they were just getting comfortable and happy, but they needed to clear the air. Or she did, in any case.

He took a deep breath before releasing it slowly. “Let me guess, the Borg drone in the room.”

“Precisely.”

“Okay. Though I can’t fathom what good it will do to bring her up now. It was a mistake, and I am sorry for it – for causing anyone pain – but my feelings are long gone. You must know that.”

“But you did have feelings.”

He sighed again, but didn’t let go of her hand. If anything he held on tighter. “I thought I did. I hoped I did. I was trying to move on, I believed you only felt friendship for me. She was interested. We dated for a while. We realized it was a mistake, we ended it. End of story.”

“You make it sound so simple…”

He sighed and a hint of frustration seeped through his calm tone. “I don’t know what you want me to say, Kathryn. We didn’t sleep together, if that’s what you’re asking.”

It wasn’t and Kathryn blinked in surprise at this confession, though she couldn’t deny that a part of her was secretly relieved, and she wasn’t sure why. Not that it mattered in the end… She shook her head with a sigh.

He stopped walking and faced her, his hands coming to rest on her upper arms. “Kathryn,” he started, serious and determined, his gaze locking with hers. “I don’t know how else to say this: you own me. I’ve known that since about five minutes after you made me your First Officer. I’ve fought it, ignored it, and hid it to the point where I actually believed it was gone. I saw you try to move on from Mark with other men, and didn’t say anything because, well it wasn’t my place, but also because all I’ve ever wanted was to see you happy. Even when you moved in with a man you barely
knew, or considered leaving Voyager for him.”

Kathryn blinked at this rebuttal – that had been over a year ago! Clearly Chakotay hadn’t quite put that whole debacle with the fake memories behind him. He went on before she had a chance to respond.

“So Seven came along, and to my surprise we got along. For a while I honestly thought she could make me happy some day, if I could just reclaim my heart and move on. But there was my mistake: thinking that I could reclaim it from you. Getting involved with Seven was stupid, short-sighted, but it’s also what made me realize what a fool I’d been to even think my love for you would ever fade, or that my heart could belong to anyone else. But the most important part is that both Seven and I have put it all behind us, so,” he paused and inhaled, “I hope you can too.”

Kathryn looked into his eyes for a moment as she collected her thoughts. She knew he spoke the truth, and she knew from her recent conversations with Seven that the young woman had moved on as well. She lowered her gaze to his chest and touched the spot above his heart. “It’s not that you tried to be happy with someone else that hurt so much, Chakotay, or not even that you chose Seven! It’s the fact that… the fact that you kept it from me, that you didn’t tell me.”

He closed his eyes and shook his head. When he opened them again his gaze was sad, but his hand slid down her shoulder in a reassuring caress. “I wanted to tell you, but I didn’t know how. You were distancing yourself from me, and I…”

“It was self-preservation, I thought I was losing you.”

He sighed and stepped closer, covering her hand on his chest with his own. It was warm and steady, and the feel of it on her skin next to the rhythm of his heart beneath her palm was comforting. “I’m sorry.”

She moved her other hand to touch his cheek. “I know. And I’m sorry if I ever made you believe that my feelings weren’t as deep as they were. But I was in an awkward position, it wouldn’t have been right for me to-.”

He frowned and shook his head. “No, I know that! I’ve never blamed you for taking your duty seriously. How could I? You were my captain, and if anything it made me admire you even more.”

Kathryn gave a small smile, touched by his unwavering loyalty when it came to his duty, and his long-spoken promise that he would always put her needs above his. He’d always had. She suddenly felt selfish for feeling so betrayed when she had also had her role to play in all this. They started walking again and Kathryn retook his arm.

“But I could have been a better friend. You shouldn’t have felt like you needed to keep something so important from me. It would have been painful, but no less so than the alternative. Believe me.”

He frowned. “How did you find out?”

“I must have a propensity for self-punishment, Chakotay, because that time-travel Admiral Janeway took a twisted satisfaction in telling me.”

He let out a long sigh and shook his head. “She wasn’t you, Kathryn. I’m of the belief that what we are, who we truly are, is a reflection of our actions, not predetermined by some grand scheme or timeline. She wanted to go back in time for a reason – I think something along the way had happened in her life to make her bitter and unhappy. It doesn’t mean you’re anything like her.”

“I hope you’re right.” Kathryn stared up at Chakotay as something occurred to her. “It just occurred
to me that, maybe what she never truly recovered from, was the loss of her Chakotay.” Is that how she would have ended up if Neelix hadn’t contacted them to come to his people’s rescue? If she’d never found out that Chakotay and Seven had long terminated their involvement?

He tightened his grip on her fingers and tucked her a little closer into his side. “I have every intention to never let you find out for yourself,” he told her gently but firmly and she smiled softly at the determination and devotion in his eyes.

“So,” he started again, his eyes searching her face. “Anything else you’d like to know before we return to the part where I make you as happy as I possibly can for as long as you’ll have me?”

She shook her head with a small chuckle and looped both her arms around his. “No.”

“Good.”

“Actually, there is one thing.”

He rubbed his forehead and threw her a half-amused half-dreading look. “Okay.”

“That thing you mentioned, me moving in with Jaffen when our crew was taken to that power plant to work.”

He exhaled and looked down, shaking his head. “I shouldn’t have said that. It wasn’t fair of me to bring it up.”

“Maybe not, but you did, and clearly it’s been bothering you. So, let’s hear it.”

“Kathryn, it’s fine…”

She let go of his arm and stepped sideways to sit down on an upcoming sidewalk bench, crossing her leg so she could lean back and look up at him. “Go on. I was able to get something off my chest, it’s only fair you get the chance to do the same.”

He pursed his lips as he studied her, hands on his hips, as if weighing the pros and the cons of humoring her. “Fine-”

“Let’s start by getting something straight,” she interrupted.

He raised an eyebrow. “I thought I was doing this-”

“That wasn’t really me. Maybe part of it was me, but not the important part. So you can’t hold the decisions I made then against me.”

His expression was still a strange mix of amused and annoyed. “I don’t. But you’re right, something about it bothered me. It’s like you said – it wasn’t the fact that you seemed to find happiness with somebody else – well, maybe it stung a little. But I’ve always wanted you to be happy above anything else. No, I think what irritated me is that for some reason he was able to turn you against me – that somehow, the portrait he was painting for you was more appealing than my truth. That despite our connection, you still decided to listen to him. As much as I wish it were, what I felt wasn’t petty jealousy, it was…”

“Betrayal,” she finished for him, now meeting his gaze seriously, pointedly.

He sighed in understanding.

She leaned forward. “I need you to understand something, Chakotay. The only reason that he was
able to convince me not to trust you, to turn you in, was because… It played into the sense of
carefreeness I felt there, as if a huge weight had been lifted off my shoulders. I didn’t know what that
weight was at the time.”

He came to sit next to her. “Your responsibilities as a captain.”

She gave a nod. “Even though I couldn’t tell exactly why, you were a symbol of all that, and by the
same token you jeopardized the illusion of freedom that I had. So it was less scary to go with Jaffen’s
suspicions than having to face everything you represented. That’s all. But once I remembered, I also
remembered that I had always embraced my responsibilities, even when the burdens outweighed the
rewards. And I remembered why my instinct was to trust you, and that’s because you’re a straight
arrow, Chakotay, and you’ve been my anchor and my moral compass every single time I lost myself.
I know it doesn’t absolve me completely, but it’s the truth.”

He sighed again. “So I guess in our own way, without meaning to, we both betrayed each other.”

She leaned forward to better look at his face. “And I’m sure, if we keep digging, we’ll find more of
those moments of doubt, and suspicion. Chakotay, can we get past all of that?” She was suddenly
very worried that their history – too many years of longing and too many things left unsaid – would
ruin things for them now. But they’d already gone through so much, they couldn’t give up now!

He exhaled and to her relief smiled his crooked smile. “After everything I’ve told you, do you really
think this is going to stop me, or change the way I feel?”

She exhaled in relief and leaned in to kiss his lips, pulling on his neck to bring him closer. He circled
one arm around her while his other hand came to rest on her neck and his lips coaxed her mouth
open. Kathryn got lost in the sensation of his lips, his hands, his warmth and when they finally pulled
away, she had no idea how much time had elapsed. Only that it seemed like the closer they got, the
more of him she needed – the more mysterious and attractive he became. She was ready to spend a
lifetime learning to identify each expression on his handsome features, to respond to every passionate
caress of his lips with one of her own, to erase every frown from his brow, to bring up that disarming
dimpled smile and twinkling eyes with her teasing. To be his partner, in every sense of the word.

He straightened and took in his surroundings, as if startled at the unfamiliarity of it – the old-
fashioned street and lampposts, tall trees and 21st-century revival houses. He frowned. “Where are
we? I don’t think I’ve ever been in this area before.”

Kathryn bit her cheek mischievously as she leaned back into the bench and pointed over her shoulder
to the building behind them. “This is my house.”

His gaze flicked to the historic brick building and back to hers. Kathryn had to bite back her grin at
the surprise in his expression.

“It’s nice,” he said at last.

She nodded, thoroughly amused by his reaction.

“You want to come in for a cup of coffee?” She asked lightly – like she’d done a hundred times as a
captain – and stood to her feet. Except that this time, they both knew that, even though coffee was
always on the table with her, there was more to the invitation.

He bit his lips as he stood up to face her. “I… would love to. You have no idea how much I want
to…” He said wistfully.
“But?”

“But, I don’t think I should.”

Kathryn wasn’t quite sure how to react. “Alright,” she replied after an awkward pause.

He stopped her with a hand on her arm. “It’s... very... tempting for me to forget right now, but I’m still your junior officer.” His eyes drifted to the pips on her collar before returning to her face. “And until that changes, until I can come to you as your equal, I’ll act in a way befitting a Starfleet officer. As much as I want to stay here with you tonight, and the spirits know I do, if I leave now we won’t have anything to ever reproach ourselves with when it comes to our professionalism.”

Kathryn stared at him, trying to decide whether she was surprised, proud or annoyed with him for being the one to hold up to her the principles that she lived by. Had it been anyone else she would have thought it was just an excuse, but she knew Chakotay actually meant it. He had one foot out of Starfleet, yet his duty and the values that she held so highly still mattered to him. She admired him for it – even if admittedly it caused her some momentary frustration.

“Who’s defining parameters, now?” She countered, finally letting some humor into her raised eyebrow and crooked smile. “And whatever happened to making me as happy as you possibly can?”

He let out a small chuckle and put his hands on his hips, relieved to hear her typical teasing drawl. “I’m afraid it’s deferred for an indefinite, though definitely short, period of time.” His smile softened and he turned serious. “I intend on accepting the Academy job first thing tomorrow, and hand in my resignation at Starfleet Command by the same token. Admiral Hayes said I should expect a short delay in making the paperwork official, so I actually need to return to Voyager for the time being. But I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

She nodded and touched his chest, committing to memory the feel of the Starfleet uniform on him. “Well then, Captain, it was an honor serving with you.”

He took in a deep breath before releasing it, his dark eyes holding hers steadily. “No Admiral, the privilege was all mine.”

She reached out and he grabbed her hand, squeezing her fingers before stepping away. “Goodnight Kathryn.”

“Goodnight Chakotay.”

oooOooo

A/N: ‘Tis as Elvis Presley once sang: “Wise men say only fools rush in…” ;-)

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oooOooo
Laughter rang throughout Kathryn’s house as Neelix related the story of how he had asked Dexa to become his wife. Kathryn smiled to herself as she busied herself around her kitchen – half listening to the muffled voices coming from the next room, and half trying to focus on the recipe she was following. Apparently Neelix’s plans for a romantic proposal had met with obstacle after obstacle until he had ended up proposing to Dexa knee deep in mud and smelling of ixan cow. Whatever that was.

“That’s what I call true love,” Tom teased. There was a baby squeal from Miral, which sparked more laughter.

“How did you propose to your wife, Mr. Tuvok?” The question came from a female voice Kathryn recognized as Dexa’s and Kathryn had to admit, she kind of wished she could see her Vulcan friend’s expression right then. Dexa was probably trying to bring Tuvok into conversation, apparently not aware that Tuvok would contribute if he believed it necessary or useful. So Kathryn was surprised when Tuvok actually answered her question.

“On Vulcan, it is customary to engage in a strict ritual when the time comes for a couple to bond…”

Kathryn almost chopped off her finger trying to cut the onion, so she tuned out the muffled voices, and focused on her task. God knew cooking wasn’t her forte on a good day; she wasn’t going to mess up when she was hosting the first reunion of Voyager’s senior staff since the end of their incredible journey. Luckily Seven had volunteered to give her a hand with the cooking, so at least one of them was working efficiently as they put everything together for the main course.

Since Seven had started her new position at the DQU a week ago, the two of them had worked more closely than they had in years, and Kathryn had come to realize that she had missed her. Seven seemed to acclimate well to living on Earth, especially once Voyager had returned to pick up Chakotay for his last command and the crew had transferred her regeneration alcove to her Earth quarters. Knowing what Seven was hoping to accomplish with the research into artificial singularities, it was gratifying to watch her work with B’Elanna and the others. Her hopes for a future in which she was happy helping others like her – a future in which she was not alone – made her more human than Kathryn had ever seen her.

Kathryn glanced at the clock. Everyone was here except for Chakotay, Harry and the Doctor. The three of them were on their way back from Chakotay’s last mission as Voyager’s Captain. According to their flight plan the ship should have docked a couple of hours ago, and Kathryn wondered what the delay could be. Not that she had given a precise arrival time for this little get-together, but it wasn’t like Chakotay to tarry, especially – one would think – given the incentive.

The anticipation was killing her. She hadn’t seen him in person since that night he’d walked her home and she could barely contain her excitement and nervousness at the thought of seeing him again, of embarking in this relationship with him, of being in his embrace, of peeling back his mysteries.

Much to her pleasure, he’d written to her almost everyday since he’d left and his letters were everything she had always assumed they would be: thoughtful and poetic but also packed with subtle humor. His most recent letter, which dated from the day before, had told her that his Starfleet resignation had gone through, and would be effective as soon as he completed his final mission and turned in his combadge at Starfleet Command.
She was happy for him – for them, but at the same time his resignation felt like the end of something. As if his leaving Starfleet truly marked the end of Voyager’s journey through the Delta Quadrant. Even though Voyager was part of her fleet, having Chakotay as the captain had made her feel as though she hadn’t completely left it. Even while they had been estranged, Chakotay had been the link that had kept her connected to the ship, and the past seven years they had spent on board, like he was keeping the torch alight.

Well, maybe now she could truly move on.

She realized that the yearning and dissatisfaction she had felt before they’d received Neelix’s call for help had vanished. For the first time in a long, long time, she was satisfied, content. Happy to start afresh in her position as admiral. There was no doubt in her mind that part of it was due to the knowledge of Chakotay’s feelings and the anticipation of their relationship, but it wasn’t just that. Maybe it was Neelix’s presence, and the fact that he, Dexa and Brax had decided to stay in the Alpha Quadrant, or maybe it was the possibilities that B’Elanna’s Entraptor created, but Kathryn no longer yearned for the past, or felt incomplete. Maybe she would long for space travel again, but if she ever got the itch she could easily take a page out of B’Elanna’s book and take on some away missions every once in a while. Just to keep her reflexes sharp.

The doorbell chimed in the next room and Kathryn froze as she heard greetings being exchanged, and then, Chakotay’s voice as he responded to Tom’s accusation of them being late.

“There was a little… mishap… with Harry’s ankle.”

“What happened? We want some details,” Tom asked.

Many of them spoke at once and the words became indistinct, though Kathryn thought she heard Harry say that it was too embarrassing and the Doctor say something about a fall and a minor injury.

Seven suddenly appeared at Kathryn’s side. “You should greet your guests. I will continue here.”

Kathryn squeezed her forearm gratefully. She stopped just short of crossing the threshold and spun around. “Don’t forget to turn down the heat as soon as the sauce boils.”

Seven looked slightly insulted. “I will not let it burn.”

Kathryn nodded skeptically while she resumed her movement to exit, but just as she was gaining momentum she collided with another body and she startled to a halt. “Oh!” She knew it was him even before she noticed the rust-colored cotton shirt or recognized the fresh masculine scent and the feel of his hands on her arms.

When she finally looked up at Chakotay’s face her heart skipped a beat. His eyes danced with pleasure at seeing her and she couldn’t help but respond with a bright smile of her own. Although it was strange to see him out of his Starfleet uniform, she was reminded just how much his civilian attire brought out his complexion and the chocolaty brown of his eyes. It made him look younger, somehow, carefree.

“I just came to make sure you hadn’t burnt the kitchen down,” he teased her before looking over her shoulder. “Seven,” he greeted. “I suspect the unusual lack of smoke is due to your presence here.”

Kathryn narrowed her eyes at him. “Very funny.”

“It was in fact Neelix who suggested I offer my assistance to the admiral, knowing her propensity to burn food items.”
Kathryn spun to stare at Seven. “And here I thought you were just being thoughtful!”

Seven raised a playful eyebrow. “I am: I am being thoughtful to your guests.”

Chakotay bit back his grin and Kathryn sent him a mockingly warning stare. He raised his hands in defense. “There’s wine around here somewhere,” she drawled. She turned to Seven one last time, playfully going for the last word. “For the record, I have never, ever, burnt down any kitchens. Just… the food.”

Kathryn left Seven and, Chakotay not far behind, she went to greet Harry and the Doctor now conversing with Tuvok in the living room. Although she longed for some time alone with Chakotay to greet him properly and to ask him about the resignation, she was still the hostess, and the least she could do was greet her guests. Besides, it really was wonderful to see everyone together again: B’Elanna was sitting with Dexa on the floor as the two women watched Brax entertain Miral; and Neelix and Tom were sprawled across the couch conversing, while Icheb sat straight next to them listening in on their conversation with undisguised interest. Chakotay went to fetch glasses of wine while Kathryn welcomed Harry and the Doctor. For some reason she was unable to keep herself from following Chakotay’s movements with her eyes.

“Have you given any thought as to Mr. Chakotay’s replacement as captain of Voyager?” Tuvok asked and Kathryn snapped her attention back to him.

“Hmm? Oh we have a short list of candidates. I can’t really discuss it, but I think Voyager will be in good hands.”

Chakotay returned, carefully balancing three wine glasses and gestured for Kathryn to take one. She nodded her thanks.

“That’s all we can ask for,” Harry replied with a genuine smile as he grabbed the other glass Chakotay was offering.

“I have to say,” the Doctor started, “Voyager won’t be the same without all of you. It’s almost enough to make me think about reassignment. Perhaps I have outgrown my usefulness as an EMH, it would be quite challenging to pursue my other talents, and, frankly, it was already quite bizarre without you, admiral-” Realizing what he was saying he redirected his apologetic attention to Chakotay. “No offense, Captain- Chakotay. You see, I’m a hologram of habit, and your leadership style is quite different than -”

Chakotay interrupted the Doctor’s dramatic explanation with his hand. He exchanged a quick pointed look with Harry, who appeared to be shifting rather awkwardly on his feet, as if this had been a subject of debate between them. “I get it. We all felt a little strange without our rightful leader,” Chakotay added for both Harry’s and Kathryn’s sake. “So no offense taken, Doc.”

The Doctor smiled in relief before returning his attention to Kathryn. “If I may ask, how is Seven doing with her new position within the Delta Quadrant Unit?”

Kathryn grinned at the opportunity for a little payback for all that teasing back in the kitchen. “You should ask her yourself, she’s in the kitchen. I’m sure she’ll be happy to tell you all about it.”

Chakotay leaned closer to whisper into her ear when the Doctor followed her suggestion and excused himself. “You just did that on purpose, didn’t you?”

“Why Chakotay I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

He hummed skeptically, his eyes dancing with amusement. The desire to be alone with him hit her
full force again and she struggled not to lean into him or reach out to touch him. Just as she was about to suggest they go somewhere more private, Seven stepped out from the kitchen and everyone fell silent as they looked at her expectantly.

“The recipe has been executed according to the specific instructions.”

At everyone’s blank stare, Kathryn grinned. “I think what Seven’s trying to say is: dinner’s ready. Let’s eat!”

Everyone gathered around the table while Kathryn and Seven when to get the food from the kitchen, and Chakotay volunteered to give a hand. Seven grabbed the plate containing the main course and left for the dining room.

As soon as the two of them were alone in the kitchen, Kathryn leaned her head closer to Chakotay’s. “I expected you an hour ago, what was the delay?” She asked, her voice no louder than a whisper, while they retrieved the other dishes from the counter. Everything looked and smelled annoyingly perfect.

Chakotay threw her a smile. “Harry fractured his ankle.”

“He broke his ankle?” She repeated, not sure whether to be concerned or amused. In the end she was a little bit of both. “How?”

“He made me promise not to say. He’s fine, the Doctor patched him up right away. But that’s why we were delayed. Trust me,” he added as he leaned closer to lower his voice even more, “I wanted to be here much sooner, but I couldn’t just leave him to fend on his own,” he replied playfully, his eyes traveling from her eyes to her lips and back again. Oh how she wished they were alone in the house!

Kathryn grinned, teasing. “That was very generous.”

“Call it my last action as a Starfleet captain.”

He was making light of his resignation, but Kathryn sobered as she watched him carefully, wondering whether the lighthearted tone was just a façade, whether it had been as easy as he made it seem. She was about to ask him about it when Seven walked in again, looking for more dishes to take to the table.

Kathryn handed her the final dish and the three of them joined the others at the table.

The atmosphere was cheerful and Kathryn couldn’t recall the last time she had seen all of those faces look so relaxed. It was as if everyone was finally riding off the adrenaline rush of the Entraptor mission and the chaos of the following week.

Chakotay sat next to her, looking perfectly relaxed. Yet Kathryn could tell by his overall quietness that something distracted him and made him more subdued than usual. While he wasn’t necessarily the most extroverted when in a large group, he wasn’t a shy man either. So this quietness was rather atypical of him. By the way that B’Elanna kept sending him curious looks from across the table, Kathryn wasn’t the only one to have noticed.

The conversation drifted across a bunch of different topics: among other things Chakotay’s resignation from Starfleet and his new profession, the history of Kathryn’s house and neighborhood, Tom’s latest holonovel, Miral’s teething, Seven’s efficiency improvements at the DQU, the true events leading to Harry’s broken ankle, the story of how the Talaxians, soon after Neelix had joined them on the asteroid, had started trading again (on Dexa and Nirax’s urging) and had thus acquired the ships they had used to travel through the wormhole.
This led to a discussion about the Talaxians’ divisiveness when it came to the decision that they faced. Most of them, including Neelix and his family, had chosen to stay in the Alpha Quadrant, but many of them wanted to go back to the Delta Quadrant and rebuild their community somewhere else. Both Neelix and Dexa felt that their roles as ambassador and council member respectively would be as important as ever in preserving good relations among the families. The beauty of it, however, was that the Entraptor allowed the separation to only be temporary. Kathryn was in the process of organizing a meeting with the rest of the admiralty and Federation representatives to determine exactly how to regulate and share the Entraptor technology at this early stage in its testing, but she was hopeful that no one would see any issue with using the device to send the Talaxians back if they wanted.

At that point Kathryn had risen to her feet and raised her glass for a toast. “I’d like to take this opportunity to thank you all for coming, and for turning this gathering into an event to be cherished and remembered. I’d also like to extend a formal welcome to Neelix and his family – I think I speak for everyone when I say that our Voyager family has not been complete without our dear friend, morale officer, cook and ambassador.”

“Hear, hear,” Chakotay said, raising his glass and everyone echoed his words and gesture. Neelix shared an embarrassed but proud smile with Dexa and Brax. Kathryn paused to look at everyone before going on.

“I know that for some of us Voyager’s return home was not quite the idyllic homecoming that we had dreamed about, and that many of us have struggled these last few months as we tried to figure out where we belong now that our incredible journey has come to an end,” she said as she met B’Elanna’s and Chakotay’s gazes in turn. “But what these past couple of weeks have shown me, is that the journey is far from over. Our team may get scattered across the quadrant, but our family ties remain strong and hold us all together across the distance. I think tonight, your presence here, speaks to that. And if I’ve learned anything working alongside all of you these last seven, almost eight years, is that if we stick together, we can overcome anything. So I’d like to toast to the future: to its joys and challenges; to the journey, because it’s not over until it’s over; and to this family, whose bonds, brilliance and resilience – as we found out recently – transcends even spacetime and brought us all here tonight.”

Tom raised his glass. “To…” He blinked, as if he couldn’t remember all of the items, “everything Admiral Janeway said!”

Everyone laughed and they clinked their glasses. Kathryn took particular care of meeting Chakotay’s eyes as their glasses clinked, and something of an understanding passed between them.

“I’d also like to say a few words, if I may,” Neelix said as he stood, one hand on his stomach while the other held the glass.

Kathryn sat down again and instinctively leaned into Chakotay. He, just as naturally, put his arm around her chair, though without making contact with her directly.

“I would like to personally thank all of you, my Voyager family, for everything you’ve risked to come to our help. You could have easily dismissed my story as an old wives’ tale, or deemed the risks too high. But no, you – all of you – did everything in your power to help us, risked your lives, and for that, I’m eternally grateful. I’ve come to realize over the years aboard Voyager that, while humans have their faults,” he made a point of pausing and they all chuckled, “they will do anything to help one of their own. And Dexa, Brax, and I, are honored to be considered as such. Thank you.” The raw emotion on his face moved Kathryn almost to tears and no one spoke for a long second.

“Dessert, anyone?” Neelix asked to lighten the mood and everyone chuckled again, lightening the
mood in a way only Neelix knew how.

Hours later, the evening was declared a success, and everyone left with intentions of hosting the next reunion. While Kathryn was saying goodbye to her guests, Chakotay had retreated into the kitchen to take care of the leftovers and putting the dirty dishes in the sonic washer. If anyone noticed that he wasn’t leaving with the rest of them, no one said anything.

That is, except for B’Elanna. Kathryn should have known the younger woman would notice the change in their interactions! When Kathryn went to hug her goodbye and thank her for coming, B’Elanna quickly whispered: “I’m not one to gloat,” she said teasingly, “but I knew Chakotay would come to his senses. I’m so glad I was right about it not being too late.”

Kathryn hugged her a little tighter in reply. They exchanged a smile when B’Elanna pulled back, and that was that.

Once everyone had left, Kathryn walked around the living room to gather discarded wine glasses before stepping into the kitchen to bring them in for washing.

Chakotay was busy putting away some of the leftover dessert and he gave her a smile when she came in. It was an intense kind of smile and Kathryn was once again struck by his peculiar behavior.

“You don’t have any room left for this last piece of chocolate cake, do you?” He asked lightly as she walked around the counter to where he was standing and wiped some of the chocolate frosting from the presentation plate with her finger to lick it off.

“Oh no. We’ll keep it for tomorrow.”

His smile widened into a small chuckle and Kathryn stared at him.

“What?”

He shook his head, still smiling, while he put the remaining piece into a container. “It’s nothing, just… The way you said ‘we’ just now. It was nice. Sounded…natural.”

“Oh. That’s because it feels natural,” she replied as she leaned closer into his side, watching his handiwork. “It feels right to have you standing here in my kitchen like this. Washing up,” she added teasingly and he chuckled. The smell of fresh coffee reached her nose and Kathryn gave him a delighted stare. “And you’ve made coffee!”

He glanced at her as he went through different cupboards until he found two mugs and filled them with coffee. “It’s my strategy, you see: to make myself as handy as possible so that I become absolutely necessary to your happiness.”

“How long have you been working on this scheme, Chakotay? Because as far as I’m concerned, you’ve achieved that goal a long time ago.”

“I admit, it’s been a long-term project.” He winked at her before giving her a mug.

“You know what this all reminds me of?” She asked as they left the kitchen and walked to the living room, coffee in hand.

“What?”

Kathryn had dimmed the lights after everyone had left and they settled down on the couch with a sigh. It wasn’t long before Kathryn shifted to lean back against him. One of his arms draped around
“When we were quarantined on that planet together, we called it New Earth, do you remember?” She asked as she threw him a glance over her shoulder.

He scoffed incredulously. “How could I forget?” He took a sip of coffee, and his voice was softer, almost hesitant, when he spoke again. “That’s when I fell in love with you.”

Kathryn’s breath caught in her throat at the admission, the softly spoken words, as if he dreaded her reaction. That was years ago.

He moved his arm further around her so that he could reach for her fingers and he intertwined them with his. “Before then I admired and respected you, and I felt an attraction, but… I got to know you a little, then, not Captain Janeway, but Kathryn. You made it very easy to fall for you. You knew, I’m sure. Nothing ever truly escapes your notice.”

Kathryn smiled a little. “I suspected. And I admit, it scared me at the time. I was still hanging on to Mark back then, and you made letting him go look so very appealing. You were the kindest, the most thoughtful, passionate and intriguing man I had ever met. And not too bad looking either,” she teased and she felt his soft chuckle reverberate in his chest. “I recognized the potential, but saw it as a threat instead of something positive.” She shook her head to try to shake away her unease. “You know what else I remember, though?” She went on, infusing some playfulness back into her voice. “Your magical hands giving me one of the best shoulder rubs of my life. I certainly hope there’s more where that came from!” She teased as she gently nudged his ribs with her elbow.

He replied by very slowly pressing his lips against the side of her neck to the spot where her shoulder met her neck. Kathryn almost jumped out of her skin at the unexpected sensation; normally her uniform would have been in the way, so wearing a dress for the occasion suddenly felt like an idea sent from Heaven. His kiss was chaste enough, just a brief pressure on her skin, but the effects on Kathryn’s skin lingered and she shivered long after he’d pulled back.

“Well, it’s been a while,” he replied, his tone playful, “so I’ll have to test it to find out.”

She grinned at their flirtation, but couldn’t help but notice once again that there was something subdued about him. It was subtle, hidden underneath the layer of teasing and flirtatious banter. But beyond all that, there was depth of emotion – though she couldn’t identify which, exactly – and seriousness. “You were quiet at dinner,” she commented at last.

“Was I?” He sounded genuinely surprised.

She turned so she could face him, readjusting her position until she was sitting sideways on the couch, her legs curled beneath her and leaning her elbow against the back, just above his shoulder. He was watching her curiously, still waiting for her to say more.

“You were. Is it because of your resignation? Are you having second thoughts?”

His smile was instantaneous and confident, without hesitation. “No. For the first time in months, I feel like I actually know what I’m doing. I love Voyager, and I won’t deny that there are things about space travel that I might miss every once in a while, but I’m ready for something else. There’s plenty of adventure to be had, right here.”

“On Earth?”

“There too.”
She snorted in amusement and he gave a crooked smile. But she wouldn’t let herself get distracted.

“So… if not that…” She pressed.

He seemed to consider her words for a moment before setting his coffee cup down on the table and shifting slightly to better face her. His hand found her shoulder in a gentle caress, the warmth of it seeping through the straps of her dress. “I guess… I was just mentally pinching myself.”

She raised a quizzical eyebrow and he went on.

“I was thinking, wondering, if there was any chance that this- this moment, could actually be real. That I could possibly be this happy, so at peace. I don’t see how I could deserve it.” He gave an embarrassed shrug. “I know it sounds silly, but I was just sitting there, amazed at the fact that everyone I care about is healthy and content. And I looked at you, and marveled at the fact that you actually want me in your life, that you’d let me feel what you feel, and that it was the most complex, steadfast feeling I’d ever felt. It gave me an anchor when I didn’t know where I ended and that entity started. So I guess… I was just contemplating how lucky I am, and thanking my spirit guide for steering me toward all those choices that have led me here, to this moment.” He gave a small shrug again, as if asking for her assessment.

Kathryn’s smile had turned watery at his words and she couldn’t stop her fingers from reaching out to touch his face, the intricate design at his temple. “It’s not silly if it’s the truth. Happiness is not silly.”

He smiled and caught her hand to kiss her palm, his lips once again sending a bolt of electricity from her hand to her toes. “That’s a relief.”

It took everything Kathryn had to keep her head together and reply coherently, because there was more to say. “I admit, I had a similar thought myself over dinner. After everything we’ve gone through, for the first time since we all got back to the Alpha Quadrant, I feel like we all belong where we should – or that, at the very least, we’ll now all be able to move forward even if the journey isn’t always going to be easy.”

He nodded. “It’s like you said, so long as we’re together, we can pull through anything.”

“So long as I’m by your side, I think that’s true,” she rectified. Her hand slid from his neck to his chest, just above his heart, where his combadge would have been. “Chakotay, you have no idea how thrilled and happy this makes me – being with you like this, the thought of being with you like this tomorrow, and the day after. All those months after we got back and I thought you were lost to me, that I’d missed my chance... It made me realize that I truly couldn’t live a day without you. And I only wish I’d understood how true that was sooner. Maybe it would have saved us both some heartache.”

He raised her hand to his lips again to gently kiss her knuckles. “It was a confusing and painful time,” he replied, “but as painful and confusing as it was, I don’t regret any of it. Because I think we both needed the time to figure out what we wanted now that we were back home. I needed to figure out what I wanted to do with my life, to find my purpose again, before I could even hope of declaring myself…”

“And I…needed to learn how to stop hiding my feelings and accept them for what they were,” Kathryn completed, understanding his point. She grinned. “Here’s to timing.”

“Here’s to timing,” he repeated softly, his voice deep and raw.
He smiled into her eyes and of common accord they both leaned in for an unhurried and affectionate kiss, her fingers moving to touch the softness of the hair at his temple. After a moment he pulled back and took the coffee mug from her hand and left it next to his on the table. When his lips found hers again, they were hungrier and Kathryn shifted closer, needing to feel more of his body against hers. She heard herself moan in pleasure as he pulled her closer into his arms and her chest came into contact with his. He took the opportunity to deepen the kiss, coaxing her lips open with his to touch her tongue with his. She moaned at the electrifying sensation and circled his torso with her arms, loving the feel of the cotton of his shirt and the hard feel of muscle and bone underneath the softness. But she needed more of his warmth, more of his skin.

He paused when she tugged the shirt free of his belt, breathing heavily, and met her eyes. Kathryn saw the question in his heady gaze so she slowly stood to her feet, taking him with her. Walking backwards and pulling him with her, she met his eyes unabashedly as her hands resumed their task of unbuttoning his shirt. His eyes went dark, yet they were burning with a light from within, like embers, and Kathryn felt their burn to her core.

His own fingers tangled into her hair as she worked on his shirt, releasing her hair from the clip she used to pin it up. Now moving forward to match Kathryn’s backward movement, he leaned in to kiss her again while his fingers trailed to her shoulders and slid underneath the shoulder straps of her dress, kindling gooseflesh on her skin. His fingers massaged the muscles there in one deep, warm, stroke, and Kathryn grinned against his lips, remembering her earlier comment.

At last she reached the last button and, never leaving his lips, opened his shirt and slid the sleeves off. Her hands went to his broad chest and he gathered her closer to his body. She hummed with pleasure at the feel of his warm skin and mad heartbeat underneath her palm. They were now moving past the threshold of her bedroom and they pulled back just enough to look at each other and smile. Kathryn leaned in to kiss his neck and threw him a surprised and mischievous glance when he jerked and chuckled at the contact. Well, she’d be damned, the man was ticklish!

He prevented her impulse to do it again by returning his lips to hers, his hands grazing the skin at her back, leaving gooseflesh in their wake.

“I have to say…” Kathryn panted before his lips found hers again, then moved to her lower lip, at once teasing and seductive, and his fingers magically worked their way across her back to unfasten her dress. “I’m curious… as to…” He hummed in reply and his smiling lips traveled down her chin to her throat, leaving a hot trail of kisses and gooseflesh in their path. He knew full well what this was doing to her concentration, and she figured it was payback for discovering that his neck was a ticklish spot. “…whether or not exploration… remains at the top…” His hand slid through the opening of her dress at her back and she gasped. “…of your priorities.”

She felt him grin against the hollow of her throat, but he pulled back just far enough to look into her eyes. “A valid question Ms. Janeway… I think it’s worth investigating…” His voice was deep and raspy, his tone flirtatious, but his hand pushed her hair back gently, lovingly, and his smile lit up his dark eyes with a new kind of happiness.

With one more step backward, Kathryn pulled Chakotay down with her onto the bed, safe in the knowledge that they had a lifetime to explore each other, and realign the stars that had drifted apart.

oooOooo

A/N: This was originally supposed to be the end, but for some reason I couldn’t let Janeway and Chakotay go just yet, so there will be a short epilogue.

Random thought: it occurred to me that in a world where replicators exist (and a capitalist economy
doesn’t), they probably wouldn’t even need to keep leftovers…! Oh well, let’s pretend it’s from a habit of conserving rations aboard Voyager! :-)
“The point of this week’s lecture is that, despite our best intentions, First Contacts do not always go the way Starfleet hopes they will go. So a good officer will be able to adapt, to find new ways of implementing First Contact protocols – but a great officer will do so without endangering the Prime Directive. That’s the challenge,” Chakotay lectured as he leisurely paced in front of his classroom.

He was pleased to see that most of the students were following him with rapt attention. They knew that this was eventually leading to a story about the Delta Quadrant, but they also knew that those had to be earned, so he stopped pacing and turned to face the cadets with a smile. “Now, your assignment was to find an example in Starfleet historical records of a situation when that happened, and to provide an analysis of the circumstances. Anyone care to volunteer their findings?”

A young woman named Clare raised her hand.

“Species 8472.”

Chakotay raised his eyebrows in surprise. He hadn’t expected an analysis of one of Voyager’s log entries, and certainly not that one. “Go on.”

“When Voyager encountered them the first time, they were violent at first, but Captain Janeway was eventually able to negotiate a peace with them.”

Chakotay was about to reply that the situation had also involved the Borg, an Ocampa with telepathic abilities and many other variables that complicated the case, when a familiar voice joined in from the back of the room.

“That’s very flattering, but as I recall, it was a little more complicated than that!”

Chakotay couldn’t help but grin when the students startled and perked up in surprise as Kathryn walked out of the shadows by the door. How long had she been standing there?

Three months into their relationship, and his heart still never failed to skip a beat when he saw her. Even when it had only been a few hours since they’d both left for work this morning. After some rather invigorating activities in the sonic shower that had almost made them both late, he might add.

“As you were!” She ordered the cadets, augmenting the effect of the command with her hand, as she made her way down the stairs of the auditorium, loving the attention. Chakotay watched her approach with a smile, admiring her figure and the way her exuberant personality seemed to radiate from her gait and gestures. Despite her childish enthusiasm, there was something commanding and magnetic about her; every one of his students followed her movements with a star-struck look in their eyes. Himself included, probably.

The last three months had been some of the most exhilarating of his life – and that was saying a lot for a man who’d spent the last seven years in an uncharted region of the galaxy. He and Kathryn had come together as naturally as two people could, as if they had in fact been a couple long before they’d consummated their relationship. It was startling to think of their years together on Voyager through that lens, but now he realized that the connection they’d had almost since the beginning was exactly what was holding them together now, what made them appear so in sync.

Oh it wasn’t always easy – they both had their faults, some of which they shared, like their stubbornness – and they were both dedicated to their work, which meant that they worked long hours. But they always made sure to come together at the end of the day, whether at her house or at
his place near the Academy, where they talked about their day and frustrations and excitements. Those moments didn’t always feel like they were enough, but for the time being they had to, and Chakotay had from the beginning made a point of cherishing them.

Besides, it had allowed them the chance to actually process everything – the changes that came with their new life together. Even though a relationship with her had, for Chakotay at least, always been at the back of his mind, the reality of it had taken some time to get used to, especially the subtle shift in the power relations that had for so long characterized their relationship. She still had the occasional tendency to take her “captain/admiral” voice, and though Chakotay made light of it and teased her about it, he knew it was something they both struggled with. Oh he had no doubt that she saw him as her equal, in fact she’d told him so a number of times, but old habits died hard.

But all things considered, those things were meaningless compared to the sheer luck he felt to be loved by her, and to the joy and feeling of peace and completeness he felt when he was with her, when she was in his arms or slept peacefully at his side. Those feelings and moments, and her happiness, were all that mattered.

Kathryn now met his gaze when she reached him at the bottom of the stairs. Chakotay almost reached out for her but stopped himself just in time. Instead he returned her smile before clearing his throat.

“Admiral Janeway,” Chakotay greeted her, loud enough for all the students to hear. “To what do we owe this pleasure?” Even though he was always happy to see her, she had never attended his class in the couple of months he had lectured at the Academy.

Her gaze met his pointedly for a moment – there was something she needed to tell him, he realized – but she quickly returned her eyes to the crowd. “I was passing by and my ears started ringing.”

The students laughed and Chakotay smiled, though he couldn’t help feeling some concern – he knew her well enough to know that she wouldn’t have made a point of interrupting his class for something trivial. “Well, it’s not often that these cadets get to hear the story from the source, and we have a few minutes left. Admiral?” He challenged with a smile.

Kathryn sent him another mischievous look before walking closer to the students and leaned against Clare’s desk. Chakotay leaned back against his desk to listen, unable to contain a smile. Kathryn had always been a good storyteller and she loved a good, lively crowd. Those cadets were in for a treat.

“You’re right, Cadet, our first contact with Species 8472 was far from the ideal Starfleet case study. At first their wrath was not aimed at us, but, at the Borg Collective…”

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Once Kathryn had finished her tale and answered a couple of questions from wide-eyed students, Chakotay dismissed the class.

“You made their day,” he commented when Kathryn walked back to him.

“I was listening for a while before I spoke up, and I think it’s safe to say, it’s you who’s made their day. They were entranced long before I so rudely interrupted.”

“You’re welcome to interrupt anytime,” he assured as he gathered his things.

As if she now recalled the reason why she had interrupted in the first place, her expression sobered. “Is there anywhere we can talk privately?”
Chakotay nodded and led her outside the classroom to his office, and the door closed behind them. “What’s going on?”

She leaned against his desk. “B’Elanna and Seven are ready to launch version 2.0. We’ll be leaving for DS12 in an hour.”

These last few months B’Elanna and Seven had been devising a plan to launch another Neutrino Entraport into the Beta Quadrant in the hope of creating the first of many nodes in a network of devices. The goal was eventually to have them in allied or neutral territories to allow ships to do multiple jumps from one singularity to the next, thereby traveling lightyears in a few instants. Seven was apparently getting a little impatient in her wish to contact the Borg resistance in the Beta Quadrant, and this was the first step she would be taking toward that end.

Chakotay nodded but couldn’t help a sigh as he sat in the chair in front of Kathryn. It was probably just overprotectiveness, but he rather wished he could go with them, if only to keep an eye on them all. But especially on Kathryn.

“How long will you be gone?”

“About a week, maybe ten days.”

“You’ll be careful?”

She smiled and moved to sit in his lap. “Aren’t I always?”

“A paragon of prudence,” he retorted sarcastically and she grinned, putting her arm around his neck to graze her fingers into his hair.

“I’ll be careful,” she promised before kissing his lips briefly. Too briefly. Chakotay sighed with the awareness that anyone could knock on the door any moment, including students.

“So, what are you going to do with me out of your hair for a week?” She asked teasingly.

“Aside from the big party with the boys at your house, you mean?”

She snorted at the old-fashioned stereotype and he grinned.

“Speaking of my house,” she said as if she’d just remembered that it was something she’d been meaning to discuss, “there is one thing you could do while I’m gone.”

“I’m listening,” he replied curiously. Usually if something needed fixing, Kathryn wasn’t the type of woman to need someone else to do it – actually she was better qualified than most people to do it herself. But even if that weren’t the case, he couldn’t recall anything not working properly.

“You could start moving your stuff in. You already spend most of your time there, and I’ve cleared out some space when I went home to pack earlier. That way it wouldn’t be my house anymore, but our house. Then you’ll be able to throw as many parties as you want in my absence.”

Chakotay stared at her, at the way the uncertainty in her eyes belied the lighthearted tone of her invitation and showed some deeper dread at his reaction. Didn’t she know by now how delighted this would make him? For an independent woman like Kathryn Janeway this was a big step, he knew that and he was touched, but he was still dejected to see that even after all this time, she still doubted his devotion. He would need to remedy that as soon as she got back. He pulled her tighter into his embrace and smiled into her eyes. He felt her relax and she smiled back.
“Alright,” he agreed. “Does that mean I get to finally reorganize the kitchen?” He teased, knowing it would touch a soft spot based on previous discussions on the subject.

As expected she threw him an indignant look. “I’ll have you know it’s perfectly well organized, by functional category, why-”

Chakotay grinned and kissed her temple. “I’m aware of your classification system, Kathryn. It’s perfectly rational, but doesn’t make any intuitive sense. Besides, you’re hardly ever in there now that I’m around to do all the hard work.”

She snorted and laughed before disentangling herself and standing to her feet. “But you do such a fine job.”

Still grinning, Chakotay stood with her. In truth he loved cooking for her – in fact he was always happy to do things that pleased her. He always had. He’d even built her a bathtub once.

“Well, I should head out, lest Captain Tuvok decides to leave without me,” she said and met his eyes more seriously, in spite of the light tone.

He nodded and pulled her into his arms. While Tuvok wouldn’t have been his first choice to command Voyager, Chakotay admired him and knew that the years as Chief of Security had taught him that captains couldn’t always just rely on logic. A big part of decision-making was also about instinct, and about listening to the crew. Hopefully Tuvok would adjust his Vulcan logic to encompass a broader spectrum of actions. It was, after all, logical to do so. And he had Harry as his First Officer to take care of the social aspect of running a crew like Voyager’s. They would make a good team, balance each other out.

“I would walk you to the DQU, but I have another class starting soon.” He paused to gather her closer. “I’ll miss you, even when I’m in the middle of my big party with the boys, and there’s debauchery and inebriation all around.”

She grinned, shaking her head, and reached up to kiss his lips. “I’ll miss you.” She took a step back. “No debauchery,” she ordered.

He chuckled, resting his hands on his hips. “You drive a hard bargain. Give my best to the others.”

“I will. I love you.”

“I love you.”

With one last smile, Kathryn left his office.

After she was gone Chakotay leaned back against his desk and sighed. For the thousandth time in the last three months, he marveled at the unexpected turn that his life had taken. Not only recently with Kathryn and the new posting, but even before. When he was a Maquis, he’d been ready to die fighting to defend his land and his people, and if the Caretaker hadn’t flung his ship into the Delta Quadrant and if Kathryn hadn’t come after them, he doubted he would have lived long enough to have such a meaningful relationship with another person, or find the peace that allowed him to do so now. Kathryn had saved him, in more ways than one.

And now that they were both blissfully happy with their current situation, and now that his friends had all found their own places and purposes in the new order of things, he could finally truly embrace the peace that he’d sought for so long.

And be happy.
The End

A/N: Thanks so much for sticking with me through to the end! I hope it was worth it!

I hope you enjoyed, if so, please feel free to let me know!

Till next time!

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