

Forever Walk With Me

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Summary: In one way or another, friends would always walk their ways together. A Voyager New Year's fic. Post Endgame.

Disclaimer: All Paramount, nothing mine. Sighs. Lyrics belong to Benny Andersson & Björn Ulvaeus.

Author's Note: I have no idea what effect this song (or its lyrics) has on other people, but I have a very special connection to it, and I always wanted to use it in a fic. For Voyager, it finally just seemed right. I hope you like it.

There was an air of jolly happiness around people throughout the sector.

Seven months had passed since long-lost Voyager had returned home to the Alpha Quadrant - and debriefings had just been finished shortly before Christmas, allowing all crewmembers to spend their holidays with their families. The first Christmas with their loved ones after seven years in the Delta Quadrant.

No one knew that their former captain, Kathryn Janeway, had gone to great lengths to make this possible, fighting hard, like a lioness for her cubs, to get everyone home - again - before holiday season started. It soon proved that convincing the admiralty to drop any charges against the former Maquis who were part of her crew wasn't as hard as she had expected; explaining why she had made certain choices and thus violated several regulations over the years was a lot harder.

She came home on December 30th - exhausted, tired, and with the definite plan to go to bed and sleep through the next five days, at least.

She felt selfish thinking it, but for once she doubted her decision to do everything to bring Voyager home as soon as possible. She missed her crew already; they'd grown together, and she felt alone and useless now that they weren't there anymore, day in and day out, fighting side by side with her against every enemy and hardship.

Who would she be, what would she be without them?

Janeway shook her head to chase those thoughts ago. She should be happy, should rejoice with the others, crewmembers and their families. And she surely shouldn't spend time contemplating a situation and its rightness after working to achieve it for so long.

She was thinking too much - she needed to put her mind to rest. And that she did. She went to bed, notwithstanding the habitual urge to replicate herself a coffee, and slept sixteen hours straight. Nothing was able to wake her; no outside noises, no alarm of incoming messages at her comm. station, no loud neighbors. She was dead to the world. Only the afternoon sun shining directly into her face was able to pull her mind back into the waking world.

For someone who'd gotten used to a minimum of sleep, sixteen hours felt like a week of sleep would have to everyone else. So turning around and going back to this sweet oblivion was out of question.

Lazily she went through her usually-morning-now-afternoon routine, taking a long bath, replicating herself a nice meal and a huge pot of coffee, for once not thinking about replicator rations, and indulged in something she hadn't done in years - she read a good book.

When the doctor came by in the late evening and asked her to come with him because someone wanted to see her, she didn't think anything of it. It wouldn't be so bad to get out of her apartment for a few hours. Voyager's former

medic would probably bring her to Tuvok, whose recovery process she had followed the best she could, trying to stay informed as to how her old friend was.

She didn't get suspicious when the EMH brought her to a transportation point, to have them beamed to their destination. She also didn't wonder about the unfamiliar hallway they arrived in shortly after, and walked down for a while. Only the huge double doors had her frown and slow down her step, turning to the medical hologram.

"Doctor?" she asked, with her best stern captain's face in place.

"A surprise, captain. You will like it, trust me."

There was a strange buzzing sound, getting louder the closer they came to the doors, and slowly it dawned on Janeway where this would lead, literally. It was December 31st, after all. But before she had any chance to protest, they reached the doors and the doctor pushed one wing open, letting his captain inside - to meet a huge crowd in an even bigger room.

Janeway actually gasped when she stepped inside and realized how many people there were - as far as she could tell, every single Voyager crewmember, including family.

Tom Paris was standing on a stage at the room's side, and was just talking to a musician when he spotted her. He waved at her and smiled, then nodded to the doctor, mouthing a thanks - so this had all been planned, and wasn't a spontaneous idea the doctor had come up with. Fearing Tom might announce her arrival, her first impulse was to walk over to him - but the young man simply resumed his conversation with the musician.

"We agreed to not throw you right into the lion's den; people will notice soon enough that you are here," the holographic man next to her told her quietly as he led her further into the room. And indeed, some people, especially her staff of officers, only smiled and nodded, just like Tom had, but otherwise kept their distance.

There was still respect for the captain, even though she wasn't their captain anymore.

Only one person came up to her as soon as he spotted her - Chakotay. Seven at his side, he approached her with his dimpled trademark smile, and Janeway fought down a funny feeling forming in her stomach.

"Good evening, Kathryn. I'm glad to see the doctor was able to convince you to come here." Her former first officer's tone was friendly, if not cheerful; what worried her was this slight twitching of the corner of his mouth and the sparkle in his eyes.

"It's not like he had told me where we were going," she remarked, regarding the doctor who was standing beside her with a very brief glance.

"Not that you would have come if you had known."

"Probably..." A pause. A long one. That had struck a nerve. "Probably not." She sighed deeply, then cleared her throat demonstratively. "So... we haven't heard from each other in a while. Tell me, how are you two?" There was an edge in her otherwise perfectly calm and composed voice, and the smile was forced and desperately held in her face. Chakotay rose an eyebrow; of course he noticed her demeanor. He knew her well enough.

"Seven and I are fine. Separately, anyway. We broke up, about four months ago." It was a simple statement, said with as much emotion as someone would talk about the weather. But then he couldn't help but laugh at her confused expression. "We weren't working. This... acquaintance one couldn't even call relationship was always doomed to fail. When she first came aboard, I wanted to throw her out of the airlock, after all. I almost succeeded, too." Now it was for Janeway to laugh, although she was also visibly cringing while doing so.

"So we have decided to remain friends," Seven, who had been quiet until then, now continued, oblivious to the discomfort of her 'foster mother', "and the comm- I'm sorry, Chakotay, agreed to help me... regaining my humanity."

"At least as far as the platonic aspects are concerned. Everything else will be my task and pleasure to teach," a handsome man, with dark blond hair, green eyes and of a slim, but nevertheless strong build, chimed in when joining their small group and putting his arm around Seven's waist. The former Borg immediately turned to him, without any doubt very comfortable in his arms. "Lieutenant Albert Gerting, ma'am. It's my honor to meet you."

"Likewise, Lieutenant." More Janeway wasn't able to manage in this moment; there was so much happening her mind had to process - only that her mind wasn't in a processing mood right now. Luckily, Seven and Albert excused themselves and vanished in the crowd, so she could at least put her head off thinking about them for the moment.

"I'm sorry your mother and sister can't be here," Chakotay spoke again. "It wasn't easy to reach them, and by the time we finally did, there wasn't enough time left for them to return." Kathryn nodded; she knew her mother was with Phoebe and her family on their traditional Janeway Christmas trip, as she had asked them to.

"But they'll be here by January 2nd, and you're expected to visit your family in Indiana," the doctor added, smiling reassuringly at her and squeezing her arm lightly. "Now, if you excuse me as well..." The EMH busily walked away, and joined some people, obviously medical personnel, engaging in what seemed to be a very interesting conversation with them. Between Janeway and Chakotay, however, silence stretched while they watched their crew and their loved ones. Minutes passed before the Indian man offered to get his friend a drink, which she readily - almost with a bit of relief - accepted.

He never made it back to her, though.

Just when he had fetched the drinks from the bar on the other side of the room, someone clinked against a glass - Tom Paris was standing at the center of the stage and asking for the guests' attention.

"We are not far away from the new year," he began, then looked around and waited until all conversation had stopped, before he continued, "and it will be the first time in seven years we'll celebrate it with our families. *Both* families - our own and Voyager's crew. I hope you are as happy as we, B'Elanna and I, are to be here," enthusiastic agreement forced Tom to stop his speech for a moment, and he waved his hands in a muting gesture. "So... I did what I like doing most - searching the 20th century databases for anything that might just suit this occasion, and us. This is a song I think describes this crew, what lies behind us and what is yet to come, best. We will play it at midnight, so get ready, people - there's only 30... no, 25 seconds left!"

Everyone was watching Tom attentively, awaiting what would come next, what song he could possibly have chosen. There were some classics from the 20th and 21st century, and most people knew these - but obviously Tom Paris had found yet another piece of music that might make this evening just that little bit more memorable than it already was.

Ten seconds to go, and the whole group, still facing the stage, started counting backwards, getting louder with every second. When they reached the one, they were shouting so loud it was almost deafening; and when it was finally midnight, the crowd greeted the new year, 2379, by erupting into cheering and clapping; they jumped and danced, and hugged and kissed each other, and there was no face without delight and pure joy showing on it; even the Vulcans looked happy, in their very own way.

Seconds after the big chronometer had turned to midnight, music started playing. And surprisingly quick, the room calmed down, curious as to what Voyager's former pilot had chosen for this special moment.

An instrument, sounding distinctively like an accordion, gave only a few notes; then a woman sang the first line.

You and I can share the silence // Finding comfort together // The way old friends do

Some of the people were already nodding and smiling, understanding the words.

Another woman sang the next line.

And after fights and words of violence // We make up with each other // The way old friends do

More people smiled, and some pulled those standing next to them close. Every last bit of chatter died down; everyone concentrated on the lyrics, and already felt their effect.

Now other voices joined in; female as well as male ones.

Times of joy and times of sorrow // We will always see it through

An agreeing, acknowledging murmur went through the crowd, but only for a very short moment; no one wanted to miss even a single word of the song's text. Some of the people could be seen with tears in their eyes, leaning against a loved one. Most of them were Voyager's former crewmembers.

Oh I don't care what comes tomorrow // We can face it together // The way old friends do

And then, tears weren't only waiting to be shed in people's eyes anymore - relentlessly they were rolling down cheeks, dripping on clothes of their owners and the people's they were embracing. A whole room was crying with joy and sorrow, thinking of who and what they had lost and found, what they had left behind and what was still waiting for them ahead, wherever their journey, their next journey, would take them.

The lyrics were repeated, now with fully orchestrated music, and the reverberance of the song itself as well as of the room made it only sound even more imposing and overwhelming than it already was. One who had looked close would have seen people shivering and shaking at the sensation when the music and its lyrics washed over them, touched their hearts and souls.

And in one corner of the room, Kathryn Janeway came terribly close to losing her composure.

As she was watching her crew and their families, she felt like her whole world came crushing down around her. Helpless against it, she had to let tears stream freely, and sobs leave her throat without any chance of stopping them. She wanted to leave the room, but knew everyone would notice it when the doors were opened; so she pressed herself into a corner, half hidden in the shadows, and willed herself to calm down, to pull herself together, so she would be able to show a happy face and leave, pretending that everything was okay.

It might just have worked. Just one more time making use of the captain's mask, just one more time denying that she, at the end of the day, was only human herself, emotional and not immune to any kind of hurt and heartbreak.

It might have - hadn't it been for the one man who had never been fooled by her carefully schooled outside appearance to finally make it back to her side and unceremoniously pull her into his arms just as the song ended.

Everything that had kept her going over the past years fell from her then - all her worries and fears and sorrow, the strain of needing to bring a crew of almost 150 people back home to the Alpha Quadrant, her care for her people who she loved like a family, and doing everything while keeping the façade of a strong, undaunted captain up at all costs. What was left was only the woman behind the captain, the fragile, vulnerable human being behind the strong and brave Starfleet officer devoid of any weakness. Seven years she'd hidden this side of her, and had only, if at all, let it out when she was alone in her quarters at night. Seven years she had had every reason to keep going, and she did so, overcoming every depression plaguing her, every failure she accused herself of.

But in the arms of the man whose love she had always denied herself, and whom she had denied her love, because she simply couldn't act in a way she felt was irresponsible and inappropriate, was no holding back anymore. She

clung to him, her face hidden in his chest while his body shielded her from all eyes in the room, and allowed herself to cry. Cry for everything they had lost on their journey, the friends and crewmen, but also the time and the chances taken from them. The prospect of parting soon, everyone going their own way. Never again coming back to become one crew again.

But among all those tears of sorrow were also tears of joy and happiness. Fewer, maybe, but none of them less meaningful; they had saved so many lives, won new crewmembers, gained so much knowledge. And they all had found friends, a new and very special kind of family.

Suddenly, her earlier musings returned. Suddenly, seven years seemed so awfully short.

But, she had to push those thoughts aside. Their journey was over, and it was the best thing that could have happened to them. What had changed was that she had come to a point where she had stopped regretting that this journey ever happened. Maybe it was the greatest gift they had ever gotten, despite everything.

Slowly, she detached herself from Chakotay, lifting her head from his chest, his clothing - formal wear, but no uniform, as she only noticed now - stained with a dark, wet spot, and slightly embarrassed she rubbed with her hand over it in a vain attempt to dry the material.

Chakotay stopped her hand with one of his own, his other arm still around her, and nudged her to look at him. She met his eyes for a moment, but then looked down and away again.

"I really don't want the crew to see me like this," she murmured, her voice still weak from her heavy crying and the tears that just didn't stop running down her cheeks. She wanted to leave his embrace, but he held her fast and close.

"Don't worry, Kathryn. The worst thing that could happen is that they join us in a record-breaking group hug, to console the captain they love so much," he answered with a fond smile, and she laughed through her tears, the hiccupping noises this resulted in the most adorable sound he had ever heard. Gentle he brushed away the tears from her cheeks and then kissed irritated skin, caressing it with feathery light touches from his lips.

Just when she hesitantly snuggled back into his arms and put her head on his shoulder, Tom Paris' voice sounded again from the speakers.

"I almost forgot the most important thing. But thankfully I have a wife to remind me of everything I forgot," laughter filled the room at that, and increased when the helmsman added, "and if looks could kill, my dear friends..." He waited a moment until the crowd was silent again, using the opportunity to throw B'Elanna an air kiss. "What I wanted to say was, there is one person here tonight who deserves honorable mentioning - aside from my lovely wife of course," Tom grinned mischievously, ignoring Torres' reprimanding calling of his name, "and though everyone here knows who I'm talking about - and where, or more, in whose arms she is at the moment - please still allow me to say: Thank you, Captain Kathryn Janeway. You were and you are the best captain any crew can possibly wish for, and it was an honor to serve with you."

Kathryn groaned and tried to bury her face in the crook of Chakotay's neck, but the man holding her wouldn't let her do that. Not that there would have been any need to anyways. The whole room clapped and cheered, and those who were able to see the couple as they were standing in their little niche also smiled at them, but other than that, they all respected their privacy and stayed back.

It was no secret among the crew that there was a very special bond between their commanding duo, and encouraged by Tom Paris, everyone was waiting for them to finally admit their feelings to themselves and everyone else. They knew that the embrace they shared just then was a step into the right direction.

When everyone was again busy with their conversations in smaller and larger groups, with exchanging stories and meeting old and new friends, Janeway finally dared to look at Chakotay again.

The love she saw in his eyes, the fondness and affection, all those feelings she had thought long forgotten and abandoned, just like she had him and his subtle advances resented and abandoned so long ago, brought her to the verge of tears all over again.

To the day, she had never realized how much she really loved him; she had always known the feelings were there, whether she wanted them to or not; but she had never been aware of their depth. Especially not in the past three or four years. He had always been there, as her anchor, her advisor, the one she trusted most and relied on; the one she talked to and who listened to her and supported her - and if only by talking to her with this calming, warm and gentle voice of his. She had gotten used to him, taken him for granted. How she must have hurt him. And yet he was still with her, still at her side, taking care of her even now. How did she even deserve this man?

"Oh Chakotay... what have I done to us?" she whispered, her hand anxiously cupping his cheek.

"What was necessary. Don't look back, Kathryn. Let us look at the future," he said, a hopeful indication in his words.

"Our future," she answered his silent question after just the tiniest moment of hesitation. She would need time to accommodate to this, but she was sure she could do it. Because she knew now that she wanted it. She would miss her crew, her ship, their journey. Should would miss it all terribly, and there would come other days and nights when she could cry again. But if there was one thought she could never bear, one thing she would never be able to shed enough tears over, it would be losing him. She knew that now.

When he leant in slowly to kiss her, she met him halfway. Their first kiss was full of love, but years of suppressed feelings soon added a passionate note and they lost themselves in a hungry encounter, a dance of tongues and lips with and against each other that left them breathless and dizzy when they parted again.

The long look they shared afterwards was only broken by them becoming aware of the silence around them - and when they turned, they saw that everyone was staring at them. With huge and happy grins plastered on their faces. Somewhere among the crowd Janeway spotted Tuvok, and she could have sworn that he even had a "Finally!" expression on his face.

Kathryn and Chakotay smiled, a little embarrassed, and then shared another short kiss, which was loudly approved of by everyone present; hugs for the captain by several women and backslaps for the commander by a good number of men followed when the couple rejoined the crowd.

Tom's New Year song was played again sometime during the night, and this time, couples and families swayed to the music, dancing, humming, even singing along. And somewhere among them, Chakotay held Kathryn close to him and moved with her to the melody while shedding a tear or two of his own.

Celebrations went on till the late morning hours; celebrations of a new year in their new old, or old new, home, of new-found love, and of a group of friends that would forever remain just that - friends who'd always walk together.

Because they all belonged to a unique *patchwork family* and in their hearts, they were never going to part.

END