

IN ANOTHER PAST

Rating:

P18 / NC-17

Summary:

Post Year Of Hell. Sometimes, lost memories seized those who were never supposed to know the truth about the horrors of another past.

Warnings:

Has definitely a dark edge. Some may see non-consensual sex in one scene, but I like to point out that this is not what happens.

Disclaimer:

All paramount, nothing mine. Also, the characters imo belong to the actresses and actors because it was them who brought them to life.

Author's Note:

This starts at the end of Year Of Hell. To make the events in this story possible, I had to take it AU, meaning that this would play between YOH and Random Thoughts, but within a much longer stretch of time.

This story was co-authored by my very good friend Spooky. She helped me A LOT with this story, therefore I felt that just naming her as beta reader wouldn't be enough. I was stuck several times and maneuvered myself into some dead ends, but luckily, with her help I always found a way out. Plus, she loves Year Of Hell just like I do, so this story is also dedicated to her. Lots of love to you, hun!

***Those who cannot remember the past
are condemned to repeat it.***

- George Santayana

Cold sweat covered his body, a body shivering and shaking when it jolted into a sitting position. His breathing was labored, and his heart beat so wildly it threatened to break his ribcage and jump out. His head was thrumming with pain that was blinding him when he fought back into consciousness from his nightmare.

He clutched his shirt and desperately, almost in panic, pulled it from his body, freeing his chest from a constraint that wasn't there, but still seemed to crush him. He threw his bedding aside, stumbled from his bed and tumbled through his quarters, vainly searching for a way that would bring him away from the pictures that sliced through his heart and mind.

He had seen Voyager. And he had seen its end.

Nights on starships were a curiously quiet affair. Even if crews were spacefaring for months, if not years, they still maintained a regular day-night-rhythm. People were working in shifts, and although encounters of all kinds were possible at any time, the crews nevertheless stuck to their routines. After all, a regular sleep pattern was essential for their health.

Even being thousands of light years away from Earth or known space in general, Voyager operated on an Earth-like twenty-four hour day and night rhythm - and the majority of the crew worked at day and slept at night.

This night was no different. The past weeks had been uneventful for a change; they'd encountered only one species called Krenim. Or more to the point, they had encountered one ship of them, and its pilot had warned them of the unstable political situation in the territory ahead. So they had taken a course around Krenim space. A very boring, but at least also relaxing course, with no other ships, no inhabited planets, not even any interesting phenomena.

Now days were as quiet as usually were nights, and nights... nights brought a silence that made Voyager appear like a ghost ship. Even those still on duty only talked in hushed voices, as if they were afraid anything that was even the slightest bit of an unnecessary noise could break a spell that literally whispered through the corridors.

It was one week into their lonely journey - one that was now lonelier than ever before - that after another uneventful day, Commander Chakotay, the ship's first officer, went to bed early. For some time now, he had been feeling strangely exhausted - perhaps the quiet days without any adrenaline wore him out more than real action. And the general atmosphere on the ship did the rest. Since the Doctor had attested him perfect health, he had to assume that boredom was the only 'illness' he was suffering from. So an extensive shower and crawling into his bed after a night cup of herbal tea felt like just the right thing to do.

The moment he jerked from his sleep in the earliest morning hours after a nightmare, he wasn't so sure about that anymore. It took him a few deep breaths to calm down and clear his mind. It wasn't that he had never had nightmares before. But something about this one had been different. Had been too real, too vivid. Too close.

He had seen Voyager's bridge in a terrible condition, and on top of that one of the crewmen dead. But there had been more - he had felt the air whirling around him, dust invading his respiratory system. He had smelled what the fires had burned - especially the flesh of wounded crewmen.

Nausea overcame him just thinking of it, and Chakotay left his bed for the bathroom, splashing cold water into his face and swallowing some of it to calm down his stomach. His arms trembled when he supported himself on his sink and threatened to give out under the heavy weight of his upper body leaning onto them, and Voyager's first officer looked down on himself in confusion.

What was the matter with him?

Sighing, he decided to get dressed and take his time having a good breakfast; after all, his mother had once taught him that it was the most important meal of the whole day, and that a good breakfast always promised an equally good day. His mother's wisdom kept word - his shift and hours of free-time afterwards were not worth mentioning.

When he went to bed the same evening, he was exhausted from an hour of workout on the holodeck, but also deeply relaxed from the shower he had taken afterwards. The moment his head hit the pillow, he was asleep.

But again, not for long.

With all the force he could come up with he pulled himself from the ordeal his subconscious confronted him with. He jumped up and almost fell off the bed; even a short scream escaped his throat. He panted hard, struggling against the images, trying to get rid of them as he stumbled into the shower, somehow losing his night clothes in the process, and activated the cold water. Only after about ten minutes under the chilling stream, he found back into reality completely.

This time, he didn't wait for the morning, didn't treat himself with an early and extensive breakfast. Instead, he left his quarters, barefoot and in his sleeping attire he had pulled back on, and headed for sickbay.

He never noticed Kathryn Janeway standing in her doorway, watching him go; deep concern showing on her face.

Chapter One

Chakotay reached sickbay, expecting it to be quiet and empty. What he found was a brightly illuminated medical station, the Doctor bustling about, and Tom Paris sitting at one of the biobeds with B'Elanna Torres standing next to him.

"Commander," the younger man, also in his pajamas and a bath robe only, just like B'Elanna, greeted him. He looked tired, Chakotay noticed, and was so pale as if he had seen a ghost.

"Tom. Are you all right?"

"More or less. Just a nightmare," the pilot shrugged dismissively, but the half Klingon next to him shook her head.

"Fifth night in a row," B'Elanna added, "had to drag him here to finally let the Doctor have a look." She tilted her head and eyed the first officer critically. "What's with you?"

"Nightmares..." he answered, weighing the word on his tongue, "Is this some kind of epidemic?"

"Not that I know of, Commander. At least you two are the first ones to report problems of this kind," the EMH now joined the conversation, administering a hypospray to Tom's neck. "This should hopefully help you sleep, Mr. Paris. You may return to your quarters."

"Thanks, Doc." Paris hopped from the biobed and walked towards the exit with B'Elanna. Before he left, he called, "Night, Chakotay," over his shoulder. Then the couple was gone.

Chakotay didn't get the chance to respond, as the Doctor already pushed him to one of the biobeds and began scanning him.

"So, you're suffering from bad dreams as well." It was a statement, not a question. If the EMH hadn't heard Voyager's second in command talk about it before, his tricorder readings had by now told him what was up. Quickened heartbeat, heightened blood pressure, and what humans called 'cold sweat' blared at him and told tales of a recent wave of anxiety and terror.

"It was the second time," Chakotay affirmed nevertheless.

"Hm... apart from the usual physiological reactions, there seems to be nothing wrong. Could it be this species that attacks people in their sleep again?"

"I don't think so, I didn't see any of them, and besides... this was different. Last time, most of us were confronted with situations that caused discomfort or even embarrassment on a personal level. This time, it was... bigger."

"Care to elaborate, Commander?"

"It looked like a..." The Doctor stopped in his work when he heard his patient's voice dying. Worried he walked back over from where he'd been preparing a hypo, and put a hand on the shoulder of the man who hung his head, deep in thought.

"Commander?"

"It looked like we'd just encountered another hostile race; there was some damage on the bridge, and one crewman dead. But... I felt like I was there. I didn't only see everything clearly; I also felt and smelt and heard it. And... and then there was this strange premonition that this was more than... more than a fight with the evil alien of the week. It felt like..." He paused for a moment, shaking his head. "I don't know why, but it felt like war. Like the end."

The Doctor listened attentively to Chakotay's words, contemplating them thoroughly before answering while pressing a hypospray against his patient's neck.

"I would say that now that we have a few quiet weeks for a change, your mind is finally finding the time and energy to process what you've experienced in the past months, years even. However, what you're telling me sounds suspiciously similar to what Mr. Paris reported. Commander, I'd like you to go back to bed for now. Try to get some sleep; the medicine I gave you should help you with that. But please consult me immediately as soon as you have another nightmare."

"Yes. Thank you, Doctor."

But despite the Doctor's treatment, both men lay fully awake that night.

Chakotay soon gave up believing in the Doctor's capability to help them. Night after night he had to helplessly accept what his mind tormented him with, and it was driving him insane. Tom didn't look any better, he noticed; however, having B'Elanna at his side seemed to somewhat add some advantage for the younger man.

When he entered the holodeck in the eighth night since it had all started, he was very well aware of the uselessness of what he planned to do. Exhaustion hadn't helped before, and he doubted it would now; but at least it would give him the feeling that he had tried something, done something, *anything*. And maybe, just maybe, his energy-drained system would be too weak to let his mind conjure up every last bit of horror it had in store.

Choosing a higher level than his abilities usually allowed him in his boxing program was not the wisest thing to do, but right then, Chakotay couldn't have cared less. If it didn't stop his dreams, then it would hopefully stop the thoughts of the same for some time, as long as he was busy fighting in the ring.

It didn't help. Not at all. And his frustration grew.

Every day the holodeck found him running every possible and perhaps impossible program about fighting, about war and rage and anything else that let Voyager's first officer convert the pictures and scenarios he'd seen, the ones that scared him to no end, into a bloodlust that would have shocked him, shaken him to the core, could he have seen himself.

Despite the advanced levels, his opponents barely stood a chance. His hits rained down on them when he fought like in a trance, a fever. He didn't notice the blood on his hands, his face, his clothes, until his holodeck time was over and he ended the program. Every time he promised himself to stop. Every new day, after a new nightmare, he returned.

It went on for a week and a half; eleven days he tortured his body just like his mind tortured his soul. On the twelfth day, the opponent in his recent program vanished mid-stroke - and when he turned around himself in confusion, he found no one else than Kathryn Janeway, standing in the shadows, watching him with a dead-serious, but also terrible pained expression on her face.

That evening, Janeway brought him back to his quarters, replicated him a cup of herbal tea and sat at his side, silent, never saying a single word, until he fell asleep on his couch. They didn't speak then, and they didn't talk about it afterwards. But Chakotay realized that he had to stop with these frantic attempts to heal himself, especially since he knew that it didn't end anything.

What initially was hoped for to be only a temporary condition, maybe a kind of an post-traumatic stress disorder in a very extended, week-long form that was caused by too many horrors seen in the past and too much time to think about them in the present, both men learned to accept as a permanent condition they as well as anyone else - most importantly the Doctor - couldn't do anything about.

Weeks went by that soon turned into one month and then another, and the first officer and the pilot consulted the EMH often, always risen from their sleep by nightmares that obviously were getting worse. But whatever the Doctor did, he couldn't find a solution. He tested both men for everything possible and impossible he could think of, let them stay in sickbay overnight, monitored their brain activities during their sleep. But to no avail.

Captain Janeway noted the condition of both officers with growing concern. She saw Tom's and B'Elanna's tiredness, and more often than enough, her first officer's unrest robbed her of her sleep as well when she heard him through the thin walls. After the holodeck incident, as she had named it for herself and then stored away as a memory not be brought back to the surface, she resumed to only quietly watch him leave his quarters for sickbay. Before long, however, she began to offer her company.

She felt helpless, something that ate at her just like her worries did. Her strength faded with each throwback her officers and friends had to take. Every time Chakotay, Torres and Paris met to talk about their experiences, exchange theories and advices, Janeway joined them to listen to both men's stories - and to share a few words with B'Elanna. Since she had decided to do her best and support Chakotay, her chief engineer was the only one she allowed herself to confide in, to consult over both men's conditions - and share what were their observations.

What started out as an infrequent get-together soon became a regular, almost daily meeting. They clung to their hope that they would one day, one time, come up with a solution, that one of them would have an idea and think of something they hadn't yet to dismiss as fruitless. Nightmares with no apparent reason weren't exactly material of founded sciences.

"Maybe we should really consider the Doctor's suggestion and put you in a temporary coma. It could be the key when those dreams shouldn't occur then anymore," Janeway one evening brought boldly up a subject they had been touching only hesitantly.

"I'm not sure," Tom contradicted his captain's words, "he also said that he might not be able to wake us anymore if we have one of these nightmares then. Just think about it, already now B'Elanna has her problems to wake me. This really isn't the kind of dreams I'd like to spend more time with than I can help it."

"Tom's right. As long as there's a risk of getting caught in my own nightmares, I rather try and stay awake as long as possible." The dark rings under his eyes and the ashen color of his naturally golden skin didn't exactly substantiate the commander's words; he looked as if he hadn't slept in months - which was true, to some extent - and could have needed some forced rest. But without the promise for that to be peaceful, staying awake was the probably more relaxing alternative. And safer also; being trapped in a state of psychological terror could be lethal.

"Chakotay, what about your... animal guide?" It was a thought that had occurred to B'Elanna earlier already.

"I tried it. But the world in my vision seems as... scrambled as Voyager in my dreams. I told the Doctor, but... neither of us really knows what happens during these quests. It's just something my people always accepted as part of our culture. No one of us ever asked questions about the how and why."

"For all we know, they could simply be the voice of your subconscious mind." The Indian nodded at his captain's idea, silently agreeing to it.

"So where does that leave us?" Torres wondered aloud, and covered Tom's hand, lying on his couch between them, with hers.

"Probably with just another nightmare," her boyfriend said what everyone was thinking; and with a sarcastic undertone each of the other three could relate to. An air of frustration and resignation hung in the room when they said their good-byes and good-nights and parted for the evening.

Neither would have predicted that this night came with a change.

Because Tom, for the first time in what had turned into several weeks by now, didn't have a nightmare. He slept through without so much as twitching a muscle. His calmness even disturbed his mate's own rest, as B'Elanna, by now sharing quarters with the man she loved, was so trained to react to Tom's bad dreams immediately and bring him out of them that when she woke sometime during the night by an auto-mechanism, she thought he had fallen into a coma - or worse. Instead, when she shook him, he blinked and simply gave her a tired smile. Then he pulled her to him and went back to sleep.

The next morning, the commanding duo, summoned by the Doctor, met in sickbay. Seeing that Torres and Paris were also present had hope growing within them, and they shared a quick glance.

"Doctor, what is it? You said it's urgent. Did you find-"

"Don't get your hopes up, please," the EMH interrupted Chakotay. "At least not yet." Then he turned to Voyager's pilot and nodded to indicate he should start his report.

"I was on a strange ship," Tom began. "Unfamiliar, don't think we've ever encountered a species with that kind of high-tech vessels. I was sitting alone in a small room, working on something, and then, all of a sudden, I was beamed away, to another ship. Harry greeted me, and then I saw B'Elanna, and..." He paused for a moment and his expression turned into a pondering one. "And the pictures just... dissolved. That's all."

"No trashing on the bed, no moaning or even screaming, no jerking awake. I don't think Tom moved more than people usually do in their sleep," the half Klingon woman added, her arms crossed over her chest, still looking somewhat disbelieving.

"That is good to hear, Mr. Paris, but I wouldn't rejoice yet," Janeway warned when she noticed the younger officer's relieved half-grin. "Not that I would want to take away your hopes, but this might just have been an... exception. We should wait what happens in the next few nights."

"In any way, I'd like to know how you slept, Mr. Chakotay. Did you experience the same as Lieutenant Paris?" Seeing the first officer's as well as Janeway's face fall, the Doctor didn't need to hear the answer to know it; neither did the couple next to one of the biobeds.

"On the contrary, I'm afraid. I was on that ship as well, I think... but in a big room, with faceless figures... shadows working on consoles. I could hear indistinct voices, orders and affirmations, but nothing was clear enough. It was technology I didn't recognize. Then I thought I was going to be beamed off the ship, but I just... in the blink of an eye, literally, I was on Voyager. On a badly beaten up, almost beyond repair one. I didn't see much, it was all sort of... blurry. However, I felt the impact of another ship colliding with us. That's when I *woke* up."

"I'm sorry, Chakotay." Tom's sympathy was genuine; his grin gone, sadness in his eyes. He had hoped that since they'd so far always experienced the same changes in their condition - if one could call it so - that maybe the older man had had a quiet night himself.

"It's okay, Tom. I'm getting used to it." The grim cynicism in his voice betrayed the words; not that anyone in sickbay would have believed them anyway.

"Commander, Lieutenant, I'd like to perform some tests, see if there are any medically noticeable changes," the Doctor declared and motioned to one of the free biobeds, waiting for Chakotay to sit down there, while B'Elanna and Janeway moved to leave sickbay. Before they were through the door, the captain suggested to meet at lunch time, to which everyone agreed; certainly there were some new stories to share.

As expected, the Doctor's examinations, scans and tests again brought no results. At least none that would have helped Chakotay.

Tom got a clean bill of health, his body surprisingly showing not a single sign of stress, even though logic told the EMH that there should have been some remnants left after the past weeks. But the pilot was as energetic and full of life and wit as everyone knew him, and his physical as well as mental condition were that of someone who'd just come back from a holiday fortnight. On the other hand, after all those restless nights one good night's sleep must have felt exactly like such a holiday.

Voyager's first officer was still looking dead on his feet, and that was putting it nicely. That the Doctor's tricorder readings screamed for the scanned one to get some sleep was noted by both the Indian and the hologram with barely more than a shrug. The EMH offered to attach a cortical scanner on Chakotay's neck once more, but the commander declined; it wasn't as if the tiny piece of technology had done anything good the past few times.

Chakotay left sickbay just in time to get back to his quarters, change, and meet with the others for lunch - while he desperately tried to ignore the temptation to return to the holodeck and fight off the horror in his mind just like he'd done in the beginning. And even though he knew it was to no avail, it got harder to withstand with every passing day.

The lunch meeting was a wordless affair at first. Seated in a normally unused separate dining room that belonged to the mess hall, the four senior officers all poked around in their food, but didn't really eat, and much less talked. May Paris have been

better, worrying about Chakotay left them all without appetite. Digesting the new developments was busying their stomachs and minds enough.

Neelix had prepared a light meal for them, a vegetarian dish that tasted really good, but even that couldn't get them to eat properly as they all needed to.

Tom suddenly putting down his fork energetically brought everyone's attention from their own thoughts to him, and they eyed the young man with expressions ranging from confused over irritated to slightly shocked when he looked at them exasperated.

"There has to be something we can do!" he exclaimed when he pushed his plate from him. "It can't be that hard to find an answer, anything that's different between Chakotay and me, now that my nightmares have stopped. Maybe we're thinking into the completely wrong direction."

"But what direction would you suggest, Tom?" the Indian asked, his voice calm and composed. He had long since realized that getting angry or irritated over his situation didn't help anyone, least of all him. He was touched by the younger man's passion, though; certainly they had come a long way from two people simply tolerating each other due to the circumstances to being something resembling friends.

"I wish I knew, Chakotay, I really do." The fury gone as quickly as it had come, Paris sounded almost defeated then, and forced a smile when B'Elanna touched his arm reassuringly.

"Your nightmares have stopped. Maybe we should simply assume that Chakotay's will as well soon. This night, the next; I'd like to assume that he'll be as free of them as you are now already, Tom." B'Elanna's unusual calm, almost soothing words and voice were followed by nods from the commanding duo, and Paris rubbed his hands over his face.

"I hate that this is obviously all we can do," he murmured. The older man next to him put a hand on his shoulder

"Don't worry, Tom. I'll get through it. I've seen worse in my life." The agreeing rumbling noises the others made were heartfelt. And yet no one was really convinced.

They all felt that the literal big bang was still about to come.

The following nights had Captain Janeway almost consider staying in Chakotay's quarters overnight. Certainly it would have been easier than to be woken by screams and whimpers echoing through both their quarters and her having to get into his first.

After Tom Paris' nightmares had stopped, hope had grown in all those who knew of the events that both men would once and for all be free of these horrific disturbances. For Tom, this was true. For Chakotay, however, it seemed to get even worse. The atrocity of his mental film-strips increased more and more, and the question arose how much of this was yet humanly possible to bear.

The first night came with a loud thud against the wall for Janeway when Chakotay jumped from his nightmare, in every sense of the word. He scrambled from his bed as if it was something frightful, as if it was on fire like parts of the bridge he had seen in flashes while he was still on the unknown alien vessel. He stumbled, his feet and legs not quite coordinated in his mind's hazy state, and practically ran into the wall his bedroom shared with his captain's.

Kathryn was there within seconds, rushing to his quarters where Chakotay had by then found his way into the main room. He managed a weak "Come in!" at her ringing, and fell down into one of his armchairs just when she entered.

In the second night, he did something he had never done before, throughout the whole time - he sleepwalked. At least that was how one could have described him raising from his bed and throwing around objects in his quarters. There was no recognizable

pattern, though when Janeway watched him for a moment, contemplating how to best stop him, she got the impression that he was trying to clear a path.

He sank down to his knees when he reached his bed again, and slowly regained consciousness. They spent the rest of the night restoring and tidying his quarters, and then ate breakfast together in silence.

The third night had the captain wake from not only one thud against the wall, but continuous knocking. Someone was banging against the barrier between her and her first officer's quarters, and Janeway, having trouble to clear her sleepy mind, didn't know at first where it came from, or why.

That was until she heard him calling out her name, asking, no, demanding her to come out - of wherever. She brought him back into reality by going over, standing next to his still unaware self, and telling him, "I'm here, Chakotay. Everything's fine." He wavered slightly, then looked at her questioningly.

Slowly losing hope, Janeway decided to try a new strategy and convert her idea into action by staying in his quarters for the fourth night. He protested, as the sleeping place she chose - a chair next to his bed - was too uncomfortable. He nearly offered to share his bed, but stopped himself before he could suggest it. They had become close, closer than ever before and they had been on New Earth maybe, but still it felt like crossing unconquerable boundaries.

So he let her take the chairs. Arranging herself on two of them - one to sit on, one for her feet to put up - she chose a position as close to his bed as possible, and took his hand in hers. One could have easily mistaken the picture they gave for a concerned lover or relative spending day and night at the sickbed of a beloved one.

His hand grabbed hers tightly when he began to thrash on the bed, and he almost pulled her off her chairs. She managed to get out of them before she could get caught between the bed's frame and the seats, but obtained some bruises and scratched nevertheless before he woke up.

After that, he forbid her to spend any more nights at his side - he feared that he could seriously hurt her the next time, and he wasn't about to accept that risk. The anger he felt over his own actions showed in his eyes and scared her enough to agree. For the moment.

The fifth night was considerably quiet. Physically, Chakotay showed almost no signs of inner disturbance, of a nightmare. But as they said, psychological warfare was worse than fighting man against man with weapons. And in this night, he saw everyone leave a heavily damaged Voyager - everyone except Kathryn. He saw her say goodbye to everyone, saw the sorrow in their eyes; even in Tuvok's blinded ones. There was a finality to this scene that made him want to avert his eyes and scream in agony. But he couldn't.

When he woke up, he was sobbing uncontrollably.

Chapter 2

There was a disturbing, almost deadly quiet in Commander Chakotay's quarters the following night. It seemed like the calm before the storm. And a storm was about to break loose indeed.

He had gone to bed making use of the hypospray the Doctor had given him; still hoping that one day, one *night*, it would just help. Two and a half hours he was granted a peaceful slumber. Then hell, storm, and whatever else there was to punish his soul, befell him.

His insides burned. Not his body, no. But his mind, his head, his thoughts. The pictures torturing him were like molten photographs, like reality that was destroyed by fire

around the edges. He tried to close his eyes, turn away, but the pictures followed him; they were not burned themselves, but *into* his retina. Into his inner eye.

His wet clothes clung to his body; cold sweat was covering him. He thrashed on his bed, his legs knotting his covers around him, and he kicked against the restraints, almost in panic, as in his subconsciousness it felt like something was keeping him from doing what he needed to do.

Save his captain.

The bridge was in ruins, a sad memory of the once proud center of a ship they called their home, their refuge. Lights were flickering, consoles blackened, ripped out, dead. A collection of debris, nothing more. No red alert, no blaring klaxons, only darkness and dust filling the air, and now and then an explosion illuminated parts of what was left of the bridge for a few seconds.

And in the middle of it all sat Kathryn Janeway. Bruised and dirty; her clothes sweaty, her pants and her grey undershirt clinging to her. Her hair was messed and wild; her face marred by an ugly scar. But it was also filled with determination. And anger. No, fury. Her lips were tightly pressed together as she stared ahead to where once the view screen had been; now there was only a gaping hole, and a weakened containment field keeping the smoky air inside.

Only slowly Chakotay realized what was happening. Or was about to happen. Voyager was so badly damaged that there was no chance she would stay in one piece much longer. He received mental images of alien ships helping the Alpha Quadrant vessel, but they were either damaged themselves, or simply vanished when the enemy fired some weapon he had never seen before.

It was a losing battle. Voyager was powerless, most systems had already failed, and now she was drifting towards the hostile ship and-

Oh God.

"Kathryn, no," he whispered when it dawned on him what she was doing. But she didn't hear him. She just sat there, unwavering, as she steered the ship into destruction, and herself into death. He tried to get to her, stop her, but found himself unable to move. He could only watch. And feel his heart break.

The moment Voyager collided with the unknown ship in his dream, and shattered into a thousand pieces, flying away from a ball of fire, Chakotay screamed. And this was how he woke up - screaming at the top of his lungs. Calling out to her, begging her to not do it. Not to sacrifice herself. His sleep-fogged mind couldn't register at first that he was awake, that he had already freed himself from the horrors of his nightmare. He didn't hear his door chime sounding; he was deaf to the world just as he was blind to his surroundings.

Only a person grabbing his shoulders and shaking him was finally able to penetrate his haze, and slowly he found back into reality.

His eyes were flowing over with tears, tears that ran down his cheeks in streams. First he only heard her voice, couldn't focus, but did his best to follow the familiar sound, calling out to him again and again. He fought through pictures and impressions, through the thick mass of fear and agony that was clutching at him until he saw her.

"Kathryn," he rasped, his voice raw from his screaming, when he recognized the features of the woman he'd just seen die in a ball of fire. Then, without any other word, he pulled her into his arms.

When he said her name, she felt incredibly relieved. His scream had been like an ice-cold hand, reaching out to her through bulkheads and into her sleeping mind, and had made her jolt awake in terror. When he hadn't answered the door she felt frightened - even more

so when he then didn't react to her presence either. She had heard him wake in panic from his nightmares often in the past weeks, if not months; it just had never been so bad.

Tonight was the for now grimmest peak of a too-slow, too-long buildup. Throughout the past weeks Kathryn had always been there for him, and shaken him awake more times than she could still count. Since they had stopped meeting with Tom and B'Elanna regularly she also was the one listening to the fragments of stories he was telling. She didn't know exactly why, but she partly felt responsible for his condition, and wanted to be there for him.

Almost as often, whenever she sat at the edge of his bed while he was calming down, he had wrapped his arms around her tightly and buried his face in her hair. She never pulled away when he did that; he needed the comfort, and she wouldn't deny it to him.

So when he pressed her against him this time, she also stayed in his arms; although he almost crushed her. When suddenly, unexpectedly, he started kissing her, she was too shocked and confused to react at first. When he began to undress her, she wanted to protest, but found herself unable to. He took what he needed and she let it happen. He wasn't hurting her; even in his state, there was still a part of him that made sure he wouldn't harm her. It wasn't brutal what he did. But it wasn't gentle either. It was hard and fast and frantic and desperate. A panic-induced search for life beneath his fingers, a warm body under his touch that assured him everything was okay. He felt her, and he held onto her, wild and unrelenting, but with tears still streaming down his face. All she did was quietly talk to him, caress his face, brush away his tears, kiss his hair when he buried his face in the crook of her neck and climaxed.

Exhausted, physically and mentally, he fell down beside her afterwards. For endless minutes, there was a deafening silence filling the room. Then he pulled her to him and began to whisper "I'm sorry". Over and over again. He sobbed and apologized, and she simply held him until he fell asleep.

He didn't dream again that night.

Chakotay didn't think he had ever woken up like this before. The women he slept with - in either way - he was always protective of. He was just that kind of man. He would hold the woman in his embrace and show her how much he cared, even in his sleep.

Waking up with a woman, and such a petite one at that, spooned up behind him was different, to say at least. It was so unusual that it at first added to his disorientation, the confusion he felt when he left the realm of sleep. A slim arm was draped over his waist, and a small hand held his firmly. He felt her breath on his back, right between his shoulder blades, and he felt her silky hair tickling his neck. Most importantly, however, he felt her soft, warm curves pressed against him - her naked skin on his.

Very slowly he detached himself from her sleeping form and left the bed. On strangely unstable legs he walked into the bathroom, washing away the dizziness with cool water; only then he returned to take a look at the woman who had just hugged him to her. He froze when he recognized who it was.

His captain.

His Kathryn.

Chakotay's mind raced, thoughts whirling in his head. He couldn't remember what had happened. He felt a latent headache throbbing behind his eyes, eyes that burned slightly - as though he'd cried half the night. Looking sideways, his face met its reflection in the bathroom mirror, and it showed him red-rimmed eyes and irritated skin on his cheeks. So he had indeed cried. But why?

And how did Kathryn fit into that picture? A naked Kathryn in his bed, at that?

The longer he was looking at her, the more his musings receded; instead, his heart warmed at the sight of her. She lay there, still sleeping soundly, snuggling into the blanket - obviously missing the warmth of his body. She looked more peaceful than he could remember to have ever seen her; relaxed and for once freed of her daily burden. For a moment he wondered whether she always looked like this when she slept; if maybe she could escape the insanity of their situation, their journey, at night, and if only for a few hours. He wouldn't envy her that; she, of all people, was the one who deserved it most.

He didn't know how long he had watched her when she stirred and blinked. She looked as disoriented as he had felt when he had woken up, but soon seemed to recognize her surroundings. Turning, she found herself staring directly at him. Their eyes met and held each other for countless minutes; only then she cleared her throat, averted her eyes, even blushed a bit.

"You're awake," she stated the obvious, and pulled the sheet tighter around her body, covering herself. "How are you feeling?"

"Groggy," he admitted, "exhausted. Like I had a rough night."

"You should go see the Doctor." She didn't say more; she just got up and collected her clothes. Still standing naked in the doorway to his bathroom, he watched her with irritation when she dressed awkwardly, the blanket draped around her shoulders. It took him until she looked up at him again to answer.

"Why?" He wanted to know. The strange feeling that something wasn't right, by no means right, overcame him, and he frowned. What really disturbed him was that he still had no idea what it was.

"Trust me, Chakotay," she rose and walked over to him, now fully dressed in what he recognized as her nightwear, "please, go see the Doctor." This time her voice was gentler, her words less an order. She framed his face with her hands and caressed his cheeks with her thumbs. The she turned away and left his quarters.

It had probably never taken him this long to put on his clothes ever before in his life, but right then, his mind was too occupied to waste energy on physical actions, and so he headed for sickbay only an hour later. The Doctor seemed to know exactly what to look for and check before Chakotay could say anything; but when he told him that he didn't remember anything, the EMH remained strangely quiet. He just sent him back to his quarters with the order to rest. The first officer's protest fell on deaf ears.

Even though the crewmen he met in the corridors showed no signs of unusual behavior - they all smiled and greeted him like they always did in eventless hours like this one - the Indian couldn't shake the feeling that there was some big secret lurking around the next edge, watching him, snickering at his obliviousness, only to carry on quickly as soon as he came near it.

Instead for his quarters, he aimed for the captain's ready room. If the Doctor wasn't answering his questions, surely Kathryn would; after all, she had been with him. Or so he thought. Having no memory of the past night, he couldn't be sure what had really happened; on the other hand, both of them naked in his bed didn't leave that much room for interpretations.

Halfway to deck one, Janeway contacted him and asked him to come to her, so when he approached the door to her ready room it opened immediately. Carefully he stepped inside and waited for the doors to close again, all the while watching her as she sat at her desk, seemingly engrossed in whatever showed on her computer screen.

"Captain, you wanted to see me?" He didn't know why he was so formal. But the fact that she didn't acknowledge his presence at once irritated him. And even more so did her answer.

"One second, Commander." That she was addressing him equally polite had him actually worried then. Had he been intoxicated the night before and done something

stupid? Certainly that would demand a good explanation, because it definitely wasn't him. He had never been a friend of alcohol and only drank a glass occasionally; most times when Kathryn was around. But he had never once drunk more than two or three glasses, and he had *never* lost control.

"Kathryn?" he tried, his voice low, as he now addressed her more personally. Finally she faced him - and the look of sadness on her face shocked him. "Can we talk?" She looked at him for a long moment; then she slowly shook her head.

"Later. Not now. After my shift."

"Kathryn... I don't know what-"

"It's okay, Chakotay." Again her voice was all business. Even with the hint of worry in it, it was distant and professional. Her expression didn't give away anything, and he felt his insides clench, making him sick. "I just wanted to know if you're feeling better and fit for duty."

"I... do." He looked at her in bewilderment. Feeling better? "Though I don't remember feeling bad," he couldn't help but add. The pain in her eyes was so evident that moment it broke his heart, even more so because he didn't know the reasons for it.

Janeway allowed herself a guarded look at him. He was so blissfully unaware of everything that had happened the night before - or all those nights in the past weeks. She had spoken to the Doctor earlier; assumedly, Chakotay's last nightmare had activated some kind of self-preserving mechanism in his mind and pushed him into amnesia. Added to that, it must have been the actual last bad dream, as he had slept through without any disturbance until morning. He had been as quiet as B'Elanna had reported Tom had been the last night of his sleep-terrorizing pictures.

The most significant difference was that Tom didn't have sex with B'Elanna in that night, or any other night after a nightmare - as far as she and the Doctor, whom she, as uncomfortable as it had been, had to confide in, knew. And of course the younger man didn't suffer from amnesia.

"That's good," the captain commented after a short while, "go and get some rest, we'll see each other later." Her words sounded so final that the commander didn't dare to contradict her; instead he nodded, turned and left the ready room.

Back in his quarters, he took a shower and drank his usual herbal tea before he went to bed to rest as ordered, this strange exhaustion and sleepiness claiming him getting stronger by the minute.

He slept peacefully until the computer woke him several hours later.

Her quarters were almost dark when he entered them this early evening. Only where she sat in one of her armchairs a bit of illumination shone from the walls.

"Kathryn, are you all right?" He took a few tentative steps towards her, but stopped when she held up her hand. Silently she motioned for him to sit, and he took his seat on the end of the couch that was farthest away from her. Not that he liked to keep the distance; but somehow her demeanor didn't seem to allow him something else.

"In the past weeks... you were plagued by nightmares," she began quietly when she was sure she had his attention, skipping any verbosity and pleasantries. "Nightmares that got worse with every passing day. I can't tell you what you were dreaming about; the Doctor gave me permission to give you a rough outline of events, but asked me not to go into details. We don't know what memories that could trigger. Tom had the same problem, almost the same nightmares even. But it was just you two. And then, last night..."

"You were with me."

"I came over. When I heard you scream."

"Scream? They were that bad? Now I'm almost glad I can't remember them," he tried to joke lightly, only to have every ounce of humor knocked out of him at her next words.

"They were... Chakotay, hadn't I known that you were suffering from nightmares - I would have thought that you were tortured to death." Her first officer stared at her in shock at her revelation.

"Why don't I remember anything?" He didn't really expect Kathryn to have an answer to that question, but that didn't make it any less pressing or important. He obviously had had a terrible time and now... now he couldn't even recall one single second of it. It all seemed to be wiped away. He was swaying between being relieved and worried, and he was fighting against whatever non-physical constriction was tightening his chest.

"Your last nightmare must have been so bad that your mind saw amnesia as the only escape. Maybe otherwise you would have gone insane. What you described after the other nights before was horrific. I don't know if even *I* want to know what your last nightmare was about. And maybe it is better if you don't remember it." With a deep frown on his face, Chakotay eyed her for a while, and she could see his mind work, search for any memory that might have been forgotten when everything else was sealed away.

"There has to be something you can tell me. Anything that gives me an idea of what all this was about. It's been several weeks, Kathryn - and they're missing from my life, my memory! There's a blank in my life, and you can't leave me with it unfilled!"

"What do you expect me to do?"

"Tell me something, *anything*, that at least gives me an idea of what happened in the past weeks."

"Nothing!" She momentarily lost her composure, and her friend saw that there was something clearly weighing on her. She hid it quickly again, though, her captain's façade slipping into place like an armor, a second skin. Much calmer, she continued, "Nothing happened, Chakotay. The space we've been traveling through for the past few weeks is unpopulated. We had to bypass a region that is politically unstable. We were warned when we crossed the borders and plotted a course around their territories. Ever since then, there hasn't happened much - except for the fact that you and Tom suddenly started having nightmares with a regularity that it couldn't be a coincidence anymore."

"The Doctor?"

"Doesn't know anything. He examined both you and Tom countless times, but..." She trailed off and shook her head. "Chakotay, we have no explanations whatsoever. No one else was affected, and we didn't encounter any other species, phenomena or such. It was just the two of you having the cruelest, most horrific nightmares, and they stopped as suddenly as they had started. You told me what you had seen, but it never made any sense. We cross-referenced visual clues with sensor data, but there was nothing that stood out in any way. Whatever it was you saw, it has, with most certainty, nothing to do with our journey."

"What about Tom, did you talk to him?"

"We all did, countless times. We sat together, you, Tom and B'Elanna, me. We exchanged everything we knew, and you and Tom told about your dreams." Sighing, Janeway got up and walking over to her replicator. She ordered a coffee for herself and a tea for him, and returned to her seat, placing the teacup in the middle of the table. Chakotay noticed how she continued to keep a physical distance just like she did emotionally; he had to lean forward, almost stand up to get his cup.

"Tom still remembers, doesn't he? It doesn't make sense." He was frustrated, and she obviously shared that feeling. He knew she wanted to give him answers, but he began to understand that she was practically as clueless as him, except for her memory as an observer and as someone who had heard his and Tom's stories.

"Nothing here makes sense, Chakotay. I wish it did. I wish I had answers, explanations, resolutions. But I don't. We do everything we can to find out more; maybe there is a hidden ship, a phenomenon the sensors need to be adjusted to detect it first, or whatever. The Doctor keeps going through all the results he has. And if it doesn't help you and Tom, then hopefully everyone else who might be affected at some time."

"I remember the small celebration after the completion of astrometrics lab, and how the Doctor gave a lengthy speech," Chakotay pondered, his tone even and thoughtful, as if voicing his thoughts and the remnants of his last memories before the time period his amnesia covered helped him getting a better grab of everything. "We were both thinking the same, probably like everyone else present..." A faint smile ghosted over his features, but was gone again soon. "Then Tuvok called us to the bridge, much to our relief, and everyone else left as well, claiming to better get back to their posts. When we arrived on the bridge, there was a face... there was... this face..." Janeway didn't miss how his breathing became quicker; how something was stirring up emotions inside him.

"Do you remember who this face belonged to?"

"I... It was... There was a name... his or his race's..." He growled and let his head fall into his hands between his knees. "It's all a blank with some mist, but nothing remotely clear enough. I don't know. I can't remember. I can't-"

"Shh, it's okay, Chakotay, you need time. The past weeks were anything but easy; your mind will need to regenerate first. Try to be patient," the woman across from him soothed him; however, she still kept her distance to him, instead of initiating physical contact as a comforting gesture, like his was used to with her.

Resigned, the commander nodded, "You're probably right. I just hate being left in the dark like this."

"I know how terrible it is. But maybe it's better for you to regenerate first before you are confronted with the truths about this grueling time." She smiled at him then; it didn't quite reach her eyes though, he noticed. Whatever it was, it had eaten at her as much as it did at him now, even though he didn't even know everything.

"Kathryn, about... you were with me last night, and... did we-" She inhaled sharply at his words, her expression gaining an almost panicky edge when she cut him off.

"Chakotay, I understand your confusion, and your desire to get as many pieces of information as possible, but I'd prefer not to talk about it now." She hadn't yet dealt with *it* herself; how was she supposed to talk about it to him then?

"But, Kathryn-"

"Please," she said, a mixture of resentment and a plea in her eyes. He was too determined to be stopped by it, however.

"Listen, we can-" Her face hardened when she interrupted him this time.

"I'd like you to leave now, Commander." Her unexpected change in tone and behavior shocked him, to say at least. Whatever had happened, it was bad enough to make his best friend lose her normally unshakeable composure.

He frowned at her, seriously contemplating not leaving like this now, forcing her to answer at least what he was sure she was able to, but decided against it in the end. The look she gave him was enough to assure him that he would gain nothing by urging her further. With a court nod, he turned and left.

Chapter 3

The morning was still young and her shift had just begun, but she wasn't just able to concentrate on anything. Janeway was somewhere lost in her brooding, the conversation

with Chakotay from prior day's evening still playing in her mind while she stared out into space and at stars flying by, an obligatory coffee cup cradled in between her hands, when the sound of her ready room door chime startled her. She eyed the door for a moment, actually opting to decline entry to whoever was asking permission to come in, but quickly reminded herself of her position and her duties. She was the captain; some personal problems mustn't interfere with her fitness for service.

"Come in," she so called, and looked curiously at B'Elanna Torres who entered the room.

"Captain, do you have a minute?"

"Of course, lieutenant." She rose and pointed to her couch, indicating that Torres should take place there. "Would you like some coffee?"

"Thanks," the younger woman nodded and smiled; then accepted the cup Janeway handed her a few moments later. She studied the dark beverage intensely as her commanding officer sat down next to her on the couch at the upper level. Silence stretched, and Kathryn watched her chief engineer for a while, seeing and sensing her nervousness.

"What can I do for you, B'Elanna?" Only at her captain's words Torres took a deep breath and readied herself to bring forth whatever was on her mind.

"Captain... permission to speak freely?"

Janeway instantly nodded. "Go ahead."

"You are always there for us when anyone of the crew needs you, needs *someone*. We can always turn to you, day and night, with all our problems. The whole crew knows that and loves you for that." The captain smiled gently at those words, touched deeply to hear them for once spoken aloud by someone else than Chakotay. "And..." B'Elanna frowned, thinking about how to say it. "It's no secret among the crew that you and Chakotay are close and that he's the only person you turn to from time to time."

The half Klingon woman had said the sentence so fast that Janeway had to suppress a laugh, doing her best to keep a straight face. She really wondered where this was going, and her curiosity kept her from pointing out that this was invading her privacy a bit too much. On the other hand - there was nothing wrong about the captain keeping a close relationship to her first officer. Most commanding duos she knew of shared a deep bond of trust and friendship. It was, after all, essential to their ability to fulfill their missions.

"Captain..." Torres finally went on after a moment of silence, "some of us are wondering... Chakotay's condition is weighing on you; everyone can see that. And... without wanting to cross any line, I'd like to offer you an open ear, whenever you should need one. You were taking care of the commander, just like I was doing with Tom. But Tom's fine now, contrary to Chakotay, and you... you can't go on like this and help him without any support." The younger woman took a deep breath after she'd finished; then she looked at her captain expectantly.

What she saw in her commanding officer's eyes could only be described as deep affection, aimed towards her. Hadn't it been so inappropriate for her, she certainly would have hugged B'Elanna in that moment. It was good to know that there was someone she could turn to; and still, she also knew that she couldn't do it.

Or could she?

Over the past years, she had often wondered how she was supposed to hold herself upright - mentally - when there really were a few decades still to come on their journey. She was strong, yes, but even her strength had its limits. Janeway had lived long enough, seen just as much, to be not as presumptuous as to believe she could really manage all this alone for the next forty-or-so years. The first four years had been hard and often tested the boundaries of what she was able to take without breaking. Sure, she had Chakotay, and maybe also Tuvok, but some day, that wouldn't be enough anymore.

And just sometimes she wondered where her own refusal to create a closer bond to her crew, and especially the senior officers, came from. Of course it wasn't usual, and of course the captain was supposed maintain some distance to his or her crew. But that applied to normal circumstances only. And nothing about their situation was normal.

Even though B'Elanna was right about her turning to Chakotay when she needed some advice, some second opinion, she still made her decisions alone. She was the captain, after all.

A captain without any support from higher authorities.

Without realizing it, what she had intended to be an inward sigh turned into a loud, if not heavy one. In almost the same second she looked up at B'Elanna, shocked at her own revelation and openness - even though it had only been a wordless one. Still, it had been a sign of weakness she always tried so hard to hide.

It came as a surprise, somehow, what happened next. Or didn't happen. The world didn't fell apart, the universe didn't implode. Time didn't stop just because Kathryn Janeway had showed some weakness. *Humanity*. Also, there was no pity in B'Elanna's eyes. Only this special kind of warmth everyone who cared would show.

"I'm really grateful for the offer, B'Elanna. I absolutely appreciate it. But I..." She trailed off before she could decline, again re-thinking her own pondering quickly. Coming to a decision, she took a deep breath before she continued: "I might come back to your offer." She covered the younger woman's hand that lay on the couch between them with hers and squeezed it slightly. "Thank you, B'Elanna," she added quietly; then she stood. Torres, understanding the gesture, rose as well and nodded with a smile before leaving the ready room.

Kathryn fell back into the cushions, closing her eyes for a moment. She had every intention of sorting her own thoughts and contemplating thoroughly whether she really needed an open ear - that of a subordinate, no less, something that, despite being touched by the offer, still gave her a funny feeling in the stomach. She was eternally grateful for the other woman's offer and knew that, if there was anyone who could understand her situation, it was B'Elanna.

And she realized that for the moment it was all that mattered.

"Janeway to Lieutenant Torres."

"Torres here."

"B'Elanna, would you come to my quarters this evening and have dinner with me? 1900 hours." Kathryn could hear her chief engineer's smile when she answered.

"Of course, Captain, I will be there. Torres out."

At precisely 1900 hours, Janeway's door chime rang. The vegetable lasagna just materialized in the replicator, and the captain called for Torres to come in while she retrieved the dish and placed it on the table.

"Good evening, Captain," greeted the half Klingon woman and took a few reluctant steps into the room; she had never been in the captain's quarters before, and even though she occasionally butted heads with her commanding officer, she still had a deep respect for the older woman. Entering these quarters felt like a huge privilege, and her body language must have given away her thoughts, as Janeway walked over to her and smiled invitingly.

"Contrary to common belief, I don't bite. At least not my own crew," she winked. And the ice was broken. B'Elanna chuckled lightly, gave her captain the wine Tom had advised her to bring, and both women sat down at the nicely set table.

They started easy, with small talk, ship business, some updates on the engineering team, even one or two gossipy stories. Dinner wasn't supposed to lay heavy in their

stomachs, so conversation served to it was light and off every dangerous or too emotional territory.

That changed when they relocated to the sitting area with their wine glasses in their hands. They both took place on the couch, and when Janeway got comfortable by folding one leg under the other and leaning back sideways against the back of the sofa, B'Elanna mimicked the position, facing her captain.

Tapping her fingertip against the glass and eliciting a faint ringing sound from the material, Torres finally took the courage to try and end the dancing around the subject that had initially brought them together for this evening.

"Captain, I don't suppose you invited me for some chit-chat or, you know..."

"Girl talk?" She matched the smirk on Janeway's face at that, and nodded yes.

"You must know, I'm not very good at that," B'Elanna admitted, and the woman across from her gave a short laugh.

"Don't worry, neither am I. Even though my sister often tried to get me there. I'm just not that kind of... *girl*."

"I had no idea you had a sister." The captain's look became distant, and she stared out of the viewport at the stars flying by.

"Phoebe. She is three years younger than me. But... we're very different. She's an artist, while I'm the scientist. We never had much contact when I was still... in communications range. Now... I miss her." It wasn't exactly information that would have demanded a high security clearance, but probably something everyone could have read in the captain's personnel file, and yet felt B'Elanna honored that her commanding officer was so open as to tell her about her sister.

"When I was younger I always wished for a sibling... someone like me so the other kids wouldn't treat me like some..." She huffed. "Some alien. Today, however... I'm glad that there isn't just another person to miss. I can settle with the feeling of having my friends, my... family here on Voyager. And I have Tom, which is most valuable."

The mention of Tom brought Janeway back to the topic at hand. This evening was meant to serve a purpose.

"B'Elanna... I hope you don't mind my asking, but - what exactly happened when Tom had his nightmares? Anything... specific, anything distinctive, maybe only in one or two nights? Was at any time something different that never happened again, and hadn't before?" Janeway stared at the swirling liquid in her wine glass when she asked the question. She knew that the other woman would suspect more behind it, but hoped she would let it go for the moment and just answer. She hadn't yet decided how much she was going to tell B'Elanna, especially regarding that last nightmare Chakotay had had, and the events afterwards. But if there were similarities...

"No... it was the same, every time. He had a nightmare, trashed around the bed and sometimes mumbled, talked or even screamed, and then I woke him up - if he didn't jolt awake himself. He was disoriented every time, but recovered quickly and went back to sleep when it wasn't morning already." Janeway studied Torres thoughtfully, considering her next words; but B'Elanna already spoke again before she could say anything. "Captain, are you thinking of anything concrete?"

"I was just... wondering if there was anything in Tom's behavior, anything that was unusual, not him maybe."

"You mean besides his nightmares?"

"And the 'routine' that came with them, yes." B'Elanna's frown and narrowed eyes made it clear that if she didn't have suspicions about her commanding officer's questions yet, she had them now.

"Captain, if there is anything you-"

"I'm... just asking, B'Elanna." The younger woman accepted it for the moment, and thought through all those nights she, despite there being a good number of them, remembered vividly. In the end, she could only shake her head.

"No, I'm sorry, I don't think there was anything that qualifies as unusual, other than the nightmares themselves. It was just as I have told you; every night the same routine, with slight variances maybe, but in general, it went like this each and every time."

"It's just... when Chakotay had his very last nightmare, he..." The captain trailed off; she couldn't possibly tell B'Elanna about this. It was too personal, too intimate, and something she wasn't sure she could have told her best friend; much less a woman who was a member of her crew and maybe a close acquaintance, but no one she would call a friend yet. Even if B'Elanna shared some of her experiences as far as "their" men's bad dreams were concerned.

"He... acted differently?" Kathryn didn't miss the gently probing note in the other woman's voice, offering an open ear and no judgment whatsoever. She felt like she was offered immunity in some way; to be free of her captain's person and be only the woman and human being behind it for a short while.

"He wasn't himself." The shallow breathing B'Elanna noticed in Janeway's words already told tales of something that had badly gone wrong. Added to that, the captain did her best to avoid Torres' eyes, focusing on her glass, the candle on the coffee table, or the coffee cup with by now cold coffee next to it.

"We don't have a counselor on this ship, and while I, or the Doctor, or whoever, should probably advise you to consult at least a simulated counselor on the holodeck, I think that the best therapist is still a living and breathing being. Captain... everyone knows that with us being your subordinates, this isn't easy for you. But I had my share of difficult times in my life, and I've seen quite a lot. You may think that anyone of us thinks any less of you just because you show some weakness. But that isn't true. I had to learn first that talking about what weighs on you makes you a better person in the end."

Déjà vu, B'Elanna thought after she had finished her little speech and waited for her captain's reaction. Just like earlier this day in the ready room, a long silenced stretched between the women. The half Klingon wasn't all that sure she wanted to guess what had happened in that night. She knew Chakotay pretty well and considered him a good friend, even a brotherly figure of some kind, but right now she feared that he had done something stupid, that he had maybe hurt the captain in a fit of panic or rage. Voyager's commanding officer was everything but the strong and self-confident woman she knew in this moment, and if Janeway herself didn't do it then, certainly B'Elanna cursed her captain's position and them being so far away from home more than at any other time.

"I was woken by his scream that night, just like in so many other nights before," Janeway suddenly began, snapping Torres out of her musings. "I went over to his quarters, and had to let myself in because he didn't answer the door. But this time, he also didn't wake at once when I came to him; it took me a few seconds to shake him awake, which was different. I had never had problems to wake him before. When he finally came to, he hugged me. I thought... I thought he was going to crush me."

"This... wasn't the end, right?" B'Elanna didn't think she had ever heard her own voice as quiet and hesitant as it was when she said those words. Not sure what to expect, she carefully shifted closer to her captain, but was stopped by a hand held up. On the older woman's face she saw that it took her every bit of courage to be so open and say what she was going to, but she needed to do that 'on her own'.

"B'Elanna, this can never leave this room, do you understand that?"

"You know you don't need to ask, Captain."

"I know. I'm sorry, B'Elanna. What happened, it's... Chakotay had hugged me before; so that wasn't surprising. After his nightmares, he needed the comfort, which was okay

with me. I was there to comfort him. But this time... he... he just started kissing me. All of a sudden." She saw the other woman's eyebrows shoot upwards, and gave a bitter laugh. "He slept with me."

Had B'Elanna still held her wine glass in her hand, it would have dropped to the floor then.

"Wh-" Torres coughed slightly; several seconds passed until the words really reached her brain. Then, however, staying calm anymore was out of question. "He did what?!" she outright yelled and jumped up from her seat, face twisted with anger. "That p'tach! How could he ever dare... Tell me that's not..." Only her captain's reaction, or lack thereof, that she didn't move even an inch during the younger woman's outburst, had Torres freeze in her tirade momentarily and allowed Janeway a few, albeit simple, words.

"Please calm down, B'Elanna." Her voice was strong, her feelings not betraying it, but the half Klingon read enough in the other woman's body language to understand how upset she really was. Sitting down again while breathing in deeply and releasing this breath very slowly through pursed lips, she bought herself some time to find the right response. If there was one.

"You said that he... it wasn't... consensual, was it?" Torres' voice was restrained, her breathing shaky, when she tried to keep her rage in check, even though same temper slowly began to fade. Kathryn let out a long breath, and she didn't really need to hear the answer; she hadn't even needed to ask the question, actually. The older woman still replied, if only with a simple shake of her head.

Janeway was equally surprised and thankful when no display of sympathy came. No "I'm sorry", no touch of a hand, no pitiful look. Just a neutral but thoughtful expression showed on the other one's face after she had calmed down again, and what evidence that she was processing the information and contemplating a fitting response. And that she understood.

"He didn't hurt you." It was no question this time, but a statement. B'Elanna knew that her commanding officer would have been in a much greater state of distress had Chakotay really done any harm to her. In fact, despite her slight confusion, Janeway didn't show any signs of distress. Of course she was upset, but not in the way brutally sexually assaulted women she had seen too many of had been.

"He may not have asked me whether I wanted it, but his intention behind this intercourse had been none to harm me. From the very beginning, the moment he started kissing me, I never felt fear. I know I would have sensed malice if there had been any, but there was still a lot of the man I know inside."

"The man who loves you too much to let anything happen to you," the half Klingon murmured, more to herself - before she realized what she had just spoken aloud. Her hand flew to her mouth in shock. "I'm sorry, Captain, I'm crossing a line here, and I-"

"It's all right, B'Elanna," Kathryn stopped her mid-sentence, allowing herself the thought that the other woman was right and she knew it all too well. They both did. In the past weeks and months they had spent a lot of time together, the four of them, and Janeway wasn't so gullible to think that B'Elanna - and probably Tom as well - hadn't noticed what she herself couldn't deny anymore. They had become closer, her and Chakotay - closer than it was yet appropriate for a commanding duo, for friends. The tension between them had grown immensely, surpassing even what had once existed back on New Earth. She had come to realize that she was ready to take the next step, that shutting herself off from the rest of her crew just because she was the captain and needed distance wouldn't do her any good in the long view. In the end, it had only been his condition that had held them back from acting on their feelings.

"What are you going to do now?" Torres brought her back from her musings.

"To be serious, I have no idea. I need to talk to Chakotay, but..."

"You also need to sort this out for yourself first." Janeway nodded slowly.

"There is a lot that needs to be said, and I think that, sooner or later, I owe Chakotay the truth. If he never remembers... Should I tell him of the past months when the Doctor advises me to? Should I tell him everything, or rather keep some things from him so his inner peace won't be disturbed again? Should I..."

"You have plenty of time for that, Captain," stated B'Elanna softly, willing to ease the other woman's mind.

"Not necessarily. He's already asking about... he... He may not remember the night or everything else before it, but when he woke up the morning after, his mind was clear. And understandably he wants an explanation for me being in his bed." The half Klingon frowned then, wondering why Janeway hadn't just left the quarters after the incident, and the captain recognized the unspoken question she'd already been pondering herself - even though rationally, the answer was quite simple. "I didn't want to leave him, but be there for him. I was... frightened for him, his well-being. And he seemed to calm down while he held me. So..."

"I understand," Torres nodded, assuming that having a person who was so dear to him close would help his troubled mind. She would have stayed with Tom, no matter what. When you loved someone...

Picking up her wine glass to drink the remaining sip, she saw her hostess fail to suppress a yawn.

"I'm sorry," Janeway apologized, her usual habit of fearing to show weakness returning for a moment.

"No need to be. That was a hell of a day, and even more of a last few weeks. If I may, Captain - you should get some rest. But if you need someone to listen or talk to..." Kathryn smiled when B'Elanna left the sentence open; it didn't need to be said, but both women understood the sentiment. After just a hint of hesitation, Torres reached for her captain's hand and squeezed it quickly, before she rose from the couch.

"Good night, Captain. Sleep well." The older woman, having left her seat as well, led her guest to the door.

"Thank you, B'Elanna. For everything. And good night to you, too."

Chapter 4

It was late already, B'Elanna had left some time ago and Janeway was about to go to bed when an unknown visitor demanded her attention by ringing the door chime. Hesitating for just a second, she eventually walked over to her quarter's entrance and touched the panel to open the door.

She wasn't sure whether she was surprised when she found Chakotay outside. He looked like he'd just been about to call it a night, only dressed in sweatpants and a shirt, but then had thought the better of it and come over.

She stepped back wordlessly, and he entered slowly, seemingly unsure of himself. Only when the door had closed again, she spoke.

"Something I can do for you, Commander?" Her voice was controlled; friendly and not cold, but still distanced. He had no idea she was trying to maintain this distance to keep herself from telling him things he mustn't know now, and to give him time to get his memories back, by himself and hopefully slowly.

"I'm sorry to disturb you at this late hour, but I felt that..." He trailed off, searching for the right words. Words she found automatically as she turned away and stepped away to stand in front of her viewport.

"We need to talk? We can do that, but not today, Chakotay. I'm tired. I suggest you come to my ready room tomorrow and-"

"Kathryn, this is ridiculous," he cut her off, anger rising inside him. "You can't avoid me without at least telling me a reason. You can't just push me away and don't-"

"We had sex." His mouth dropped open at her confession. She was still not looking at him, but standing with her back to him. He could however see the slight shaking of her shoulders.

"What?"

"After your nightmare, you were confused and desperate, and then you suddenly... you..." Kathryn stopped, not sure how to formulate it. She hadn't meant to tell him at all; the words had fallen from her lips before she could do anything about it. How was she supposed to tell him that he had taken from her what she knew he needed then? They were a lot more than just best friends, and this would make everything even more complicated.

"I raped you." All he could do was swallow repeatedly to keep himself from throwing up.

"No," she said firmly and whirled around, finally facing him. "God, no, Chakotay, please don't think that. I could have stopped you, I could have walked away. You didn't hurt me and you didn't force yourself on me without taking care first that..." She took a shuddering breath. "That I was ready." Pain and regret showed in her features. "If anything, I was the one who... I should have stopped you. I feel like I used you, and in some way I probably did. Maybe we used each other. But however you put it, I was the one in control, and I failed to do the right thing. I'm sorry."

He rubbed his hands over his face, taking deep breaths. It couldn't be true. Kathryn would never lie to him, but this... how was he supposed to expect her to ever forgive him? How was he supposed to forgive himself? There was something unspoken between them, had been for a long time, and over the years, they had taken tentative steps towards each other, towards whatever might still await them in their friendship, their companionship - their relationship.

When Janeway walked over to him and raised her hand to touch his face, he found himself backing away.

"Please, Kathryn, I..." He saw the hurt in her eyes even though she tried to hide it and put her usual mask back into place, and he regretted his rejection immediately. "I can't, I... In whatever way, I violated you," he shook his head when she opened her mouth to protest, "however you see it. Even if you say that I didn't hurt you, I still didn't have your consent. And for me..." Chakotay's voice died in his throat when tears threatened flow from his eyes once again. When she attempted to touch him this time, he allowed it. Gently she rubbed his upper arm and let her hand then come to rest over his heart in a familiar gesture.

"Please don't do that to yourself, Chakotay. It will only make this harder, for both of us."

He couldn't help himself then; the moment she took another half-step towards him, he pulled her into his arms and hugged her to him, as close and tight as he could. She returned the embrace, wrapped her arms around his strong body and felt him bury his face in her neck, just like he had done in that night. Only that this time it was real, it was him, in full possession of his mind and conscience. And she realized just how good it felt.

They stood like this for what could have been ages, but were only mere seconds, before he released her, although he didn't let go of her entirely. They were millimeters apart when they stared at each other, their thoughts on a rollercoaster of possibilities and probabilities, of memories and what-ifs. In the end it was Chakotay who broke their eye contact and stepped back.

"Thank you for being so honest with me, Kathryn. It means a lot to me," he told her quietly, his eyes full of sincere gratefulness.

"There's nothing to thank me for, Chakotay," she replied, a warm smile on her face, reassuring him that she was okay; that *they* were okay. He only nodded at that, accepting her words.

"Good night."

"Good night."

He turned to her door and stepped out of her quarters, and she waited for the door to close again before she let out a deep sigh. There was much that would need some restoring and rebuilding, and as of now, she didn't know how they would do it. Even if she was okay with what had happened - and she was, she had told him the truth there - she knew that he was deeply hurt by his own actions. This was a fine mess she had maneuvered them into.

With another sigh - this was becoming a bad habit - she turned away from the door, but was stopped midway when her door chime rang once again. At her permission, the door opened to reveal Chakotay, looking as if he had never left, and unceremoniously he stepped back inside. His dark eyes told of a raging war inside his mind as he fought with himself and coming to terms with his actions.

"Kathryn, how can I ever..." Her fingertips against his lips silenced him.

"It is all right. Really, Chakotay. I know you would never intentionally hurt me. I knew that all the time. And you didn't. Even then, even with your mind clouded, *you didn't hurt me.*" For the first time, Chakotay looked at her - really looked at her - when she emphasized the words.

"It wasn't me..."

"And yet, it was. Maybe the action wasn't yours, but the heart behind it, restraining you, was." He shook his head and Janeway expected him to once again doubt her words. She didn't expect him to take a step forward and lean down to press his lips to hers while wrapping his arms around her.

The kiss was incredibly gentle, and Kathryn felt tears pool in her eyes. His tenderness, the way he held her, protectively enclosed her in his arms, how his lips whispered over hers - it warmed and broke her heart at the same time. In the few stolen moments when she had allowed herself to let her mind wander, think about what they maybe could have, she had always known that he would be a gentle, generous lover. And just now, and even though he was only kissing her, he proved her to be right.

It was clear to her that he simply wanted to show her how it could and should have been between them, who he really was, what he had rather given her. Something he had been preserving for her ever since New Earth, to share with her whenever she was ready. He had been waiting for this moment, quietly showing her his love, letting her know that he was there, patient and understanding, and she had always been thankful for it, for him giving her the time and space she needed; even accepting that she would never be able to conquer this overwhelming feeling of responsibility that suppressed everything else.

In that moment, the ever-present voice of duty remained silent when she hesitantly, carefully surrendered to him. But right then two personalities inhabited him, and so he pulled away all too soon, backing away to bring some distance between them as a pained expression formed on his face.

"Forgive me, Kathryn, I shouldn't have-" He stopped himself abruptly and left her quarters so quickly it looked as though he was fleeing from her, from them, from whatever was happening between them. Janeway could only stare to where he had been standing a few seconds before, confusion and just the slightest bit of desperation inside her waiting to be noticed, to be addressed, while her mind still progressed what had occurred, and what, in all logic, should come next.

To hell with logic.

She groaned and rubbed her hands over her face, her heart going out to the man whose soul was so terribly tormented. She couldn't let him fight this battle with himself; he

would torture, maybe even destroy himself. She should never have told him what had happened that night; at least not the part about them having sex, and, strictly speaking, non-consensual one at that.

Barefoot and in her sleeping attire, she left her quarters and crossed the short distance to his door unseen by anyone at this late evening hour. He gave her permission to enter immediately, and she found him sitting on the floor, his medicine bundle opened in front of him.

"May I?" He nodded, and his eyes never left her as she sat down cross-legged next to him. He wasn't proceeding then with his vision quest, nor was he offering her to try again what she had done only once years ago. He just looked at her, thoughtfully, intensely. For long minutes, she contemplated what to say while she stared at his *akoonah*, an object that for some reason emanated an air of calmness and peace for her.

"So full was I of slumber at that point where I abandoned the true way.' Do you remember those words?"

Chakotay nodded. "Dante," he only commented, looking down at his medicine bundle.

"But it is not always the way to hell one wrong step brings you onto, even if it appears so for the moment." Gently, carefully, her hand sought his and touched it lightly, and with relief she noticed that he wasn't pulling away. "Hell is what we make of it."

"Way to hell or not, in neither world I would have been forgiven for what I have done." The bitterness in his voice knifed her heart, and she felt at a loss as to how to make it clear to him that all his guilt and misery were misplaced.

"But only one world counts - *our* world. And no one is blaming or judging you here."

He realized that she wasn't talking about their time, their reality, the waking world, or *Voyager* - but actually about the two of them. The realm where their friendship, their relationship existed. When she took his hand and rose, nudging him to follow suit, he didn't hesitate. He came to stand in front of her and she looked up at him, smiling tenderly.

"You are my friend. My best friend. And come heaven, come hell, I stand by your side, just like you stand by mine. You didn't betray me, you didn't misuse my trust. It was nothing more than your pained soul taking control for a while. But as I said, there was still heart in it, and it was *your* heart." She let go of his hand and instead framed his face before she continued, speaking softly, "You are one of the kindest, gentlest persons I've ever met. You are not capable of hurting anyone of your friends. It's all I need to know." She ended her speech to another long-stretching quiet, another moment of mouths remaining silent while souls spoke.

When he kissed her this time, he didn't pull back again. Not to end this loving encounter, anyways.

This time, they both needed it. Maybe Kathryn hadn't come to his quarters because she hoped for a follow-up, for him ending what he had started earlier with his first kiss. But she didn't fight against it, either. She allowed herself to let go and fall. Into his arms. And into his love.

He peeled her clothes from her body piece after piece, showering every new inch of skin with kisses and feathery light touches, worshipping her, body and soul. Kathryn wanted to return the favor, to learn about him and undress him, reveal the golden skin underneath, but he wouldn't let her. Every time her hands and arms made an attempt to move, he would hold her back, stop her and then claim her lips in just another kiss, a loving distraction she willingly fell for.

When nothing but her bare porcelain skin remained, he lifted her into his arms and carefully placed her on his bed, the handmade duvet soft as velvet against her naked body. She closed her eyes and sighed; breathed in deeply the scent surrounding her that was uniquely him. Only when she looked up at him again, she found him watching her silently

in the semi-darkness, his face half covered in shadows as he admired her with his eyes. She resisted the sudden urge to pull the blanket around her nude body, but Chakotay must have sensed her slight discomfort, and sat down beside her, his hand cupping her cheek.

"You are so beautiful, Kathryn. So beautiful," he whispered and leaned down to press his lips to her forehead, before wandering down, over her eyes, her cheeks, to her mouth. This time, it was a leisure kiss that soon grew into something new, something passionate, something that took both their breaths away and made them gasp when they finally parted.

The hand that had just been holding her face now glided down, over her shoulder, playfully skimming her breast, and came to rest on her stomach, the heat from the big hand covering most of her belly making her nerve endings dance and causing her to shiver at a sensation she couldn't yet understand. His fingers tapped lightly against her skin and tickled her, but also created a rush of feelings that went to her head just like it went down between her legs.

Chakotay didn't leave her the chance to give it much further thought when his mouth began to wander yet again, seeking out all the sensitive spots he had mapped and memorized during his first exploration before; his tongue down her neck, his lips nipping at her collarbone, his teeth lightly grazing the delicate skin of her breasts before his lips closed around one puckered peak.

The woman subject to his skilled ministrations moaned and sighed, one of her hands lifting to rest at the back of his head, to hold him in place where he didn't want to leave anyways. Her perfect round mounds felt far too wonderful under his touch.

He alternated between giving first the one, then the other breast some attention, only to repeat the action several times, never giving the wetted buds the chance to cool too much, his tongue twirling and teasing and massaging so much that Kathryn began to lift her chest to press into his touch even more.

Meanwhile, his hardness against her leg created just another sensation she somehow had to cope with, and more and more, she felt overwhelmed by all those feelings befalling her - it simply had been too long since a man had given her so much attention, and she began to lose control over her body's almost violent reaction to him.

Sliding her hand over her own body, her fingers closed in on his erection and touched it lightly through the thin cloth of his sweatpants. Unprepared for it, he jerked and gently bit down on one of her nipples, at which she moaned in pain and pleasure. He murmured an apology against her skin, but she only pulled his head up and him into another kiss while her hand worked its way up his body beneath his shirt.

Only unwillingly he ended his sweet feast on her mouth to lose the piece of clothing and bare his upper body to her eager fingers, waiting to touch his warm skin and firm muscles while he leaned back over her, his tongue grazing her lips before beginning another downwards journey. In a smooth and elegant movement, he drifted deeper along her in lust squirming form, all the while his hands and mouth continued to roam her body. She lifted her head to follow him as he worked his way closer to where she anticipated his touch most, and sensing her watching him, he tenderly kissed her belly while locking his eyes with hers.

"Open your legs for me, Kathryn," he murmured against her skin, and held his eyes fixated on her darkened orbs even when he lifted his head; asking permission with words and eyes equally. She complied without hesitation, letting her thighs fall apart to reveal her glistening womanhood, her dark curls soaked with her arousal. He moved to kneel between her legs, then leaned forward and landed his lips just above her navel before gliding down, lower and lower, until he could slip his tongue between her folds; only his hand that had returned to rest on her stomach kept her from completely bucking off the bed. The same

hand now crept down so its thumb was able to reach the bundle of nerves that waited to be touched and fondled.

Kathryn exhaled sharply, her fingers fisting the duvet and whatever else they could reach. Ripples of passion washed over her - and she hadn't yet climaxed. Her head pressed back into the pillow, her mind was solely focused on his mouth that was doing wonders to her, and his free hand gliding up and down her leg, caressing inside and out and heightening her arousal with his soft, almost tickling touch. The hand on her stomach left its place momentarily, and she felt him pull her legs further apart, giving him better access when he played his tongue along her opening before dipping inside her hot sheath.

The thumb of his hand that had returned to her belly was nudging and massaging her clitoris, never pausing, never stopping, but constantly pushing her higher while his tongue mimicked motions his hips would later repeat. She tumbled along the edge for a while, never quite falling, but still feeling weightless, an angel dancing on the tip of the devil's trident, waiting for the sin to happen, waiting for the inevitable mutual embrace.

It came like a hard blow, expected and yet surprising. Kathryn felt it come, literally. She pressed herself against his hand and mouth, rushing towards her climax that promised to be different from any previous orgasm she had ever experienced. He found a particular sensitive spot just above her entrance and alternated between rubbing this and her clitoris, and it was her undoing.

Her eyes flew open and her lips parted for a scream that never came when her vocal cords, with the impact of her pleasurable heights, forgot how to make sounds. Her body convulsed and wound while Chakotay continued to stroke her, and a long moan that soon turned into a whimpering sigh escaped her when she came down slowly, her breathing fast; he heard her trying to get control of it again, and of her other senses, sighing another few times while she rolled her head around and stretched her body like a cat.

A fine layer of sweat covered her flushed skin; she seemed to shine in the dim lights finding its way around the room from a faintly glowing wall panel. Right then, she looked like she wasn't from this world, this universe or reality, but some fairy-like being, as beautiful as erotic.

Slowly he slid up along her body, leaving a trail of kisses until he reached her lips and caressed them with his, playfully teasing her with his tongue. Kathryn reacted lazily, still exhausted from her orgasm and needing her time to come to. She tasted herself in his mouth - something that was unfamiliar to her since she had never wanted it in her younger years and had never been offered it later. But the odd and yet somewhat intriguing taste and the thought that it was brought to her by the man who held a special place in her heart and who had just pleased her so skillfully sent a renewed wave of arousal through her.

It took her a moment to become aware of him watching her after he had ended the kiss; she opened her eyes to find his darkened orbs looking down at her with so much adoration and affection it took her breath away. She smiled up at him, and he matched the happiness showing on her face, letting one finger trail over her face.

She moved to push him onto his back then, to give back what she had just received, but he held her fast in place, shaking his head.

"No, Kathryn," he stopped her, "this is for you." She tried to protest, but he simply did what had worked as a distraction before - he claimed her lips in a deep, passionate kiss. He moved above her doing that, his erection nudging at her nether lips, and he carefully rubbed against her to wet himself. Instinctively she spread her legs wider, inviting him in, knowing from their first night that she could take him, despite her long abstinence and her narrowness, as well as his rather impressive girth.

"Chakotay?" she whispered when he readied himself to enter her. He looked at her curiously, and leaned into her touch when she cupped his cheek. "Leave your eyes open. I want to see you." He nodded, understanding without asking what was behind her request;

this was supposed to be different from their involuntary first time, in every sense. He was himself, every fiber of his being was all too aware what he was doing, and he was going to show her how long he had been desiring this.

Positioning himself at her entrance, he locked his eyes with hers before he started to slowly push in, searching for any signs of discomfort in her face, reading her as she was baring her soul to him while he completed their joining, filling her to the hilt. Kathryn's hands were stroking his back and shoulders, and she was panting heavily when his movements that had begun with long, slow strokes became faster in no time. To allow him a better angle, she wrapped her legs around his waist and rose her hips to meet him, rocking in a perfect rhythm with him.

And all the time, they held each other's eyes, a silent exchange where spoken words weren't needed. Chakotay leaned down and kissed her gently, caressed her lips more than capturing them really, just letting them touch for a moment, letting their breath mingle. Their eyes remained open, though the closeness let them lose focus until Chakotay lifted his head again. His thrusting became shallower, quicker yet, and Kathryn felt the heat in her belly and between her legs increase, her own movements becoming equally more frantic.

Chakotay stared at her in awe when her eyes began to flutter with her approaching orgasm; she couldn't keep them open anymore, couldn't stop the pleasure from overwhelming her. Her face a mask of passion; never had he dreamed of ever seeing it. When her arms fell from his body, her hands in fists, he stroked along the limbs and loosened her clutching fingers, entwining them with his and holding her, his hips never once refraining from their thrusting.

His name was a moan from the depth of her throat when she balanced on the threshold to her climax, and he plunged into her harder, brushing her clitoris with his pelvic bone, until finally, the sounds from her turned into a low squealing as ecstasy befell her. Her body pushed up against his while her walls clamped down on his manhood, massaging him to his own height, and he groaned when he felt the tell-tale strain in his groin before he exploded inside her. She felt his release flowing into her, leaving her panting and whimpering when its heat added to her own burning.

Only barely Chakotay held himself above her, his weight on his legs and elbows when he stole himself another kiss from her lips, bringing her to open her eyes again.

Her lids, heavy from this wonderful exhaustion that consumed her, moved only slowly, but Kathryn lifted them nevertheless and met his kind eyes, his handsome face over her, and she decided for herself that she never wanted to see another face. Not after love-making, not when she woke up, or went to sleep. Maybe the *captain* still had to come to terms with it, but *Kathryn* knew now what she wanted and needed in her life.

Willingly she snuggled into him and his arms when he laid down behind her and hugged her body to his after he had pulled the comforter over their cooling bodies. Her hand sought his from the arm that was wrapped around her, and she knotted their fingers together, her thumb stroking his wrist when she drifted off to sleep.

It was right this time, thought Chakotay as he pressed a kiss to her neck; he was doing what he usually did - embrace and protect the woman he loved. And he swore to himself that he would do so, not only for this night, but for the rest of his life.

Chapter 5

The difference when he woke up the next morning was significant. Kathryn was still sleeping, lying in his arms, their hands holding each other just like they'd fallen asleep after

their love-making. Had he ever wondered what had been missing in the past years, now he knew it.

It was the Starfleet captain, this incredible woman he had fallen in love with - so unbidden and yet so willingly.

She must have sensed him being awake already because she stirred only minutes later when he hugged her just that tiniest bit closer to him and buried his face in her soft hair, breathing in what he never wanted to forget again. He remembered the times he had spent far away from civilization, just him and nature, and how alive the world had smelled after a night of rain, how fresh and new. And it was just what invaded his senses now - something fresh and new, something that made him feel alive.

Slowly Kathryn turned in his embrace, her eyes only half-open yet, and he claimed her lips to kiss her awake. She sighed into his mouth, getting lost in the moment and pressing herself flush against his body. When he released her, she murmured, her voice hoarse from sleep and their passion, "Good morning."

"Good morning," he smiled, "it's only 0630, we still have an hour before we are due on the bridge." He showered her face with kisses while he cradled her in his arms.

"Then maybe we should have breakfast together. And talk," she suggested, her voice as gentle as his kisses.

"I concur... about the breakfast, at least," Chakotay replied and smiled impishly, at which she raised an eyebrow.

"Chakotay--"

"I know, Kathryn. Just this morning, please. Let's have dinner this evening and talk then, but for now..." He trailed off and then outright assaulted her lips, and she couldn't help but surrender.

They made love again, more passionately this time, and showered together afterwards - and actually appeared a few minutes early on the bridge.

No one missed how radiant their captain looked, something neither remembered to have ever seen before. They all looked up when she entered Voyager's command center, and as if by some invisible force drawn to her and the sight she gave, they all couldn't help but smile at her and at the commander who followed her out of the lift.

After their 'Good mornings' were exchanged and the night shift had passed on control over the ship to the morning workers, Janeway and Chakotay took their seats, as did Tom who just then entered the bridge.

"Good morning!" he greeted as well, and turned to face the commanding duo. He lowered his voice when he asked, a hint of concern in his voice, "Slept well?" The first officer smiled and nodded - and Tom noticed how his and the captain's eyes carried out a sparkle competition, all the while both did her best not to look too happy, and especially not at each other.

When it hit the pilot what the only logical explanation could be for their contentment, he turned back quickly to his console to hide his inevitable wide grin. Secretly, he'd been wondering for some time now how long it was going to take these two. They'd always been close, but the past weeks and months had changed a lot, and as someone who'd spent a good amount of time with them, he had to have been blind to not notice that they grew closer by the day.

A few days ago, he'd told B'Elanna of his thoughts and... suspicions, and much to his surprise, had found agreement; and that his partner obviously knew more than she let on regarding their commanding duo.

"But don't you think I should know, so I won't put my foot in it?" he had asked, smiling innocently at her; he just loved to be thoroughly informed.

"Don't worry, this is not much likely to happen. Besides, wouldn't I have to tell everyone on the ship then?" With that, she had turned around to lie on her side and go to sleep, leaving Tom to spoon up behind her and murmur some complaint into her shoulder. But except for a "Good night" he hadn't gotten any reaction.

Now that the joy that was written all over the faces of the two officers behind him every other - well, almost - thought had lost its importance and significance.

From the moment they had gotten lost in the Delta Quadrant, Voyager had been destined to become a generations ship; one on which people didn't hesitate to enter into romantic relationships because it could be, most likely, everything they'd ever get till their death. He knew there were a few crewmembers that'd paired off, some of them planning to have children - even if they had a family at home - and even more who had at least a short affairs, out of the desire to feel physical closeness; someone to release tension with, and to have someone to hold and be held by.

As far as he knew, Janeway was engaged, and if anyone, she was probably one of the most faithful persons one would ever meet; but after some years, perspectives changed, even for people like the captain. Now she looked happier than he'd ever seen her, more relaxed and at peace than at any time since he'd first met her on New Zealand, and it was enough to convince him that they'd taken a step into the right direction.

One of the reasons he had started to like and respect Chakotay had been Janeway's trust in her first officer, and that those had a chemistry that was hard to miss - right from the beginning. He regarded the captain highly, and if she deemed his former Maquis commandant trustworthy, then she had to be right.

Had he ever predicted that those two one day would be more than a commanding duo, more than friends? Tom suppressed a laugh, careful not to make any noise, to avoid being questioned... and being forced to come up with an explanation. He had never thought that much about it, but he had also never really seen a romance between these two in the realm of possibilities, what with Janeway's sense of duty and all that would forbid a relationship with her second-in-command. Not that he agreed with that sentiment.

If it was for him, she - both of them - had made the right decision. And silently he wished Janeway and Chakotay that they'd find their happiness with each other.

The following days were filled with a kind of happiness neither Chakotay nor Kathryn had experienced in years. Taking their relationship to the next level and thus admitting to their feelings had been a revelation, a weight lifted off their shoulders. Of course they had to vocalize their love for each other; a step that would take a bit more time. But being two people whose commitment and devotion in life and work also applied to how they loved, a love confession would only be mere words voicing what actions showed already anyways.

Naturally Janeway had her doubts - or more precisely, the professional side of her, the part that was captain, had. But they had both proven more often than enough throughout their years as Voyager's commanding duo that they were able to overcome every issue, every argument, how severe it ever appeared.

It felt right what they had now - and Kathryn had always trusted her gut feeling, in whatever situation, so why not now as well? The talk they had had over the dinner the evening that followed their first night - their *real* first night - together had clarified what they both expected, and how they didn't want to push anything. They would return to their usual ship business, and they wanted to keep their friendship intact, as it was what was most important to them. But they also wouldn't hold back from whatever their hearts decided they wanted. They had waited long enough.

aneway stole a glance towards the man sitting in the first officer's seat beside her, and found him looking ahead, his eyes fixed on the view screen, and a smile in place - a small one, but it spoke of profound happiness.

Two nights ago, they had taken a nightly sail on Lake George, something they hadn't done in too many months, and enchanted by the atmosphere, had made love under the full silver moon. Afterwards they had shared a long talk, speaking openly about their worries and fears; about how he still felt guilt over what he had done to her, and that he would need some more time to overcome it, and about how she would need his help when her doubts consumed her once more, doubts whether she really could be with a member with her crew.

It has been the most open and honest conversation they had ever had, and if them entering into a physical relationship hadn't already been one, the truths they exchanged definitely marked a change in their togetherness.

"Well, Tuvok, it is that time of year again! Only another three hours till your birthday. Anything fancy planned?" Tom's cheery - and cheeky - words brought Janeway back from her musings and made everyone on the bridge suppress a grin or even laugh. Some were more and others less successful in doing so, and Voyager's command center seemed to light up for a moment.

"I don't assume that I have to remind you, Mr. Paris, that Vulcans do not engage in 'fancy' activities."

"And here goes Harry's replicator ration for tomorrow," the pilot grinned widely when he swirled around in his chair. He shrank back slightly when he noticed the reproachful look his captain gave him.

"Really, Mr. Paris? Don't make me give your replicator rations for the whole next *week* to Harry." Tom was about to protest, his mouth already opened, but Janeway's death glare had every word wither away in his throat; he simply passed his own version of the glare on to a wickedly smirking Harry Kim. One who was wisely keeping his mouth shut.

"Anyway," Paris then said, attempting to bring the conversation back to his originally intended task, "be sure to come to the mess hall tomorrow night, Tuvok, you'll love it." He threw a glance over his shoulder, "And please don't claim that you're not capable to love anything, because that will neither Harry's nor my rations do any good." Tom was relieved to hear only good-natured chuckling from the commanding duo behind him, and grinned to himself when he faced his controls again.

"Why don't you for once just let Tuvok celebrate his birthday to his personal preference?" Janeway chimed in again, casting a short look to Chakotay next to her, his eyes showing as much glee as hers must have in that moment. Tuvok's stoic, "Thank you, Captain." didn't exactly help then to keep them both from bursting into laughter.

"Aw, Captain, where's the fun in that?" pouted Tom half-heartedly. "It's not like we're dragging him into a bar full of-" The pilot's teasing was cut short when a hectic acoustic signal demanded his attention.

"Tom?"

"Some... wave is heading directly towards us. But I can't tell you what it is."

"Red Alert!" Janeway called out, the bridge instantly filled with red light and a repeating warning signal. "Mr. Kim?"

"I get it, but it is indistinctive. Like it's there and then not and... like it is in a state of temporal flux." The OPS officer frowned at his console, but the captain didn't wait for him to identify what didn't seem to be identifiable now.

"Source?" she wanted to know instead, hoping to get some answers this way. Harry, however, had to disappoint her.

"I don't know, Captain, there's nothing on the sensors..." The young man trailed off when he studied his readings, trying to make sense of them.

"Tom, go to warp six, maybe we can outrun it."

"Don't think so, Captain, the wave is emitting some kind of radiation, we can't build a stable warp field." Janeway squeezed her eyes shut for the fraction of a second. How stupid of her to think that in this seemingly uninhabited and quiet region of space everything would go smooth, for just a while, just a few months of their journey that otherwise is never short of adventures.

"Time to impact?"

"Twenty-two seconds," came the answer from Tom this time, his fingers flying over the consoles, still trying to go to warp nevertheless, but it was of no use. The bridge crew was working frantically, from everywhere the sounds of consoles could be heard; vainly they tried to find a last-second-solution, knowing full well that a temporal distortion could very likely be the death of them all. "Five seconds!" Paris then announced, having everyone look up for the blink of an eye.

"All hands, brace for impact!" Janeway had barely finished the sentence when the ship was rocked, thrown around where no throwing should have been possible because of a lack of gravity and atmosphere, and still was the impact so forceful that the ship's own artificial gravity wasn't able to compensate it anymore.

The ordeal lasted not more than ten seconds, but it was enough to cause considerable damage, the bridge filled with smoke and some debris from exploded consoles here and there.

"Report!"

"Coming in, Captain," Tuvok replied immediately, "minor damages to the ship, shields holding at seventy-eight percent. Nine crewmen wounded, no fatalities."

"Any sign of more of these waves?"

"None, Captain," Kim, his face blackened from the explosion of a nearby console, responded to the question to no one in particular.

"Tom, do we have warp again?"

"Positive," Paris confirmed. No one noticed that his voice was slightly shaky, or that his face was a little too pale.

"Go to warp nine, bring us away from here, five light years. Whatever the source was, I want to be away from it as far as possible for the moment."

"Aye, Ma'am."

"Stand down Red Alert," she ordered when she felt Voyager jump to warp, and the lighting on the bridge returned to normal at an instant. "Commander, I wish-- Chakotay!" With shock Janeway found her first officer slumped forward in his chair, panting heavily, face ashen and eyes wide, and was immediately at his side. She recognized this appearance of his; last she had seen it when he had his nightmares. It was a gut feeling that told her that his memories had come back. Tapping her comm. badge, she was about to call sick bay, but Chakotay's quiet voice stopped her.

"I'm okay, Kathryn," he croaked, and looked up at her, "Just need a moment."

"You're going to sick bay, Commander, and don't you dare argue with me," Janeway replied firmly while pulling him up and guiding him to the turbolift. "Tuvok, you have the bridge and--"

"Captain." Tom's deadly quiet voice when he interrupted her had a chill running down her back. She didn't need to hear his next words to know what was coming. "I think I should accompany you." His face was as white as a sheet, though he didn't look as stricken as the commander. She nodded at him once, and his responding gesture confirmed her earlier assumptions.

"Mr. Kim, I want you to go down to astrometrics. Meet with Seven there. Analyze every single reading, turn around every stone if necessary, but I want to know exactly what caused this wave, and why it has this influence on two of my officers!" Hearing Harry's

affirmative answer just before the lift doors closed, Janeway allowed herself to take a deep breath as soon as she was alone with Chakotay and Tom. The older man more hung on the younger than he stood beside him, and Kathryn stepped up to him, framing his face with her hands.

"What did you see, Chakotay? What did you remember?" There was a long moment of silence in which the captain's eyes shortly met with those of her helmsman, whose face, to her relief, had gained back at least some of its color already. They both, however, turned pale again when they heard Chakotay's answer.

"Everything."

Chakotay had been awfully quiet during their dinner, but Kathryn felt that pushing him would have been wrong. Instead, she allowed them to sit in silence, one that was only eased by soft music and the sounds their cutlery made on the plates. She watched him as he carefully now and then took a forkful of his favorite dish into his mouth; without any enthusiasm whatsoever.

The Doctor hadn't been able to diagnose Chakotay with anything except for the return of his memories. Voyager's first officer was stressed and slightly panicked, and confused because of several weeks returning at once, something his brain would need time to cope with. Physiologically, the EMH didn't have much to help him with - other than give him a hypo with some tranquilizer perhaps.

Surely this chemical influence was one explanation for his behavior, but then, Janeway thought, was he a bit too calm. His face was a mask of stone if there had ever been one, his breathing even. It was that non-reaction that worried her most, as much as she wished him his inner peace. She just didn't believe that he could find it with this turmoil all these disturbing pictures must have left in his mind somewhere.

His plate was still half full when he got up and walked over to the couch. Janeway hesitated for only a moment, observing his short pacing, the clenching of his fists, and how he fell down onto the seat, before she followed him.

"Chakotay, what..." she began, but stopped herself when he shook his head vehemently.

"I try not to think of it, Kathryn. Right now, I really want to forget it." He snorted bitterly. "Remember when I said that I can probably be glad that I don't recall anything? Talk about conjuring up ghosts." With his face in his hands, he groaned deeply, only barely resisting to give a frustrated scream instead. He was a normally calm, controlled person, someone who was mostly at peace with himself after years of fighting against everything and anything - and especially himself - but right now, all that seemed forgotten.

"I would order you to consult a counselor, but we don't have one, and... Chakotay, I've been with you along the way, maybe, if you tell me, I can help you." She crouched before him and gently pulled his hands away, making him look at her. "I am here for you, whenever you need me."

"You want to know what I've seen?!" he exclaimed suddenly, and threw himself back into the cushions, effectively pulling his hands from hers in the progress. The captain was shocked at his outburst, but tried to hide it, busying herself with standing up and sitting down next to him on the couch.

"I want to know what is weighing on your soul," she replied calmly and covered his hand, lying on his thigh, with hers, with relief noticing that he enclosed her smaller one with his larger.

"What is weighing on my soul?" He turned to his side to face her, and his eyes spoke of endless agony. "I've seen you die, Kathryn. Everything else was horrible, but I can deal with that. I've seen worse, and not only in the past five years. But these few seconds... they

made me question so much." His voice had turned into a whisper with his last words, and he looked away. He didn't see her eyes narrow in irritation.

"What do you mean?"

"You maneuvered Voyager into another ship. You went into certain death where you could have saved yourself, and-!" sensing her objection, he raised his voice to signal her to remain silent, "I *know* you could have. You could have beamed away, there were other ships with some of our officers aboard. You could have set a course and left, there wasn't much steering to do anyway. But you sat there, and..." Chakotay's words died down suddenly after his breathless tirade; he simply shook his head when words failed him for the moment. He breathed in and out a few times, trying to calm down. Only then he went on. "Tell me it isn't the truth. Tell me that isn't what would happen." It was a desperate plea that twisted her stomach. But she couldn't lie to him.

"It would, and you know it. If I understand what you said right, then you know it is exactly how I would act."

"How am I ever supposed to bear the thought that anything could happen to you, now that the pictures are so vivid, so real, in my head? How can I ever accept you to go on any mission, enter into any dangerous situation again, and not protest every single time?"

"You, of all people, should know best what being a captain entails," she reasoned carefully. He was quiet for a moment at her words, studying his fingers. When he got up all of a sudden, she almost jumped up herself.

"Dammit, Kathryn," he called out, the change of volume making her want to duck, but she resisted the urge and continued to attentively watch him instead, "you died there, you sacrificed yourself!"

"I went down with the ship, as any good captain needs and is expected to."

"It shocks me that after five years in the Delta Quadrant, you would still think like this. It's selfish," he spat, and she frowned.

"I can think of many ways to describe it; selfish isn't a part of it."

"You're doing that for the rules and your consciousness maybe. Not for the people who love you. "

"Of course I am, I'm-"

"What use is your death to them?! Tell me, what do they gain when you die on a ship you could have left before it was destroyed?" His fists clenched at his side as he stood before the viewport, his profile a distorted picture of anger and pain.

"Chakotay, I don't know what happened in your... dreams, your visions, I don't know the background for doing what I did there. I'm sure I had my reasons to act like this and not differently."

"No, you don't know what happened, all right," he whispered back, tears now rolling down his cheeks.

"And it isn't important either," she stated matter-of-factly and rose from her seat to walk over to him, "because this is about the general thing. About my responsibilities as captain you can't accept."

"So if this would really happen, your responsibility would be to break everyone's heart?" He turned around to her then, and the anguish in his face was like a physical blow. "Break *my* heart?" She felt her defenses weaken, but fought hard to keep them yet intact. This was a discussion that wasn't yet making much sense to her, as it came from facts only he knew, but it affected her deeply nevertheless. She had always taken it as a given fact that she would stay aboard her ship, no matter what - even if it meant her death.

"My responsibility is to ensure every single one of you is safe, and that no harm can come on you. As long as I live and am captain of this ship, this will be my purpose, my obligation. If it includes going down with same ship, so be it."

"No, Kathryn," Chakotay said, his voice holding a dangerous edge to it. "This is different, don't you understand it? You can't compare our situation with that of any other ship that ever was. The crew doesn't expect you to die for them; they need you to *live* for them, to bring them home. Who should bring them back if you aren't here anymore?"

"You're very capable of doing that, you know that I have absolute trust in that. And you."

"It could never be the same. The crew wouldn't be, and neither would I. It would kill us. Can't you see that?" As her first officer, Kathryn expected him to understand her duty and what was included in it. Rationally, he maybe did. But she saw that in this moment, rationality was farthest away from him and his mind.

And she understood him also. What would she do if he wasn't there anymore? How would she go on, how would she live through just another day without him at her side? Wasn't that, secretly and beneath all talk about obligation and liability, about serving her crew by having nothing and no one, least of all a romantic relationship to a subordinate, distract her, the real reason why she had always been afraid, always held back? Because she, just like him, could never live with the thought of having him to send to what could turn out to be a death mission? To risk his life, the life of the man she loved? And lose him in the process?

The crew could eventually go on without her, even if it was hard in the beginning. But *she* would be lost without *him*. It shocked her every time she realized that, every single time she thought about it and had to admit that his loss would leave her maybe still functioning, but not living anymore.

Chakotay had seen and felt how it would be. All the pain, the suffering of losing the one he loved. She remembered that feeling all too well; but sometimes she wondered whether his death wouldn't, from a nowadays' perspective, be so much worse than Justin's and her father's all those years ago. Back then she had lost two persons she loved dearly at once. The depression she had fallen into was nothing she could afford for even one day on Voyager. However, when she considered the depth of her feelings for Chakotay, she didn't even dare to engage in any line of thought including his possible death. Because she truly doubted she could survive it, despite all her training, her ability to go through almost everything she encountered, physically and mentally.

The bond she shared with Chakotay was something unique, something that came only once in life. There was more to them than affection and a physical component. They were friends, best friends; sometimes they were one mind, one heart, a unity of rare occasion. She knew that her mother and father had once shared this kind of bond - after her father's death, Gretchen had never really recovered, even though an uninvolved bystander might not have recognized it, Kathryn had always seen sadness her mother tried to school so carefully.

The concept of soul mates had always been fascinating to Kathryn, but she had never believed that there was one for her out there as well. She had loved Justin and Mark, and she knew she would have been happy with them, but they hadn't been, by any means, soul mates. Chakotay, however...

He was right. Her former assignments never consisted of such a complex social structure as they had it on Voyager. Here they were one ship, one crew of nearly a hundred and fifty sharing one common goal, one crew standing together, *having to* stand together, on their way home, lonely in the expanses of an unknown space. They were a family, they were friends, and in time, even more would fall in love with each other, as some others already had. They weren't only colleagues who would mourn the loss of one of them, but go back to business as usual quickly. Once noble actions now really were selfish.

Janeway would still give her life if it meant she could save even one single member of her crew, but other than that, some rules maybe were obsolete, at least in their case.

And, after all, if she had to admit to herself that she couldn't live, and guide this ship, without Chakotay, then how could she asked the same of him should she die?

"I am who I am, Chakotay. Who I am trained to be. I can't change that." He shook his head sadly, but looked up slowly when she continued, "But... I promise to you that, should at any time during our journey a situation arise in which we're forced to sacrifice Voyager, I will reconsider and do my best to stay alive." She smiled at him. "We're one crew, and we have to stick together if we want to get home, don't we?"

He didn't answer. He just wrapped his arms around her and held her.

The small alien vessel, its form an impractical cylinder, orbited the second planet of a system of five. Looking peacefully and quiet on the outside, its insides were filled by a hectic rush. People quickly walked back and forth between consoles, tapped here and entered information there, reported to others, exchanged results. It was a bee hive, an anthill, busy, almost frantic activity filling the air and crew.

"First readings coming in, Sir," a young man reported to another, older looking one who stood at a huge console in the middle of the room.

"Transfer them here, Obrist" the other answered, and the first he addressed as Obrist nodded, skilled fingers flying over his station. His forehead was pulled into a concentrated frown, the flower-formed bumps at the sides of his head, a half-globe surrounded by what looked like petals of skin and cartilage, slightly stretched.

On some other consoles of the command center readings showed up, and everyone immediately got to work. They all knew exactly what they had to do, had done it countless times before. They probably could have worked in their sleep; the whole crew was devoted to the project and the invention of the older man at the main console.

The older man and commander of the ship, Annorax, had spent half his life building the machine he called the "Time Maker". His race, the Krenim, had wasted too much time over the centuries, engaging in many civil wars before finally finding its way to rise to a better, a worthy and rewarding existence. Annorax had always felt a deep sorrow thinking of all the people, innocent bystanders, who had lost the better part of their lives, their chances to have a peaceful, positively adventurous existence, to the fights of others. His own ancestors, his parents and grandparents as well as those of his wife, were among them. Innocent, never participating in the war, but still they had to suffer, live in fear and poverty, not knowing whether they would survive the next day.

The *Time Maker* he had constructed in many years of research, development and work, a machine that was supposed to one day allow his people to spend more time in the moment, or go back to a 'what if' past they would be able to choose for themselves.

First field tests were promising; the construction worked like Annorax had always imagined. They were able to shift time and events for those who were within a time altering field. It didn't have a lasting effect; merely it was a short trip into another past - but at least it was something; something to give his people back. The only problem was that the machine also emitted a temporal wave at the same time the field was created; a wave that altered the development of everything it met on its way.

The Krenim ship had already brought a significant distance between itself and every inhabited planet in the region, as well as placed warning buoys. Plus, at the borders of Krenim space several ships patrolled and told every passing vessel that the territories suffered from political instabilities. It had been the best way; every captain with a bit of common sense would avoid such a region, and the Krenim didn't have to give away anything about Annorax' experiments.

It was supposed to be safe; after all, harming anyone was the last thing Annorax or any member of his crew, his team of scientists and technicians, wanted.

"New calculations are complete, Sir," a crewman said from his side, and the commander looked over to Obrist.

"Program a new wave. Lower strength and density by three per cent. It comes still too close to the inhabited planets, we need a greater distance at which it dissolves." The hardest part for them at the moment was finding the correct wave attributes to still have a time altering field strong enough to be of any use, but a wave so weak it wouldn't affect any outsider.

"Aye, Sir," Obrist answered, and there was an expectant silence, only broken by the occasional beeping of consoles, before Annorax' second in command finally announced, "Adjustments made."

"Activate."

Chapter 6

The change was sudden. One minute, he had been sitting in his seat on the bridge, holding on as the ship shook; the next the command center of Voyager began to transform. And deform.

Chakotay recognized the scenery. It was Voyager shortly before it was destroyed. How could he ever forget these pictures? He felt himself being whirled away from his seat, only to resume the position he had in his dreams; on the main screen's left-hand side, looking past his own chair to the captain's where Kathryn sat.

She had the same determined look in her eyes, the one that was going to haunt him till the end of his days; the one that showed her will to die; the one he couldn't do anything against.

Or could he?

She stared straight ahead, her hands gripping the chair's arms, holding on - even though he wasn't sure to what. The ship? Her life? Her command? Her composure?

The latter he certainly didn't have. Not anymore. He knew what was about to happen, and he wouldn't let it happen again. The course was set, the ship unstoppable flying towards the alien vessel, ready to destroy it. There was no need for her to be here; a captain mustn't always go down with the ship.

He reached her in three long strides and hauled her from her chair. She looked at him confused and began to struggle, but he held her too fast, his strength too great for her to offer real resistance.

"I won't let you follow them!" he exclaimed and gripped her upper arms even tighter when she wound away, "We're going to leave this ship, you won't die here!" She struggled against him even more, trying to free herself while she argued with him about her decision. He knew he had the upper hand; there was no personnel whatsoever still on board to stop him. He would save her from certain death, from her own sacrifice, whether she wanted it or not.

"The course is set, the ship can fly alone," Chakotay continued while he dragged her to the door that led to a small corridor behind the bridge, "We may lose Voyager, but we won't lose you!" He took a shuddering breath. "I won't lose you."

Was it a dream, a vision, another reality - he didn't care. All that mattered was that he was in control. He would end this horror here and now. He wouldn't lose her again. He wouldn't watch her die again. And maybe he could also stop the pictures in his head by changing the events.

Dragging her along the corridor, he finally found what he was looking for - the escape pods reserved for bridge personnel, those who were the last ones to still remain on the ship when everyone else was already gone. With relief he noticed that the pods were still there and intact, and opening the hatch, he pushed Kathryn, who had by then stopped fighting against him, inside. With one last look back into bridge's general direction, he followed her and began the start sequence.

Soon, the pod was catapulted into open space, and he activated the propulsion systems to get away from the imminent explosion as fast as possible...

Chakotay never saw the bridge crew watch him in shock as he ran around, screamed and cried, and gripped empty air he obviously thought of as dead crewmen and, ultimately, Janeway in her chair. He pulled her from the seat, his grip bruisingly strong, and Tuvok and two other security officers moved to stop the first officer, but the captain just shook her head. She had a good idea what Chakotay was seeing; he wouldn't hurt her, he wanted to *save* her.

And just as she thought, he brought her to the closest escape pod and got inside with her. Janeway had hoped he would come back to his senses before he launched the pod, but he remained trapped in his hallucination, or however one wanted to call it.

Only when the pod was out and on its way, gaining more and more distance to Voyager, Chakotay suddenly fell unconscious. His mission had been to bring her to safety; and in his mind, he must have done just that before he was finally released from his delusion.

"Chakotay?" She tried to gently wake him. His skin was hot, sweat covered his face; his breathing was ragged. She caressed his cheeks, rubbed her one hand over his arms and chest in a soothing gesture while she scanned him with a tricoder. He had a light fever, and his heart rate was too high, but she was glad that apart from that he seemed to be all right.

"Voyager to escape pod #2; Captain, do you read me?"

"Yes, Mr. Tuvok, we're here. Chakotay is unconscious; it is best you beam us directly to sick bay before bringing the pod back in."

"Understood, Captain. We'll beam you out within the minute. Voyager out."

Janeway shifted closer to Chakotay, and pressed a kiss to his lips. "We'll be out of here in a few seconds," she told him quietly, trying to keep his brain working - and distracted - by talking to him.

The tingling sensation that came with their transport had never felt so good.

The Doctor had called Janeway to sickbay two hours after they had been beamed out of the escape pod. As much as she had wanted to, she couldn't have spent the whole time in the medical station; she was the captain, after all, and there was a phenomenon that still demanded investigation. So she had left Chakotay to his sleep and the care of the EMH's capable hands, and worked with Harry and Seven in astrometrics to find answers.

When the Doctor had called her, they had just found an irregularity a few thousand light years away from their position; though they hadn't yet been able to define this irregularity. Was it a ship, a planet? A natural occurrence? At least they could say with a good amount of certainty that this had to be the source of the 'memory wave', as Tom had dubbed it.

Chakotay was still asleep when Kathryn entered sickbay and approached his biobed. He looked relaxed, and the color had returned to his face, something she was very grateful for. She couldn't believe the concern she had felt for him; with every passing day it became clearer to her how important he was to her.

"Captain," the Doctor greeted her when she stepped up to the bed, and instinctively rested her hand on Chakotay's chest.

"How is he?"

"Scans of his brain show that he should back to his old self. I called you because I want to wake him up now." Saying so, the EMH took a hypospray and pressed it against the unconscious man's neck. He left when seconds later, his patient's eyes fluttered open and focused on Janeway.

"Kathryn... what happened?" Chakotay croaked, his voice affected by the earlier events and his sleep.

"I can tell you later, I just wanted to see how you a-"

"I abducted you," he interrupted her with wide eyes. "Oh God, Kathryn, did I hurt you?!"

"No, I'm fine. You were there to save me, remember?" She cupped his cheek, adding a whispered, "Just like you always are." before she threw a quick glance towards the Doctor's office, making sure he was out of sight, and gave Chakotay a kiss; then she resumed a professional distance just as the EMH returned.

"So you are all right?"

"Absolutely. You have no need to worry. While you were asleep, Seven, Harry and I were working in astrometrics. We think we may have found the source of these waves."

"And?" Chakotay tried to rise to a sitting position, but groaned when his muscles protested. Immediately the Doctor intervened and pushed him back.

"Careful, Commander, your mental outbreak obviously put an unusual great strain on your body. You should rest a bit longer." Janeway nodded in agreement with the medic's words.

"I'll be back later to give you an update. You sleep now," she told her first officer and smiled gently at him.

When she walked out of sickbay, he had already returned to the land of dreams.

"Any luck with the recalibration of our sensors?" Janeway asked before she was even through the doors to the astrometrics lab.

"None yet, Captain. Whatever we do, that... thing out there has the same characteristics as the wave. It is there, then it isn't, then it's only a faint echo... our sensors have to have knots in their circuits by now. My brain certainly has them," Ensign Kim answered while Seven still worked the console, entering commands and changing the view on the big screen again and again, but with no such luck.

Voyager's commanding officer took her time to think everything through, considering all information they had till now. She was aware that there was the option of simply going to maximum warp and try to clear the area the wave was able to reach as fast as possible. But then they didn't know how it would proceed to develop; if it was an artificial phenomenon, created by the inhabitants of these territories they had been advised to avoid, it might as well increase in its intensity, and who knew how far it would be able to reach then?

Fleeing wasn't an option. Or at least not the one that promised any success. If they tried to find out what was behind all this, they had at least a chance to bring all this to an end before any more people were affected.

"Do we have a way to predict when the next wave will hit us?"

"I'm afraid not. There is no discernable pattern to the occurrence of the waves. Which makes it all the more likely that this is an artificial phenomenon." Harry brought up a list of all waves they had registered so far, and Kathryn didn't need to have a closer look; if this wasn't coincidental, then nothing was. Her scientist's mind went through all possible

formulae and equations she could think of in that moment, but nothing applied. It was pure chaos.

"Captain," Sevens voice had her return from her musings, "I may have found something." Another few touches to the console in front of the Ex-Borg, and the huge display in front of them changed again.

"Is this..." The older woman narrowed her eyes and studied the readings and schemes appearing.

"By triangulating the signals we received with the wave, I was able to confirm two of three coordinative points. We should be able to find the source with these general directions."

"It will still be a considerably large area we have to cover; and we may not have the time to search."

"According to my estimations, a search shouldn't take longer than three days. I think I have found a way to re-modulate long range sensors so that they will be more precise. However, this may interfere with other sensors."

Janeway took another few minutes to consider all eventualities. She trusted Seven's abilities, as she did her crew's. They had managed far more complicated maneuvers. And if it would be of any help to Chakotay and Tom, or any other ship that would sooner or later pass by, it was worth a try.

"Send the coordinates to the helm and let Tom set a course," she acknowledged eventually, her decision made. "I'll be on the bridge. Good work!" With that, she was gone, leaving Harry and the former Borg to throw each other a look before they went back to their analyses.

In three-dimensional space, finding an object with only two coordinates was a lot harder than one might have thought. There were light years to cover, and doing so from some distance instead of close by to known position points didn't make things easier. For almost two days, the Alpha Quadrant vessel had been searching from afar, always staying close to the borders of Krenim territories. But even with Seven's enhancements to their scanners, they soon had to realize that they weren't as close to their destination as they would have needed to be.

Janeway knew it was time to change strategies. They were already in it too far; they couldn't back away now. She had been playing with the thought of ignoring the warning and entering Krenim space nevertheless for a while now, and the more she reasoned with herself, the more she was convinced that it was their best chance to bring an end to all of this. Even though they didn't know what to expect; after all, those waves could be part of military experiments.

And still, the impact they had on her crewmen and would possibly have on other passing vessels was unacceptable. When the Krenim warned outsiders to not enter their space because of possible dangers, then why should they want to inflict harm to those who were simply flying around their territories?

After a lengthy briefing with her senior officers - including Chakotay, who had been released from sickbay and into Kathryn's care the same evening their escape pod incident had happened - during which all possible risks as well as benefits were considered and discussed, the conclusion was clear. Voyager had never backed away from a challenge that promised to make the universe better, and they wouldn't begin with it now.

Of course they still had to pay attention to the Krenim and their political conflicts. But the area they were surveying seemed to be quiet and devoid of any activity

whatsoever; at least Voyager's sensors didn't pick up any patrols or other ships - or fights, for that matter. If there was imminent danger, it wasn't coming from war parties.

Now with reducing distance, their search didn't take long to come up with results. The closer they came to known coordinates, the more helpful sensor readings got. It was a bit like hare and hounds; every new atypical data they followed brought more hints as to where their yet undefined goal was situated.

And finally, the screen showed the glimmering picture of a cylindrical shape, flickering in and out of existence, changing color in a pattern that followed no natural law.

"Mr. Kim, was is this?" Janeway demanded an explanation as she squinted her eyes and tried to make out any structure in what looked like a malfunctioning Christmas light.

"A ship... apparently," came an irritated answer. "It seems to be in a state of temporal flux."

"Can you hail them?"

"I think so... hailing on standard frequencies..." There were several seconds passing, but for everyone on the bridge they felt like hours, before Harry finally announced, "They're answering. Audio only."

"Alien vessel. Identify yourself," someone barked, and Janeway cringed slightly.

"This is Kathryn Janeway of the Federation Starship Voyager. Some of our crew were affected by some kind of temporal wave we retraced to your ship, and we're asking for your help." Another few seconds passed; maybe even half a minute. Then, all of a sudden, a face appeared on the screen.

"I'm sorry for the trouble we've caused, Captain." The voice was friendlier than the bodiless, watchdog-like one before. "We thought we were far away from every population, starships included. It wasn't our intention to cause any... damage," the nameless man, middle-aged it seemed, explained. His face was serious, but held also a hint of kindness, and he appeared exhausted - not from recent stress, though, but from life-long strain. Janeway knew the feeling all too well.

"We're just passing by. We were advised to avoid your territories due to political instabilities, but we stayed close to the borders to not lose too much time on our journey. I apologize for entering your space, but the repercussions for my crewmen were too severe."

"You were trying to protect your crew, Captain. I understand the sentiment." The stranger straightened up to introduce himself properly. "My name is Annorax, I'm a scientist with the Krenim Empire. Captain, if you allow, I'd like to come aboard your ship and try to find a solution for your, maybe both our problems, together."

Voyager's commanding officer threw a short look over her shoulder to Tuvok, their yearlong companionship allowing them to understand each other without words. When she saw the Vulcan's approval, she returned her attention to Annorax and nodded.

"My security chief, Lieutenant Commander Tuvok, will send you all necessary information. I'm looking forward to meeting you personally."

"Likewise, Captain. Annorax out." With that, the screen went black again. Immediately Janeway headed for the turbolift, nodding to Tuvok on the way and telling him to accompany her.

"Commander, you have the bridge," she addressed Chakotay just before she entered the lift.

"Mr. Annorax, welcome to Voyager." The Krenim scientist looked around Voyager's transporter room curiously for a moment before remembering his manners and returning the greeting.

"Thank you, Captain, and for receiving me. I'm really sorry we caused you trouble; it certainly wasn't our intention," the alien man apologized again when he stepped down from the transporter platform and followed Janeway and Tuvok out of the room.

"I'm curious - you don't strike me as someone participating in political conflicts, so what are you hoping to achieve with your experiments?" Annorax looked at the woman beside him intensely for a while, seemingly contemplating what he could tell her; if she was trustworthy.

"Curious you are indeed, Captain," the alien man eventually began, his voice as warm as his smile. "I can't explain everything now, Captain, please understand that; but you are right, I by no means participate in any political conflicts. Nor are there any in Krenim space." He smirked at her irritated frown.

"But..."

"We don't want anyone to enter our space, mostly because of my experiments. To keep others away without revealing anything about my research, we claim to have these conflicts in our territories. Most species close by avoid fights and rather take a detour than get pulled into something they might not survive."

"And no captain with just a bit of common sense would endanger their crew," Janeway nodded as they stepped into the turbolift.

"Correct. It's is very important to me that you know that my research fulfils no political or military purpose. It is no weapon I've developed. However, as most technology, it certainly could be used as such. In the wrong hands, it could destroy..." He trailed off, his look becoming distant for a moment. Then he finished, whispering, "Oh so much." Voyager's captain was intrigued and concerned at the same time. The alien man was very open, seemingly trusting her easily - and telling her about what could possibly be a weapon of mass destruction.

"Mr. Annorax, I'm honored that you trust me enough to inform me about your science, but... don't you fear that one day someone might come along, simply playing nice before attacking?" The stranger smiled secretly when he passed her to enter the briefing room they just reached then.

"Everyone fears that, Captain. Am I not right? It's the way of the universe." He opened his arms, a grand gesture of a man who appeared to know a lot more than he let on. "We never knew who is friend and who is foe. But Captain, I've had my share of encounters with a rich diversity of fascinating as well as frightening people and creatures. I like to believe I know whom I can offer my trust. You are a scientist, just like me, aren't you?" He walked over to one of the chairs close to Janeway's, sat down and leaned forward. "You see the universe through the eyes of an explorer. A star is not just a star, but the collection of past, present and future. A planet is not just a planet, but a source of knowledge, thousands of years of history, of evolution, each different from the next. And the heaven... it's not just a white-streaked blue, or a dotted black, but the gateway to a never-ending world of magic and surprises."

The woman across from him couldn't help but smile at Annorax' enthusiastic words. Silently, she somewhat agreed; and still she wasn't all that convinced. Surely she was glad to meet someone who wasn't suspicious to a fault and gave her a hard time to achieve even the smallest progress in any kind of negotiations, but this seemed too easy.

Or maybe the Krenim scientist was just refreshingly trustful.

And he was. Only that he wasn't naïve. What Kathryn didn't know was that during their first contact, the enhanced Krenim technology had been able to access Voyager's database and logs - Annorax knew very well that the vessel and crew from the other side of the galaxy didn't have any hostile intentions.

Annorax, just like Janeway, wanted nothing more than to serve and protect his people. He had worked hard and tirelessly to reach what he had achieved in the course of

many years. The message that his science was endangering and harming others, that it affected strangers who didn't belong to their empire, had been shocking. His only goal, his research's only purpose had always been to help others.

Lowering his head for a moment, he hoped the female captain wouldn't notice how his smile vanished to give room to deeply felt sadness. He should have known better; even these very few minutes he had spent with her had already given him a good insight into what kind of person he was dealing with. And this woman was the impersonation of kindness and compassion.

"Mr. Annorax, are you all right?" He allowed himself another second, before he looked up, his smile in place again. Janeway, however, didn't miss the profound sadness shining in the recesses of his eyes, vaguely hidden behind his expression of happiness.

"Yes, thank you, Captain," he said, his voice all business again, "I think we should come to our problem now. You said your crew was affected by the wave my invention emits?"

"Actually, it's only two crewmen. In the past months, since we had started passing your territories, they had been plagued by nightmares. Those stopped only recently. But one of the men lost all his memories of the past months. Then, a few days ago when the wave hit us for the first time, it caused flashbacks for both them. The one who had forgotten everything not only remembered, but also falls into a hallucinative state whenever another wave hits us."

"No one else of your crew was affected, only these two crewmen?" Annorax wanted to assure, and Kathryn could see that he was as confused by the facts presented as she had been when she had been confronted with them.

"Yes. And, as I said, only one lost his memories. While both had to deal with nightmares, the dreams they had were partially similar, but still very different." The alien scientist nodded absent-mindedly, the wheels in his head rotating at maximum speed.

"To be honest, Captain, right now I can't come up with any logical reason or explanation as-

"Captain Janeway, please report to the bridge immediately," a voice via comm. interrupted him. Janeway reacted immediately, foregoing to ask the reason why she was ordered to the bridge; she knew that Chakotay would only call her during a meeting if it was important.

Giving Tuvok a sign, she asked Annorax to follow her when she approached the opposite door to the one they'd entered the briefing room through and would lead them to Voyager's command center. Quickly she walked to her chair and sat down, her trained eyes scanning the readings on the small panel between her and Chakotay's chair.

"Obviously the transporter activated some kind of residual energy in the ship's engines... and it is rerouting power to the temporal device," her first officer informed her when she passed him, and she nodded after going over the data.

"The Time Maker will emit another temporal wave within the next few seconds," Annorax, recognizing the signs, warned and gripped the railing of the upper bridge level. He knew what Janeway was going to ask even before she had turned around completely to face him, and his expression already gave his answer away.

"Can you stop it?"

"I'm sorry, Captain, no. Tell your crew to hold on. We recalibrated the wave in the past days; it shouldn't be too strong."

"The wave will be emitted in ten seconds," Tuvok's calm voice informed, and Janeway inwardly cursed his Vulcan lack of emotion momentarily. Or her inability to be as unaffected as him.

"All hands, brace for impact!" Everyone held on to what was closest just when the wave hurled away from the Krenim ship, circular like ripples in the water after a raindrop

had fallen in. Voyager was shaken violently when it was hit; some people were thrown off their chairs or feet respectively, and smoke soon filled the bridge.

It was over as quick as it had started. The Starfleet vessel calmed down suddenly, only its deranged interior and crew evidence that it just had been overrun by a something impalpable.

"Report!" the captain shouted after she had chased away the dizziness, and awaited the ever-calm voice to answer.

It never came.

"Tuvok!" Janeway called out and turned around, only to see him lying on the ground. Jumping up and practically running to him, she slapped her comm. badge. "Janeway to sickbay, medical emergency, Tuvok is wounded and unconscious!"

"He's not the only one, Captain," came the slightly sarcastic reply, as if it was only natural that sickbay was by now filled with people in need of medical attention - and after the first waves that didn't cause any serious injuries whatsoever. "Have him beamed here," the EMH then continued, and Janeway nodded at Harry Kim who'd already programmed a site-to-site transport. As soon as Tuvok was gone, she turned to the young Ensign at OPS.

"Harry?!"

"Thirty-eight crewmen wounded. Mostly minor injuries, but also six more serious cases, seven including Tuvok. Voyager, however, seems to mostly suffer from some burned-out relays and resulting smoke, but otherwise she's fine. Shields holding at eighty-one per cent." Janeway nodded in acknowledgement and finally allowed herself to check on Chakotay, walking down to him who was still sitting in his chair, once again hunched over.

"I'm fine, Kathryn, getting used to it," he assured her before she could even ask, and she squeezed his hand gently, then threw a look at her pilot.

"Tom?" He, however, didn't answer; instead he looked first to Annorax, still standing at the upper level, frozen in place it seemed, then to Chakotay, who he addressed his next words to.

"Did you see that as well?" The older man looked up, doubt and a hint of fear in his eyes.

"Yes," he affirmed, his skin now almost white against the black and red of his uniform.

"Gentlemen?" Janeway demanded an answer, the slightest hint of what one could have identified as panic in her voice and posture. She sensed that something was going on, and that she wouldn't like that something.

"Our dreams, Captain..." Paris began, but then wavered, not sure how to explain it. Chakotay didn't think about it much, he chose the easy way - and answer - with his addition to the pilot's words.

"Those weren't dreams. It's real."

Chapter 7

This time, the captain had followed her first impulse - and ordered her first officer, her helmsman and the Krenim visitor into her ready room.

"What did you mean with 'It's real'?" she addressed Chakotay as soon as the doors were closed. However, before he could answer, the alien scientist rose to speak.

"If I may, Captain," he began and waited for Janeway to nod before he went on, "I assume we all saw the same pictures. In short, it was a fight between my ship and yours, during which I proceeded with experiments that were supposed to restore a timeline that

had once been destroyed - due to *my* experiments. I can't explain what brought me to these actions, nor do I know why we entered into an armed conflict. But... both our ships were destroyed in the end and the timeline was reset." Kathryn couldn't help it - she stared at Annorax dumbfounded. For once, she couldn't claim to have understood any word of what he had said, and the past months had exhausted her too much to still keep her mask in place now.

"So... this was another timeline? Or an alternate reality? Or... what?" Tom then thankfully asked the questions she didn't dare to voice.

"I'm not entirely sure. Theoretically, my invention would make it possible to reset the timeline - to a certain point or event, erasing undefined periods of time. I assume that what we saw has actually happened - however, the destruction of both our ships brought us back to a neutral starting point. It's almost like a second chance, if you like." Even though the explanation made sense in itself, Kathryn's mind was nevertheless a mess. She had always hated temporal physics, and this one was one example that gave her the most terrible headache she had ever experienced.

"But how far into the past was the timeline erased?" Janeway wondered aloud, and did her best to sort her thoughts. "Because some things obviously were changed that kept us from entering into a conflict all over again, and that has to have been before we even met. Or more, before we met the first Krenim vessel we encountered before we could enter your space months back."

"I think more important is to know that in this timeline, the conflict never happened," Chakotay spoke quietly, his hand lightly brushing Kathryn's as he stood close to her. She looked up at him then, reacting to his touch and his words equally.

"He is right. Something is different in this time line, something that prevented us from engaging in this terrible conflict, from a war between the races of these territories and you being pulled into it," Annorax voice the thoughts that were playing in Janeway's head as well. "As I understand it, the most significant difference is that you never entered our space from where you first came across it, and that you never had an alliance with a species that was our declared enemy. But I can't claim to fully understand everything of this. Temporal physics are-"

"Nothing one should think too much about because it causes headaches," Kathryn sighed, eliciting a light chuckle from her second-in-command. Annorax smiled as well, even though it looked a tad confused.

"I wanted to say 'a very complicated matter', but I admit that you're not wrong, Captain."

"So where do we go from here now?" Tom again piped up where he'd carefully and attentively listened to the other three discussing the situation. He mostly wondered what consequences they had yet to expect; he didn't trust this all to be over yet, even though he and Chakotay hadn't had any nightmares for a while.

"If I may, Captain, I'd like to talk to both your crewmembers," he nodded at them in apology for not knowing their names, "and hear what they saw exactly. Even though we are not at war, our close future might still contain dangerous moments that are not meant to be, and I'd very much like to prevent them."

"You and me both, Mr. Annorax. And I'm sure Commander Chakotay and Lieutenant Paris will agree." Both men nodded to confirm Janeway's assumption, before she continued, "I think a dinner with the four of us and Lieutenant Torres, my chief engineer who's been with Mr. Paris the whole time, would be the best and most comfortable environment for such a difficult talk." Annorax nodded courtly and bowed slightly, indicating his acceptance.

"I'll have Neelix prepare something," Chakotay acknowledged the plan, and Voyager's pilot nodded in agreement as well.

"I suggest to meet in three hours, if that is all right with you?" After Annorax had given his consent, Janeway turned to her first officer and continued, "Let Neelix set up the dinner for 1900 hours." She would have offered the Krenim scientist a tour of the ship, but the careful side of her was still hesitant to fully trust him, even though he'd been as helpful as one could ever be. At least as far as she could tell. So she just excused herself and had Mike Ayala, in charge as long as Tuvok was in sick bay, escort him back to the transporter room so he could return to his ship until dinner time.

If it irritated their guest in any way, he didn't show it. But as far as Janeway - and her knowledge of *human* nature, even with aliens - was concerned, she saw that he understood; and probably would have done the same.

Annorax beamed over a few minutes before 1900 after being informed about their time system by Harry, and appeared in a secluded dining room that had been prepared for the meeting right on time. Only Chakotay, Paris, Torres and Janeway as well as two members of security were present when Annorax, accompanied by Ayala, entered the room where Neelix had dished up a diverse meal with culinary specialties from Earth and the Delta Quadrant equally.

leasantries were exchanged, and since introductions weren't necessary anymore, the dinner attendees sat down after only a few moments. There was a lot to talk about, a lot to discuss.

"Maybe we should start recollecting what we remember, what... what these visions have showed us. If we compare what I assume will be different memories, we might get a bigger picture that will help us find a solution," Annorax suggested as soon as their plates were filled and they were ready to start eating. A good meal often helped the soul; that was true to the people from the Alpha Quadrant as well as to the Krenim from the Delta Quadrant.

Chakotay was the first to begin putting his memories, his dreams and visions and experiences, into words, almost the whole time with his eyes fixated on Janeway who was sitting across from him. He struggled at some points, in finding the right words and voicing what he had seen in general, as the memory alone was painful. But his need to share and thus hopefully bring a solution forth was strong enough to keep him going.

When he finished, he felt exhausted; incredibly exhausted. His breathing was heavy, and he was sweating, and only Kathryn's face, her eyes through which she seemed to send him strength, kept him sane then.

Annorax and Tom very well noticed how affected Chakotay was by his own story, and resorted to exchanging a few technical facts and figures, something that had no emotional background. Only when the first officer silently nodded to Paris, thanking him and signaling that they should go on, the pilot started his own report.

Even though it was easier for Tom, he still relied on Torres, sitting next to Janeway and facing him, as his rock when he began to tell his version of the visions and nightmares they'd been confronted with. He never lost her eyes, locked onto his, when he explained in detail what he had seen, and how it was similar in many parts, though not in all, to what Chakotay had reported before.

When he closed, there was a heavy silence hanging over the dinner attendees as everyone processed the information they never before had brought together in such detail. Especially Annorax appeared to be more distraught than anyone of Voyager's officers present had expected, and his mind was working so hard, his face frozen in deep concentration, Janeway feared to startle him to death would she address him now.

Everyone poked around in their meal, not really hungry anymore, even though Neelix had outdone himself this time and the unnamed dish was very tasty. It was a shame to not eat it, but... satiating non-existent or long-forgotten hunger now that they had to digest what information they'd just shared was the least important thing then.

"This is about time travel. Tinkering with time." Annorax' voice, quiet and thoughtful, suddenly breaking the silence had them all look up in perfect synchronicity. "Time... is not a linear concept. If this has happened before, then it can happen again." There was pain in his voice; the thought that all this was his fault and that he could 'cause' it again had plagued him ever since he had shared the memory flashes when the wave hit Voyager with him on board.

"You could say so, yes," answered Janeway to what had not really been a question on his part, but nevertheless needed to be reacted to, as far as she was concerned.

"So in other words, if I continue with these experiments..." He stopped and studied both mentioned men's faces for a moment. "What if it actually has happened, in another time line, and the fact that you both were on my ship influenced your minds in a way that made it possible for your memories to stay intact, even as the time line was erased or reset? It may just be repeated. Or happen in the first place, depending on how you look at-"

"Mr. Annorax, please," Janeway kindly interrupted him, smiling as she did so.

"I'm sorry, Captain. I can't help but think though that maybe your crew members are not the only ones affected. Not yet, anyways."

"We can never say or know what happens in the future. The fact that we're sitting here and not fighting against each other, as we did in this other time line, already suggests that significant things have changed. What you are doing might not affect your people or your family in any negative way at all. But if it does..."

"The consequences could be even worse." Annorax lowered his head, staring at his half-empty plate. "All those people... so many lives... my family..." A hand on his arm startled him then, and he looked up again to find Janeway touching him gently.

"This doesn't have to be repeated. You wanted to help your people. Now help them by letting them write their history - and future - on their own." Voyager's captain leaned back again, pulling her hand away, and faced Chakotay and Tom for a moment. "My people, the Humans from Earth, waged war for centuries, if you sum it up. We were a very brutal and combative species. Countless people died a completely unnecessary death." Her two officers nodded in acknowledgment and agreement, and Janeway directed her next words to their guest. "But we accepted this as part of our past, our history. And swore to do better than our ancestors. It took us a long time to leave behind what we have become so used to. But we were successful - successful in fighting our own pugnacity. And we only looked back to remind ourselves that something like this mustn't ever happen again."

Annorax looked at Janeway for a long time, and she saw that his mind was working through everything she'd just said, every possibility and every path that lay ahead now to take. There was a decision to make; a decision whether he stopped his experiments and thus would have wasted years of research, or if there was any way to continue without causing any damage.

"You're right, Captain," he eventually began, "it mustn't. I admit though, and I guess you as a scientist will understand it, that it is hard for me to accept that everything I've done will be of no use to our society, because it won't be. It all relies on these experiments; if they are discontinued, all work will be lost. And I'm too old to start all over again."

"I understand it very well. But what about the future of your people and possibly every bypassing ship? What if it in any way affects them like it did us? There are too many variables." The Krenim sighed deeply. Of course he recognized the harsh truth behind his host's words, and it wasn't new to him. After he'd left Voyager earlier that day and returned

to his ship, his mind had been flooded by countless scenarios. He had even run a few computer simulations.

"I just wish there was another way. When the Time Maker is-"

"Kim to Captain Janeway." Janeway looked apologetically at Annorax and held up a hand to ask him and wait for a moment.

"Janeway here. What is it, Harry?"

"Mr. Obrist of the Krenim vessel is hailing us; he wants to talk to Mr. Annorax."

"Put it through, Harry." Addressing their guest, she offered, "We'll give you some privacy and you can take the call at the console over there."

"Thank you, Captain. But please, stay, I'm sure this is no matter of security you cannot know about." With that, Annorax left his seat for the console mentioned and pointed at by Janeway. Activating the comm. signal, he immediately faced his second-in-command. "Obrist. What is so important to disturb a dinner with friends?"

"Sir, I'm sorry for interrupting, but we have new inconsistencies that are increasing at an alarming rate. I think it would be better for you to take a look at it." The Krenim nodded at Janeway, a gesture she returned - a silent communication between them.

"I'll be right over, Obrist. Annorax out." Addressing his dinner company, he continued, "I am terribly sorry, Captain, that I have to leave so early, but this is an urgent matter that demands my attention."

"Of course, Mr. Annorax, I understand." Janeway rose to accompany her guest to the transporter room, but he shook his head.

"Please, I insist that you stay and finish your dinner. I'll gladly have Lieutenant Ayala escort me." He nodded with a friendly smile, and Voyager's captain followed his enquiry request, although her diplomatic consciousness protested.

"Contact us immediately if we can be of any help."

"Certainly, I will. Thank you, Captain." Janeway watched their guest leave the room, thoughtful as to what problems he'd have to face and what impact they were going to have on Voyager and her crew.

Only a short time later the three officers who had attended the meeting stepped onto the bridge, awaiting news from the Krenim vessel. Until now, Annorax hadn't contacted them again, and Janeway hoped that it wasn't a bad sign; that the situation wasn't so critical that he didn't have to time to update them. The energy readings Voyager's sensors registered from the alien ship were alarming, and almost similar to those that had appeared shortly before the last accidental temporal wave; the one that had damaged the ship and hurt some crewmembers including Tuvok, who was still in sick bay.

The captain had instructed Ensign Kim to keep a close eye on the data; unnecessarily so, because Harry's worries wouldn't have allowed him to do anything else. He came close to suggesting to bring some distance between Voyager and the Krenim ship, but thought the better of it; after all, distance hadn't help even when they'd still been light years away.

Kim was pulled from his musings when he stations signaled a significant change in the readings.

"Captain, a new wave seems to be forming," he announced, only to add a second later, "And the Krenim are hailing us."

"Open a channel."

Immediately Annorax' face appeared on the screen; concern was written all over it.

"Captain," he greeted briefly, "I'm afraid we can't stop the next wave either. The Time Maker device seems to have reached a critical point where it goes into... I guess you can call it overload, even though it won't destroy the machine. But it seems to have developed some sort of its own mind."

"Can't you shut the device down?"

"I'm afraid it's not that easy, Captain. The Time Maker has already had some influence on the time line. It's connected to it, and shutting it down just like that would be like... cutting it out of space-time and leaving a hole behind. It could cause unforeseeable difficulties in all universes' temporal structure. Even temporal ruptures." He turned away from the screen for a moment, facing someone behind him Voyager's bridge crew couldn't see, and gave a few indistinctive orders before facing the screen again. "I recommend you prepare for impact, Captain, because it seems we also won't be able to stop the next wave."

"Understood."

"Good luck, Captain."

"Likewise. Janeway out."

As soon as the comm. channel was closed, Voyager's commanding officer ordered her crew to secure all stations and keep some distance to them in case they exploded when the wave hit them. Then they waited. Some were nervously fidgeting, some were talking in hushed voices to a colleague next to them, some just stared ahead, waiting for the inevitable and accepting it as such.

"Wave is forming," Harry's voice suddenly broke the quiet on the bridge, "impact in one minute."

Between the chairs of the command duo, Chakotay's hand brushed Janeway's before they both placed their hands firmly on the armrests.

There was not much of a difference to when it had happened before. The ship was shaken and people thrown around even though they all held on tight to something, and here and there a console exploded, but at least on the bridge no one seemed to sustain serious injuries; only minor ones like scratches or bruises.

When it was over, the captain didn't need to ask for a report; Kim was already giving one before she could even open her mouth to speak.

"Two crewmen wounded, but only broken bones. Damage reports are coming in; so far nothing that can't be repaired within a few hours. Seems like we got away better than the last time."

"I'd have preferred it if there was nothing to get away better from, Mr. Kim," Janeway half barked at the ensign, even though she didn't mean it as accusing as it may have sounded. "Everyone, I want ideas as to what we can do! And Tuvok, Chakotay - my ready room." The three of them didn't get far, though. Just before they could enter the Captain's office, Harry addressed his commanding officer again.

"Captain, the Krenim ship is hailing us. Audio only."

Janeway was already returning to her chair on the bridge before Kin had finished his sentence, only to then immediately order, "Put them through."

"Captain, we need to talk again. If you allow, I beam over in ten minutes."

"All right, I send you Mr. Tuvok to escort you to my ready room."

Janeway was waiting almost impatiently for Annorax to arrive. The situation was growing more dangerous and alarming by the minute, and if they needed anything right now, it was a solution. And one that would help quickly.

She felt Chakotay's eyes resting on her, but couldn't look at him. And she didn't even know why. Was it because of this change in their relationship? She had always felt comfortable in his presence; safe and supported. Right now, it was almost distressing to have him in the room with her. She knew it was stupid, but she couldn't help herself. She just hoped that the sole reason for her feeling like this was that she was on edge like she hadn't been in a while.

Still, the door chime ringing through the ready room was almost a relief.

"Come!" she called, and immediately the door opened to reveal Annorax and Tuvok. Janeway dismissed her security chief with a thankful nod and waited until the door had closed again.

"You said we need to talk?"

"Yes. Captain, I think we have a problem."

"One, Mr. Annorax?" Janeway couldn't keep her sarcasm in check in this moment, but the Krenim obviously didn't mind. Instead, he just nodded with a sorrowful, if not apologetic expression.

"We are getting reports that fights have broken out on our home world - and I'm afraid it's safe to assume that this results from remnants of this last wave hitting the southern hemisphere." Voyager's commanding officer allowed herself a moment to close her eyes and pinch the bridge of her nose, digesting this new information. It was exactly what they'd feared would happen, but hoped so much to get away without.

"How bad is it?"

"It has only just begun, so we may have a chance to stop it..." Janeway didn't respond right away; she saw that her alien guest wasn't finished. And indeed, after what must have been at least half a minute, he continued: "I've made a decision."

"Mr. Annorax?"

"I'd rather discuss this privately, if you allow." All the Federation ship's captain could do was exchange a worried look with her first officer. Something told her that she wouldn't like what was about to come. Still, she nodded in Chakotay's direction, who did nothing to keep the concern out of his expression; concern she knew wasn't about the situation, but her. May Annorax had proven himself as trustworthy so far, leaving him alone with his captain was still nothing Voyager's first officer was happy to do. But even though this was more a wish than an order, he nevertheless respected her wishes as much as he obeyed her orders.

When Chakotay was gone, she turned towards Annorax once again.

"So?"

"There may be only one way." The alien scientist's voice was so strong and sure in that moment that Janeway could just have missed that tiny hint of defeat swinging in it. But she was good enough a knower of people's nature - human and non-human - that she heard it. In addition to that, he paced her ready room, and even though he did it slow and graceful, the restlessness was not to miss.

Just as she was asking, "What do you mean?" it dawned on her what he was about to do. Her eyes widened - something *he* didn't miss.

"Captain, it worked once. This is still a time ship; this is still the same Time Maker, from everything I've heard. There's no reason why it shouldn't work. It has already begun to influence my people in a way it was never supposed to, and all the conflicts, even wars we talked about earlier are now more than just a theory. I can't be responsible for it, and I can't have my people go into another period of fighting not that they've finally found peace. I should have taken that step as soon as I heard your story, but I was selfish to believe that all that horror could happen again in this time line where so much else seems to be different. Now I realize that how much I ever try to make believe myself that things are different, that I can change them; it will always end like this. No one should ever try to influence time."

"No one is to say that it will work. What if it makes matters worse, now that we are in a different time line?"

"It won't. I know that for one simple fact: the Time Maker still works the same. Even though the events leading here may have been different, what the device did was a matter of mathematics and physics and those don't change. I may not know all the details, but I'm sure if I did, I could just repeat every change in time and history as it was before, during

our first encounter. And it's safe to assume that your reactions would ultimately lead us to the point where both Voyager and my ship are colliding again - thus resetting the time line." Annorax' conviction had Janeway shiver inwardly. She knew he was going to destroy his own ship - only that he wouldn't need Voyager to do so this time. At least that's what she hoped.

"I understand why you see this as the only way, but - what if our memories are reset together with the time line? Then it will start all over again."

"I think I know a way to prevent just that." Voyager's captain waited a moment for her guest to continue, but soon realized that he wasn't about to explain what he was planning. His next words confirmed just that.

"I hope that you'll trust me, Captain. I can't explain, but there should be a way to keep us from losing our memories. And me... from starting this experiment anew."

"You said before that shutting the device down could cause temporal ruptures, which would have unforeseeable consequences. What about that?"

"Shutting it down would be like cutting a clean hole into the fabric of space. And that hole would be like a zero point singularity, only that it only affects time directly; everything else is subsequently influenced." Janeway nodded, understanding his comparison of the resulting phenomenon of what they knew as Black Holes.

"But if you explode the ship, won't the hole be even bigger, the destruction in space-time more severe?" This struck a nerve she never even intended to find. But Annorax looked down for a moment, clearly trying to find the right words - words for a secret he had intended to keep.

"Not if we don't explode it." And Voyager's commanding officer knew what the Krenin was planning.

"Annorax..." she began, shaking her head in shock.

"It's the only way. The civil conflicts will calm down; my government is informed how to end them. Until now, there's not many people who remember; most of those participating in the fights are members of radical groups who are looking for a reason to protest and fight. The situation will be under control soon. But I need it to stay that way, and this will only happen if I don't lose my memories. The price for that... I'm willing to pay if it brings peace to my people. And the rest of the universe."

"But you will die. And the people on your ship." Her voice sounded hollow and strangled to herself; the thought of what was about to happen was making her sick.

"As I said. It's a price worth paying."

"Do they know? Your crew?" Janeway breathed in deeply when Annorax shook his head. It was not her place to judge him or his actions; they had only just met, and even though they were connected in another time line, another reality, they were still strangers. But the Krenin scientist had this understanding, almost wise side to him she respected deeply - and that seemed to respect her every objection of whatever nature just as much.

"Only me, and now you, know about it. I've written a program that, if one puts it simple, will cause the Time Maker to im- instead of explode. That way, the core of the machine will open a window into subspace and let the ship, crumpled together, fall through, before the window is closed again. We will just vanish." He took a deep breath. "Captain, I understand your resentment of my... solution. I would be the same in your place. But I can't be responsible to have what I saw and what your crewmembers told us happen again, in whatever form. Trying to influence time was wrong, from the very beginning. Captain, I've sent all personnel that doesn't have intimate knowledge of how the Time Maker works off. Only those capable of rebuilding the machine are still on board. As is all research data. This will be the definite end of it."

"What will happen to Voyager?"

"You should be unaffected. That means you will keep your memories. And I hope this will also prevent any more of your crew getting nightmares." Janeway allowed herself to close her eyes for a moment; then she nodded.

"Thank you, Mr. Annorax." She extended her hand, and the alien man took it without hesitation. "It was an honor to have met you."

"Likewise, Captain Janeway. You are a good person, and a great commander. I hope that you and your crew will find your way home soon."

After Annorax was back in Tuvok's company and on his way to the transporter room, Janeway sat down heavily in her captain's chair, watched with concern by Chakotay. But right now, she couldn't say anything. She couldn't tell him that she was okay; that everything was fine. Because it wasn't. But he also didn't ask. He just watched her, for few seconds. Carefully moved his right hand to meet hers on her armrest and squeeze it gently. Then returned his attention to the front screen.

She had never felt so grateful.

No one said anything, or asked any questions when the Time Maker registered as overloading, and finally let the ship, just as Annorax had explained to her, fall together and vanish in a glimmer of light as it was pulled into subspace. To her understanding, the ship would only be a small piece of junk that was soon going to dissolve into dust.

As a commander responsible for more than one hundred people, she understood and respected his decision.

As a human being, however, Janeway blamed herself that she hadn't been able to find another solution than the death of a good man and scientist.

Epilog

It was the last meeting they'd have, at least of their regular ones, that Janeway, Chakotay, Torres and Paris shared the evening after they'd left Krenim space and were back on course to the Alpha Quadrant.

They did their best to keep the mood light and happy; with only so much success. There was still this hidden note of exhaustion and inner reflecting on events as a part of them worked through what had happened in all these months since it had all started, and there was this melancholy about a newly found friend lost again so soon. But they knew that Annorax, about whose sacrifice Janeway informed the others then, would have wanted them to honor his memory by going on.

So chatter was as easy as possible; perhaps there were still some things they needed to talk about, to analyze and take a closer look at, but for now, they wanted nothing more to leave all that had happened behind them and savor the feeling that they'd once again faced and overcome a much harder and much more difficult situation than ever before - at least personally.

"And then I was told to keep his arms close to his body, but of course, since back then I had no practice whatsoever - or balance, for that matter - I started flailing his arms helplessly and after a few torturous minutes landed face-down in the snow. My friends stated that it looked like a comic sequence. They were teasing me with it for years afterwards, even though I became a lot better than them," Tom told an anecdote from his early youth, making them all laugh while they ate their dinner. It were the happy stories and memories they needed right now; even if everything lay behind them.

"I always loved skiing. At least after I had gotten used to being out in the nature, and the too-cold at that," Janeway now added a story of her own, and Chakotay smiled to himself. "I often caught myself trying to ascertain the aspects physics brought into the

sport; how to hold the body, how far to bend the knees, how much to lean forward, all in correlation to the slope... only to have my sister push me from the top of the hill so that I had no other chance than to rely on instincts instead of physics. I always reached the valley safely and without accidents. The one time I actually calculated everything thoroughly, just for the fun of it, I fell halfway down and ended as a ball of snow." She chuckled at the memory, still vivid in her mind, despite it having been so long ago.

"I wish we'd find a planet that offers the chance to ski. Hills and mountains covered in powder snow..."

"It's something we always discuss about when we have to choose a holodeck program," B'Elanna sighed, making Tom take her hand and kiss it. "He wants winter sports, I want to lie on a beach and go swimming."

"Well, you might get your dream holiday then, B'Elanna," declared Janeway, smiling knowingly.

"Captain?"

"I think shore leave is in order; it's been long due, and who knows what the upcoming months, even years may bring. Before he... left... Annorax recommended a planet just outside Krenim space, a day's trip from here. According to him it has a beautiful seashore. Also, we will also find supplies there. Course is already laid in; we should be there by tomorrow afternoon."

The chief engineer and the pilot looked delighted at the prospect of a few free days, and especially B'Elanna couldn't wait for a bit of sun and warmth after the cold she had had to experience through her lover. His nightmares had crept into her bones and mind as well, leaving her with a permanent feeling of someone walking over her grave. Might have also been a whole army of someones.

"I'm sure the crew will be excited to hear that," the half Klingon nodded and smirked at the thought of how some people from her engineering team would react; during the past months without any distractions in form of battles or other problems from the outside, they'd put Voyager through an complete overhaul, checking every last screw. It might not have been exhausting, but more often than enough quite dull routine work in narrow and dim rooms, niches, and other uncomfortable places in the belly of the ship. Added to that, the temporal waves had left them with some damage that needed to be repaired before they continued their way home.

"Just don't forget to take a few days off as well," Tom jokingly instructed while he and B'Elanna rose from their seats.

The older couple across from them just smiled, and Janeway covered Chakotay's hand with hers. Instinctively Chakotay entwined their fingers, just for a second forgetting where they were - and who they were with. Only to be reminded of their company when they heard Tom speak.

"Well," the pilot said, stretching the word while he still contemplated saying what he was about to say. "At least something good has come out of all this." He gave Janeway and Chakotay a lop-sided grin and earned himself a shocked look when they realized what he had said. Quickly they pulled their hands apart, knowing full well that it was too late already. The captain was the first to collect her thoughts again.

"Tom, please-"

"Don't worry, Captain," he interrupted her before the hint of horror in her eyes could increase, "only B'Elanna and me know about it. No one else. At least I've heard no one talk about it. Your secret's safe with us. But..." He threw a quick, but loving glance at the half Klingon woman next to him, "we're both happy that you... have someone." The couple nodded to their commanding duo, then left the room.

Janeway's and Chakotay's expressions showed them deep in thought as they watched their subordinates and friends go.

"He's right, you know. Despite all the horrors, there actually has come something good out of it." Kathryn knew he was right before he had even finished the sentence. Under normal circumstances, she would never have allowed her feelings to grow enough so that the parameters she'd once defined for herself wouldn't matter anymore.

"And I'm glad it did," she so eventually agreed, and took his hand again. "Come on, let's go." She didn't need to say where - but she could have very well said home. They still had each their quarters, but most nights they'd spent in one; hers, mostly, as it was bigger. He knew that sooner or later, when they decided to make it official, they'd share quarters, and he was looking forward to the day when they didn't need to carefully sneak through one of the doors to either her or his rooms anymore.

One thing Chakotay loved most about his relationship with Kathryn was their ability to be together and, despite their mutual desire for the other, not constantly feel the need to let a simple touch lead to much more. The physical aspect of their togetherness was intense and very fulfilling, but still they could as well allow themselves the luxury of a water shower together, soaping and caressing each other, and not let it go any further.

In nights when they had to get up early the next morning and thus forewent lovemaking, being close like this was enough; it even made the experience the next time they surrendered to their passion much more powerful and satisfying.

Now Chakotay was sitting in her bed, waiting for her while she was going through her usual routine of tidying up her quarters a bit; he'd gotten to know this habit back on New Earth already, had always heard and sometimes watched her putting things back to their rightful place. He knew it was her way of ending the day; bringing order to her quarters resembled doing the same to her mind, in some way. He loved watching her then; it even amused him, because it was a crack in the usually perfect façade, this little obsession she couldn't do anything against.

But this time, she suddenly stilled, even though he knew she wasn't yet finished.

"I still can't believe how different our timelines were. I mean, in another universe the Krenim were our enemies and had us fighting till the very end," she commented, out of the blue, while standing in front the bed and still holding a tunic she had wanted to place, neatly folded, over the back of a chair.

"Temporal physics are-"

"A cause for headaches." Chakotay chuckled and pulled back the covers as an invitation so that she'd finally join him. She followed his silent request - after disposing of the tunic - and slipped beneath the blanket to sit next to him in the bed.

"I wanted to say, nothing any logic applies to, but I guess that's the same," he winked and kissed her temple.

"Just imagine what would have happened if..." She trailed off; there were many ways to end this sentence, and Chakotay knew every single one of them, even without her voicing them.

"It doesn't matter anymore. We got through this, Kathryn. And it showed once more how well we work together. Not just as a crew, but the both of us in particular."

"I'm glad you never lost hope, you know. I was worried about that; I don't know if I would have been able to manage."

"I couldn't have done it without you. But I knew you were with me, and so were the others. I have friends, I have people who care about me." He gently caressed her cheek. "I have you. I could never lose hope."

"I know. That's what I love about you." Chakotay studied her then for several minutes; just looked at her and said nothing, and Kathryn felt herself getting nervous. "What?"

"You said it," he simply replied.

"Said what?" A confused and rather helpless smile appeared on her face, and he couldn't help but smile himself.

"That you love me." She frowned at first; but laughed out loud when the words sank in.

"Actually, I said that I love that particular attitude about you," she teased and grinned, pecking him on the cheek. Then she grew serious. "But yes. I love you, Chakotay. Admitting it may have taken me a long time, but I love you. Have for a while. And you knew it, didn't you?"

"In some way I guess I did. But it is incredible to hear it." He drew her close to him and kissed her gently, pouring every last ounce of love he felt for her into the gesture, and she returned it, making him feel just how much she meant her confession. "I love you, too," he then whispered when they parted again.

They sank down on the bed and just held each other close, relishing the feeling of what they had, finally had; this new life, this new relationship that bloomed now that the strain of the past months lay behind them. They were free to pursue their feelings, free to admit to them, and it was a weight lifted off their shoulders, not having to carry around hidden emotions and affections anymore. It was funny how easy it was once they were out in the open.

Kathryn snuggled into Chakotay's embrace, his strong arms, his broad, solid chest, and sighed contentedly. She had often wondered what it would feel like, being held by him so close. She had always longed for it; being as safe, as protected, as loved as she was right then. Even though she had pushed him away; her desire to have someone, have *him*, to take care of the woman beneath the captain's mask had been there for longer than she even dared to admit.

Chakotay suppressed a chuckle when he heard her contented sigh. Who would have thought that Kathryn Janeway, his beloved petite captain, was a cuddler? Since they had began spending their nights together, he had found himself amazed at how close she remained throughout the night. A woman as independent and self-confident as her he hadn't expected to seek that much closeness.

Not that he was complaining.

Whatever had happened in the past months, and however horrible it might have been, he would go through it all over again if it meant having Kathryn in his arms every night - hopefully for the rest of his life. He loved that woman too much to ever let her go again; and he knew he couldn't also. It should have been shocking to him how reliant he was on her; instead it just felt right. A universal decision; a constant, a law of nature.

He wrapped his arms that bit tighter around her, holding her close and listened to her breath even out; then he closed his eyes and slipped into the realm of dreams himself.

The ugly sneer of a bony monster was staring right into her face, daring her to come closer, to run into her own downfall; her death. It knew she didn't have a choice, just like it knew that the bravery she showed was a mere façade. It cackled, the sound sickening and frightening, as she tried to look past it, ignore it, ignore the truth she knew she would have to face anyways.

She was going to die. Another one or two minutes, and her life would end. But she wouldn't give in. She never did. It was the path she had chosen, and she would be damned if she let that demon that awaited her already win in also taking away her last moments in the world of the living.

This was her moment. This was her victory. Maybe she would follow it into its hell, but before that, she would make sure that only those who deserved it followed her, but not her crew, her friends. Her family.

The ship was steering directly towards that other, bigger and more powerful one, but she knew that her ship, her damaged but still beautiful lady, would be victorious. And that was all that counted.

"Time's up." She growled, still ignoring the creature trying to block her view, trying to get her to look at it, and narrowed her eyes as she focused on the enemy ship. Seconds later, heat consumed her.

It was the end.

Kathryn lunged upwards with a gasp, an almost-scream only barely contained. Her heart rate was breaking every record, as was her breathing rate, and her whole body was so slick with sweat that she instantly shivered in the cool air of the bedroom.

"Kathryn, darling, what happened?" she heard the concerned voice of Chakotay who had been risen from his slumber when she had suddenly pulled from his embrace, and he stroked her hair soothingly while she wrapped her arms around herself.

"A nightmare," she whispered and looked at Chakotay with wide eyes.

THE END