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AN: This story resulted from the 2010 VAMB Secret Santa Exchange. The request was: Janeway/Chakotay. Any rating, angst is great! I’m hardcore in character. Fingers crossed! :)

Summary: 9 months Post Endgame -KJ & C are commissioned to take a diplomatic cruise. During which they rediscover the love they have for each other. There's just one problem, they're both practically engaged to someone else.

Pairing: J/OC, C/7, J/C

Rating: R

Silver Bells

"Regarding interplanetary news, earlier today, Admiral Kathryn Janeway & Captain Chakotay departed from DS9 to embark on a three month diplomatic cruise to Khonsu IX, as the Federation's official welcome envoy. The mission will also act as the maiden voyage for the USS Astraea the Federation's newest Intrepid-class ship. Upon their return, Voyager's former command team will partake in celebratory festivities, for the one year anniversary of the intrepid crew's return from their impromptu seven year journey through the Delta Quadrant.

In related news, our cameras spotted Annika Hansen, formerly known as Seven of Nine, as she exited the acclaimed Jahzara bridal boutique in Paris. The wedding of Captain Chakotay and Annika Hansen is scheduled for the day after Voyager's official anniversary ball; the couples' hope is to make the most of the crew being in one location to help celebrate the joyous occasion.

Love seems to be in the air for Voyager's former captain as well. Admiral Kathryn Janeway seen here with Antonio Moretti, a long time friend of the family, is rumored to be considering a marriage proposal from the Italian heart throb. Admiral Janeway’s publicist denies the rumor, and would only confirm that the couple is dating.

In other news ....." the program snapped off abruptly as a curse rent the through the air of the luxurious VIP cabin. The persistent beeping of the vidcom grated on her nerves as she stalked over to the unit.

"What" Kathryn snapped as she accepted the call.

"I take it you've seen this evening's newsreel," Phoebe's visage stated.
"Ugh! I can’t believe they can’t find something, anything, else to address. How is it that every legitimate, newsworthy event I’m involved in, dissolves into an embarrassing exposé on my love life, what I ate for lunch, the name of the designer dress I wore, or if I’ve had ‘work’ done," Kathryn complained as she paced agitatedly.

"Kath -" Phoebe tried to interject.

"I mean really does any of that warrant broadcasting on FNN? It’s more the type of thing I’d expect of one those cheap entertainment channels," the matching robe to her onyx silk night gown billowed behind her as she continued to pace.

"Kathryn - -"

"And just how the hell did they know that Antonio proposed?!” Kathryn growled as she turned away from the screen again.

"If you keep ignoring me, I’ll tell the press about the childhood nickname you hated. Mmm...Admiral Kitty Kat Janeway has nice ring to it, don’t you think?" Phoebe taunted.

"Phoebe--" Kathryn warned as she eyed her younger sister.

"Better yet, I’ll let slip a certain photo of you in a little black bikini...." Phoebe threatened.

"You wouldn’t dare!" Kathryn protested as she tried to hide her smile, while pointing at the screen.

"Wouldn’t I?" Phoebe taunted with a raised eyebrow as mischief danced in her eyes.

"Fine, I’m sorry I ignored you," Kathryn apologized begrudgingly.

"Much better," Phoebe gloated as Kathryn’s visage disappeared to the far wall.

"So why did you call me?" Kathryn’s voice floated across the room.

"What? I can’t call my big sister, without an ulterior motive?" Phoebe asked innocently.

"I know you, Phoebe Janeway Gallagher," Kathryn prompted with a mock glare as she seated herself before the vid terminal.

"I can’t believe you, Kathryn!” the younger sister exclaimed, “I had to find out from FNN that you’re engaged?!” Phoebe asked incredulously
"That's because, I'm not," Kathryn countered.

"And why the hell not? The man is gorgeous!" Phoebe exclaimed.

"Phoebe..." Kathryn interjected.

"That dreamy olive complexion and sexy tall, muscular build. What I wouldn't give to trace my tongue down his structured jaw line." Phoebe continued.

"Phoebe..."

"Mmm... not too mention he has gorgeous dark hair and those eyes... I could drown in those captivating eyes. And let us not forget that seductive Italian accent," Phoebe growled in the back of her throat

"All right, calm down, Eartha Kitt," Kathryn chuckled.

"Hell, if it were me, I'd grab the chocolate sauce, strip him naked, tie him to the bed and --"

"Whoa! Sibs, you have officially crossed the sister line," Kathryn censored as she rubbed her temple with her thumb and forefinger.

The sister line was sort of censor button the two siblings established while they were teenagers. It was their way of letting each other know, when too much personal information was divulged.

"Sorry, this pregnancy has me horny as hell," Phoebe apologized, "Anyway; I know you have feelings for him, Kathryn. And he's head over heels for you. What's the problem?"

"It's just too --"

"Too what? Don't you dare say 'too soon'" Phoebe stated as she eyed her older sister.

"I would never say anything that cliché," Kathryn remarked with a wave of her hand.

"Then what?" Phoebe asked genuinely with concern reflecting in her bright blue eyes, as she watched Kathryn sip from her mug.

Kathryn shook her head slightly as she swallowed, "I don't know, I just don't know," she stated.
"That's not good enough, Katie. What did you tell the poor man?"

"I didn't say no," Kathryn interrupted before her sister could reply "- but I didn't say, yes either. I asked him to let me think it over for the duration of the cruise, and that when I returned I'd give him my answer." Kathryn stated as she dropped her eyes to her lap.

"Do you love him, Katie?"

"Of course, I love him,"

"Okay, let's try that again. Are you in love with him?" Phoebe stressed.

Grey blue eyes glistened for a moment, as Kathryn gazed at her sister, "I think I could be, if I let myself..."

The sisters continued their conversation for another hour, before Phoebe signed off. Kathryn closed the lid to the small vidcom as she stood, and recycled her empty coffee mug on her way to the view port. As ridiculous as it sounded, sometimes Kathryn envied her little sister. Over the course of the last seven years, Phoebe managed to live her life as she always had: out loud, as their mother joked.

Kathryn smiled as she thought of her nephew and brother in law. Kevin was the exact opposite of Phoebe. Her sister was blunt, eclectic, outgoing, and spontaneous. Kevin was tactful, conservative, introverted, and methodical. Kathryn wasn't sure how they did it, but the two were madly in love and maintained a fulfilling marriage. Now, Kathryn was about to become an Aunt for a second time. Except, this time she'd be able to witness the birth of her niece.

Kathryn sighed as she sat on the couch and continued to gaze out at the stars. Her fist rested beneath her chin as she contemplated her current situation, while her arm relaxed along the back of the cushions. *How the hell did the press found out about Antonio's proposal? He proposed only last night! We were alone at the vineyard, no one could've overheard...*

A nagging thought entered her mind and she shook her head to dispel the unpleasant thought.

“He wouldn't ....” She spoke out loud. For just a split second she wondered if Antonio, himself leaked the news. Kathryn narrowed her eyes as she thought about other possible ways the press could have found out. After a few minutes, she finally decided to not worry about it.
Her mind wandered back to memories of Voyager, as her eyes scanned the spacious quarters she'd been given. The rooms were only slightly smaller than her former quarters on Voyager. Sadly, there was no bathtub, but at least she could drink as much real coffee as she liked. Phoebe had teased her about the number of cargo containers Kathryn shipped ahead of her arrival to the ship, all of them filled with bags of coffee beans. Kathryn countered that she would never again travel without a well stocked assortment of her favorite beverage. Replicated coffee just wasn't the same.

The USS Astraea was nearly identical to Voyager, right down to the grade of carpet that lined the hallways. The differences were a stark reminder to Kathryn that she was only a passenger this time. Aside from not being in command of the ship, Kathryn noted the wall of replicator banks in the Messhall, instead of Neelix' galley. Thus, Captain Moore was fortunate to still have his private dining room. The new ship lacked an Aeroponics bay but surprisingly, Astraea did have an Astrometrics lab. In addition, the ship was equipped with the ablative armor made popular by the Prometheus class ships. But the Astraea lacked the lived in feeling Kathryn associated with Voyager.

As she rose to prepare for bed Kathryn's thoughts wandered to the circumstances of this trip. Fate was a cruel mistress. In the last nine months, Kathryn had done everything in her power to move on with her life, and she'd succeeded to a point. Her personal life now balanced her professional one. She had her family back, as well as the opportunity for love, all she had to do was reach out and embrace it.

Anyone looking at her would think she had it all. Kathryn smiled sadly at her reflection; she had everything that she could've hoped for upon her return, save one thing.

Alone with her own thoughts, Kathryn could finally acknowledge the truth she'd hidden on Voyager. A truth that she'd managed to hide from herself for a time as well. Somewhere along their seven year journey in the Delta Quadrant, Kathryn Janeway fell in love in with her best friend.

It was ironic really, just when she was ready to throw protocol to the wind, it no longer mattered. By that time, the man she loved was already involved with another woman. Not just any woman, but one she nurtured like an adopted daughter.

Kathryn shook her head to dispel the depressing thoughts. After all she only had herself to blame and as Aunt Martha always said, there's no use in crying over spilled milk. Instead, Kathryn redirected her thoughts to the circumstances of her current assignment. Apparently, once the head of state for Khonsu IX was informed of Voyager’s return, he was adamant that as a condition of their Federation membership, the illustrious command team of Voyager be
present during the induction ceremony.

Initially, the Prime Minister insisted that Voyager herself be present as well. Owen said something about the Minister's belief that only Starfleet's most acclaimed ship and thus the ships former captain and first officer should officiate over the induction proceedings. However, with Voyager docked at Utopia Planitia for the foreseeable future and Admiral Ross' flat out refusal for the use of the USS Bellerophon; Owen had no choice but to pull the only Intrepid class ship available. As a result, Kathryn found herself on a three month voyage with her former first officer, which meant she couldn't avoid Chakotay for much longer.

As she lay in bed starring at the ceiling, Kathryn silently congratulated herself on being successful in her attempt, to limit her interaction with Chakotay to a cordial acquaintance. Starfleet Command kept her relatively busy at work and her family occupied her time at home.

Kathryn closed her eyes against the memory of Sev-Annika calling, to inform that Chakotay had proposed. As was her custom, Kathryn offered a congratulatory smile and encouraged her former protégé to contact her, if she ever needed anything. Kathryn meant the comment as polite conversation. However, Annika being Annika took the invitation literally. At least once a week, Kathryn fielded a call from the young woman with questions or concerns regarding the up coming nuptials. Kathryn counted herself lucky; at least she hadn't had to maintain a facade with Chakotay as well.

Oddly, between the two, it was less painful to interact with Annika and Kathryn never stopped to analyze why.

Kathryn was avoiding him; Chakotay was certain of it. Every time he tried to catch her alone, she slipped through his fingers. Yesterday he'd tried to casually invite himself to join her table for breakfast. However, that idea was ruined when he noticed Captain Jack Moore already entertaining her. Hell, who was he kidding the man was shamelessly flirting with her and Kathryn was giving as good as she got.

Later that evening, Chakotay arrived early to the Captain's dining hall, in order to ensure he obtained a seat next to her. In addition to himself and Kathryn, Admirals Bennett, Lewis, and Williams were also in attendance. Chakotay's efforts were once again foiled by Captain Moore, who diverted Kathryn's attention for most of the evening.

Today was a new day and Chakotay was determined. The Astraea wasn't Voyager but he
could guess where Kathryn would go for a moment of peace and quiet. He'd already tried the upper deck of main engineering, the holodeck, and the observation lounge. It didn't help matters that she was constantly moving. Every time he checked the computer for her location, by the time he arrived she'd moved on to a different section of the ship.

Chakotay quickened his steps when he caught a glimpse of auburn hair round the bend in front of him. Chakotay smiled, when he observed Kathryn speaking with Admiral Lewis, relieved that his luck appeared to have turned for the better. He waited a few moments, for their conversation to conclude, until he noticed Kathryn's body language indicate that the Admiral had touched a nerve with whatever he'd just said to her.

“There you are, I've been looking all over for you,” Chakotay interrupted urgently as he reached her.

“Captain --” Admiral Lewis started.

“My apologies Admiral Lewis, but I really need to speak with Admiral Janeway, it's regarding an urgent matter,” Chakotay apologized as he gently pulled Kathryn to his side.

“Richard, thank you. I'll take this matter into consideration,” Kathryn tipped her head as she allowed Chakotay to guide her in the opposite direction.

“Thanks,” Kathryn sighed as she pinched the bridge of her nose.

“You looked like you could do with a bit of a rescue,” Chakotay smiled as they walked together.

“Trust me, you don't want to know,” Kathryn stated as she rolled her eyes.

“So, shall we go to your quarters or mine?” Chakotay asked abruptly.

“What?” Kathryn questioned as she turned to look at him.

“For the last week I've been trying to speak with you privately and failed miserably. I'm not about to let you slip away again; now, your quarters or mine? Mine are just on the other side of the deck,” Chakotay prompted.

“Well, we've already reached mine,” Kathryn motioned to the sliding doors of the quarters they now stood in front of.

Kathryn keyed her entrance code and then stepped inside once the doors parted.
“Can I get you something?” She asked as she walked into the living area.

“Whatver you're having is fine,” Chakotay answered.

Kathryn nodded as she walked toward her portable coffee maker. The compact machine whirred to life as she fiddled with the knobs and levers.

“It'll just take a moment and then the coffee will be ready,” She informed as she crossed the room.

“Make yourself comfortable, Chakotay,” Kathryn motioned to the sofa while she sat in the adjoining plush chair.

“Thanks,”

“So what did you need to speak with me about?” She questioned as she leaned back into the chair and crossed her legs.

Chakotay hesitated for a long moment prior to speaking, “I --” he was interrupted by the beeping of the coffee machine.

“Hold that thought,” Kathryn remarked as she stood and walked back toward the far wall.

When she returned, she carried a tray holding two coffee mugs, a small bowl and a small decanter.

“Let me,” Chakotay offered as he stood and took the tray from her before placing it on the coffee table.

Kathryn regained her previous seat and indicated with a nod of her head, that he should help himself to the sugar and cream, as she cradled her mug between her hands.

Chakotay grinned as he watched her appreciate the first sip her of beloved beverage. All the years he’d known her and he never tired of watching the bliss cover her features at moments like this.

“What's so funny?” Kathryn asked a few moments later.

“What?”
“You’re grinning. You obviously find something humorous,” Kathryn stated as a smile tug at her lips.

“It’s nothing, just a memory” Chakotay offered as he sipped his coffee.

Kathryn smiled politely and then let the subject drop. The silence stretched between them for a few minutes.

*When had the silence between them become awkward? She wondered. When did they begin to fidget and not meet each others eyes?*

“I hear congratulations are in order,” Chakotay prompted abruptly.

“Oh?” She questioned with a raised eyebrow.

“Don’t play coy, Kathryn. Half the quadrant knows by now,” he chided playfully.

“Knows what?”

“About your engagement. I have to admit, I was surprised. I didn’t realize you and he were that serious,” Chakotay commented as he placed the mug on the glass coffee table.

“You shouldn’t believe everything you hear,” Kathryn stated offhandedly.

“So --” he began

“Annika informed me that the two of you have chosen a venue,” Kathryn deflected.

“Yes, she wants to be married in Paris,” he confirmed as he noted her neutral expression.

*“Admiral Williams to Janeway” the comm system interrupted.*

“Janeway here, go ahead,” she answered as she tapped her combadge.

*“Prime Minister Tpyge is requesting to speak with you regarding the itinerary for the ceremony. I’m so sorry, Kathryn. We’ve tried to explain that you won’t be directly involved with organizing the event but he is rather persistent. And we need this contract. The rare minerals that Khonsu IX has to offer -”*

“It’s all right Ben, give me about three minutes and patch him through to my terminal,” Kathryn stated as she rose from her seated position.
“Aye, Williams out.”

“I’m sorry to cut this short, Chakotay -” she began.

“Duty calls, I understand,” Chakotay commented as he stood, “I’ll forgive you if you agree to have dinner with me tonight. It’s been awhile since we shared a meal and meaningful conversation,” he invited as he held her gaze with a dimpled smile.

Kathryn swallowed against the tiny flip-flop in her stomach as he smiled at her.

“Chakotay --” she began.

“I’m not accepting ‘No’, as an answer. My quarters 1800hrs,” Chakotay ordered as he exited her quarters.

Kathryn narrowed her eyes slightly as she watched him leave. She took a moment to unfurl her fists and pushed her irritation to the back of her mind, as she approached her desk.

While she waited for the Minister’s call, Kathryn decided it was probably best that she attend dinner under her own steam. Chakotay, in his own way, had already called her out on avoiding him. If she didn’t show up he’d probably find a way to publicly paint her into a corner, so to speak.

It would be just her luck that he’d happen to catch her during a meeting to reconfirm their appointment. No, it was better to do this privately. She couldn’t afford to be caught unawares where Chakotay was concerned.

She sighed deeply, before fixing a broad smile on her face to answer the incoming message to her terminal.

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Chakotay frowned slightly as he thought over dinner with Kathryn. She hadn’t behaved in a manner that would make anyone doubt her genuine fondness of him as a former crew member. But the interaction lacked the warmth he was used to during their private dinners.

A thought suddenly occurred to him: she hadn’t touched him.

Usually after one of their dinners she’d lay a hand on his arm, chest or shoulder. With this aberration in mind Chakotay racked his brain to recall the last time he’d felt her touch.
Voyager's former Capitan was what the Delaney twins had dubbed 'touchy-feely'. At any point during an interaction with a crewman, Kathryn Janeway was known to offer a pat on the back or an encouraging squeeze of the arm. On Voyager he'd often been privileged to receive a gentle squeeze of his shoulder, a caress across his chest, and on a few occasions a gentle stroke of his face.

Chakotay was utterly shocked when he realized that the last time Kathryn voluntarily touched him, had been nearly a year ago, when they danced an obligatory waltz at the homecoming gala.

She had allowed him to loop arms with her, when the President introduced them to the general assembly of attendees, but that was only as they entered the gala. Then she very neatly disengaged herself from him.

Chakotay furrowed his brow as he now recalled that Kathryn had purposely stepped forward a few centimeters, so that his fingers only grazed the material of her clothing, when he'd reached to place his hand at the small of her back.

Chakotay rested his forearms on his thighs as he sat forward on the couch.

Kathryn's coffee cup sat on the table, untouched.

He narrowed his eyes at the mug and decided it was time he stepped his up tactics where Kathryn was concerned. He'd tolerated her actions up until now, the lunches he knew she kept with most of the senior staff at least once a month, except for him. The weekly, sometimes daily, calls he knew she shared with Annika and B'Elanna. And yet not once had she sought him out. He refused to allow her to slot him as just another of her former Voyager crew. As if they had never been more, meant more to each other.

A month passed and life aboard the starship Astraea slipped into an easy détente for everyone aboard. Kathryn and Chakotay's days consisted of lengthy diplomatic meetings with various federation charter members aboard, as well as, those on Khonsu IX via subspace communications. Without the constant weight of command on her shoulders, Chakotay noted that Kathryn was able to relax from time to time and simply enjoy the ride.

In the weeks that followed their initial private dinner, Chakotay used his intimate knowledge of Kathryn Janeway to his full advantage.

He tried anything and everything to subtly win her friendship back. From sharing his most
recent vid of Miral’s first steps to secretly fielding Admiral Lewis’ communiqués, since he knew of her disdain for the crotchety older man, which gave him an excuse to suggest they meet once week, so that he could brief her on what he’d discussed with Admiral Lewis in her stead.

To Chakotay’s relief, gradually the two settled back into the familiar routine of their working dinners. During which, the former colleagues rekindled and solidified their friendship. The first hour of the evening, they discussed the day’s occurrences, which ranged from the newest communication from Starfleet headquarters, to the most recent outlandish demand from Prime Minister Tpyge. Then the conversation ventured toward the latest bit of gossip pertaining to their former crew. Slowly, the two fell back into the easy camaraderie of their early years on Voyager, as they laughed and teased each other freely.

As the weeks progressed, it was common to find the former command duo on the holodeck together, either playing a friendly game of velocity, going for long walks, or indulging in a sail on Lake George. Unbeknownst to the other, as they revitalized their friendship, long denied and subjugated emotions began to resurface.

Chakotay admitted to himself that he’d missed his conversations with Kathryn. His discussions with Annika were often frustrating, as her views on matters were sometimes pedantic at best and down right narcissistic at worst.

Unsurprisingly, Chakotay began to have second thoughts regarding his approaching marriage. Gradually, he realized that his heart still lay nestled within the palm of the woman warrior he’d loved for years.

Kathryn had yet to give Antonio a proper answer regarding his proposal. And with each passing day she felt herself stepping back from her Italian paramour. Kathryn admitted to herself that she’d missed Chakotay’s warped sense of humor, as well as his companionship. And when she fell asleep each night, it wasn’t Antonio’s gentle smile and alluring azure eyes that greeted her; instead it was her angry warrior’s dimpled grin and enchanting mocha gaze that beckoned to her.

As each attempted to maintain the status quo of their close friendship, they were oblivious to the scuttlebutt floating around the ship, as the crew and other dignitaries traveling to Khonsu IX, whispered life into the erstwhile rumors that suggested Voyager’s command team were secretly involved romantically.
"Sooo......" Prompted the visage of B'Elanna Torres as she spoon fed Miral.

"So what?" Chakotay smiled as he watched her try to feed the squirming child in front of her.

"Oh don't even try it; this is me you're talking to. How are things going?"

"Personally or professionally?"

"Both"

"Well, professionally, same as always. It's almost like we never left Voyager."

"So you and Kathryn are okay?" She asked as Miral dribbled strained peas down her bib.

"Why wouldn't we be?" Chakotay asked

"You seriously, have to ask that question?" B'Elanna scoffed as she dipped the baby spoon into another small round container.

"That's old news, B'E. Kathryn gave us her blessing," he stated.

"What did she say when you asked her to be your 'best man'?" She inquired as she eyed him.

Chakotay tugged on his ear as he shifted his gaze away from her.

"You didn't ask her," B'Elanna stated knowingly.

"Not yet, no," he admitted.

"It's been five weeks, why not?" She asked.

"The timing just hasn't been right," he offered lamely.

"Tayo, the timing is never going to be right to ask the woman you're still in love with, to stand with you as you marry what is tantamount to her daughter."

"B'Elanna...."

"No! I can't believe you. I could just throttle you, you know,"

"We've been over this B'El," Chakotay interrupted.
“I know, I know and I promised not to bring it up again. But marrying Seven when you’re in love with someone else, is a disaster waiting to happen,”

“B’El-

“No!” B’Elanna glowered, “What kind of friend would I be, if I didn't say something? Damn it, Chakotay!” She hissed quietly, for Miral’s benefit, “It’s been nearly eight years. I can understand why nothing happened between the two of you while we were out there. But what about now? We’re home, you don’t report to her directly any longer. Hell, you’re not even in the same division any longer.” B’Elanna questioned.

“Well, there’s the little problem of, both of us being engaged to other people,” he stated sarcastically.

“That’s targshit and you know it. Neither of you are married yet. There’s still time,”

Chakotay gave her a pained look.

“Did you and Kathryn have a fight or something?” The half Klingon asked concerned.

“No, we're fine,” he answered noncommittally.

"Mmm hmm..."

"I'm telling you we're fine, just fine," he reiterated gruffly.

“Is it Seven?” She asked suddenly.

Chakotay pursed his lips before he replied, “Did you know that she's been tapping Kathryn for wedding idea?”

“Tapping?” That must be one of Tom’s twentieth century colloquialisms,” B’Elanna chuckled, “To answer your question, yes, I know about that. And I also know, how much it pains Kathryn every time Seven calls her,” B’Elanna offered.

“What do you mean?” He asked concerned.

“How can I put this...” she pondered as she wiped Miral’s face and hands, “Kathryn is more than willing to help any member of her crew. She’ll drop whatever she’s doing the minute she knows one of us is having a rough time. But with Seven, your fiancée isn't contacting her
former captain about difficulty adjusting to alpha quadrant life. She’s calling Kathryn for her opinion on wedding gowns, invitations, the proper number of bridesmaids, what type of cake and champagne to order; how to fashion her hair for the ceremony, what sort of gift should she get for Sekaya, and what’s the best locale in the AQ for your honeymoon,”

“I’m probably breaking a confidence here, but Kathryn loves you. She has for years. She just...in her mind couldn’t act on that love until we were home. Never mind that Voyager was home for a good number of the crew. She has no idea about your intent to ask her to stand with you. Take that knowledge and imagine if the roles were reversed. How would you feel if Kathryn called you at all hours of the day, asking your input on her impending marriage to Antonio? If she modeled wedding gowns in front of you, asked your opinion on lingerie, or honeymoon locations,” B’Elanna paused and gave her long time friend a meaningful look.

B’Elanna watched Chakotay’s normally bronze complexion pale. She didn’t regret the manner in which she spoke to him, only that the truth of her words had caused him pain.

“Moore to Chakotay,” the communication system interrupted.

“Go ahead, Captain,” Chakotay responded.

“We’ll be in orbit of Khonsu IX in approximately thirty minutes, you asked that I inform you,” the Captain reminded.

“Yes, thank you. I’ll inform Admiral Janeway and we’ll meet you in transporter room one. Chakotay out,” Voyager’s former first officer ended the call as he tapped his badge lightly.

“Tayo!” Miral greeted excitedly on the vidscreen with a wide grin.

“Hi precious,” he whispered.

B’Elanna smiled at her daughter, “Do you realize that both you and Kathryn call her that? And yet neither of you have seen her together. I didn't mean to hurt you Chakotay. But I would be less of friend if I didn't say something; if let you walk into something that you could potentially regret for the rest of your life. Look, you’ve got another seven weeks before you return to Earth, take that time and figure what or who you want.”

“Thanks. I gotta go. I’ll call soon, okay?” Chakotay offered distractedly.

“Be safe and come home in one piece,” B’Elanna ordered.

“Yes, ma’am” Chakotay mocked saluted before he disconnected the call.
Although, Kathryn and Chakotay dealt primarily with Prime Minister Typge, Khonsu IX was actually ruled under a monarchy. At the official welcome luncheon, Prime Minister Typge surprised the delegate party when he informed, that the King and Queen ordered the royal summer cottage prepared for their Starfleet guests. The summer cottage was in actuality a royal palace. The marble floors and regal wall coverings spoke of the owners’ wealth and the considerable staff of servants catered to every luxury one could imagine.

Queen Isisea provided a brief account of the palace history as Kathryn and Chakotay followed her and the King into a separate wing of the residence. If Kathryn or Chakotay thought it unusual of their hosts to afford an entire palace wing to just the two of them, neither spoke of on the matter. Finally, after the quartet traversed the labyrinth of halls, the royal couple opened a pair of large, heavy ornate double doors.

Immediately, Kathryn knew there had been misunderstanding. It was obvious that the monarchs believed she and Chakotay shared a far more intimate relationship. By the look of the opulent room, this was the equivalent to a royal honeymoon suite.

Before she could address the matter with the reigning monarchs, Prime Minister Tpyge appeared.

“Your Majesty's, if you would permit, I’d be happy to continue the tour so that you may attend to matters of court,” the alien offered nervously.

“Yes, although we’ve enjoyed meeting you, there are matters that require our attention at this busy time,” King Tempur replied with a slight nod of his head.

“We understand, implicitly. Your Grace,” Kathryn nodded in return.

“As woman of your stature, I’m sure that you do, Admiral. We shall reconvene tomorrow morning to continue the negotiations,” he assured as he ushered Queen Isisea out of the room.

“Admiral Janeway, I take it that you are pleased with your accommodations?” Minister Tpyge beamed as he clasped his hands in front of him.

Kathryn and Chakotay shared a meaningful look, one that did not go unnoticed by their appointed ambassador.
“Is there a problem?” the alien asked Kathryn.

“I believe there may have been a misunderstanding. It would appear that we’ve been given a room intended for a bonded couple?” she asked delicately.

“But of course! We wouldn’t dream of separating the two of you, so soon after your bonding ceremony. Why do you think we were so insistent that the two of you come together? On Khonsu IX, it is seen as the greatest show of respect for such a couple to join our cultivating ceremony. That is why we have elected to have the induction ceremony during this time. What better time to celebrate joining your Federation, eh? And who better to officiate with our King and Queen, than Starfleet’s own reigning monarchs?” Minister Tpyge argued exuberantly.

“The room is perfect, Minister. Thank you. Perhaps we could trouble you for a tour of the gardens? They look absolutely stunning,” Chakotay appeased as he looked out the patio doors.

“Yes, yes! Come, you’ll love the....”the alien ambassador prattled as he led them outside into the lavish catacombs of greenery.

“Chakotay,” Kathryn mumbled under her breath as she smiled and pretended to enjoy the tour.

Chakotay sighed as he rested his hand against the small of her back, “We’ve done this a thousand times, Kathryn,” he reminded.

Kathryn knew he was right. She’d lost count the number of times; while in the Delta Quadrant, an alien dignitary mistakenly believed that she and Chakotay were mates. More times than she’d care to admit in those situations, Voyager’s receipt of supplies depended on how well she and Chakotay were able to pull off the happily married couple ploy. They’d had to play house a number of times on Patriarchal worlds, as well as, in a few Matriarchal societies along the journey home.

“I studied the charter thoroughly. Nowhere does it state, that Khonsu’s membership is dependent upon the marital status of the welcome envoy. That was the first thing I looked for when Tpyge was so insistent that we both attend. The news of our separate engagements must’ve somehow been misconstrued. That happened enough with the rumor mill on Voyager, and we were all on the same ship. Imagine what can happen to a story when separated by various solar systems,” he stated.
Over the next two weeks, negotiations for mining rights, finalization of export treaties and historical tours came and went on Khonsu IX. All that remained of their stay was the farewell gala, which the inhabitants planned to coincide with the local cultivation festival.

Chakotay rolled his shoulders against the fitted high neck, sleeveless doublet he wore. The action caused the metal livery collar to stretch momentarily across his chest. Chakotay eyed his reflection in the mirror as the slight weight of the collar settled across his shoulders once more. Something about his ensemble seemed vaguely familiar. The black leather vest, pants and knee high boots weren’t uncomfortable, far from it, the alternating velvet material of the doublet was quite comfortable. Not to mention, the cut and color of the article accentuated his broad shoulders and bronze complexion.

Chakotay’s breath caught when Kathryn exited her bathroom, while the Queen’s attendants completed the last of their duties, flaring out Kathryn’s train and primping her hair. Kathryn wore a V-necked sleeveless gown of gold pleated silk, with a red and gold over-mantle tucked into a grey-gold scarf belt. Her hair fell in auburn waves with fine gold thread twined throughout. A pair of bracelets adorned her wrists, as well as a pair of gold bands which worn high on each arm. Her slate blue eyes were highlighted with shadowy greyish blue eye makeup and her lips were stained a soft pink color. Atop her head sat a dainty crown of gold and ruby jewels.

She looked exquisite.

As Kathryn raised her head to meet his eyes, Chakotay found new meaning behind the famous playwright's phrase, "Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale her infinite variety."

“You look ravishing,” he compliment unknowingly.

Kathryn smiled, as she curtsied gracefully, “I thank thee, for thine compliment,” she offered as she inclined her head in his direction, “You look very dashing in your own right,” Kathryn complimented as she rose.

Chakotay grinned at her playfulness before he extended his arm, “Shall we?” He asked

“We shall,” she confirmed as she gathered the train of her dress and then accepted his arm while they exited the suite.

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Kathryn took a deep breath as she heard Minster Tpyge's muffled voice introduce ‘Starfleet’s reigning Monarchs Admiral Kathryn Janeway and Captain Chakotay,’ as they reached the large ornate doors of the palace ballroom. A roar of applause filled her ears as the doors opened to
reveal a long aisle, at the end of which sat a throne. As they neared the Royals, the King and Queen rose from their seats to greet them. Kathryn kept her hand rested atop Chakotay’s outstretched fist as the Queen’s attendants had instructed of her. As they reached their seats Chakotay released her and took his own seat to her left.

If the ball was as elaborate as the state dinner they’d just completed, Kathryn feared for her sobriety.

The ceremonies were beautiful but exceedingly long. Dinner had been a three hour affair, with the speeches, various toasts, and a whirl wind seven course meal. And of course with each toast, she was obligated to take a drink of wine. Chakotay chuckled at her predicament, when King Tempur asked if the wine was not to her liking, as he noted her goblet was still half full while everyone else was working a second glass. Kathryn smiled her most sincere diplomatic smile, before downing the rest her glass to pick up a new one for the second round of toasting.

By now, as she sat opposite of Chakotay in the ballroom, Kathryn had lost count how many glasses of wine she’d imbibed.

“Eight,” Chakotay whispered behind a smile as he leaned in her direction.

“What?” Kathryn questioned.

“You’re trying to remember how many glasses of wine you drank,” he answered.

“How could you possibly know that?” Kathryn grinned.

“Because I know you,” he offered with a dimpled smile.

“Damn. I hate being a foregone conclusion,” Kathryn huffed playfully.

“Oh, you’re never that, Kathryn. And you never will be,” Chakotay assured as he held out his hand to her.

Kathryn slipped her hand into his, as she watched the King and Queen descend onto the dance floor.

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“I thought they would never tire,” Kathryn lamented as she and Chakotay returned to their suite after the farewell gala, “one more glass of wine, and you would’ve had to carry me
“They do appear to be a long winded society,” Chakotay agreed.

“Starfleet should have sent Admiral Hayes,” Kathryn joked.

“Can you imagine?” Chakotay guffawed as Kathryn disappeared into her bathroom.

Chakotay removed the chain collar from around his shoulders, as he entered his private bathroom. He rested tiredly on the ottoman, before bending to remove his boots. He’d finally managed to free himself of the doublet when he heard Kathryn call for him in the outer room.

“Chakotay...I,” she hesitated.

When he exited he found a very frustrated Kathryn Janeway sitting on the bed, sans makeup, crown, and shoes.

“What’s wrong?” Chakotay asked he watched her twist to reach her back.

“I can't get the sash. There’s one sash, somewhere back here, that will release me from this thing,” Kathryn explained as she tried to reach behind her.

Chakotay chuckled softly as he moved around behind her. After a few moments, of inspecting the various sashes and laces that made up the closure of Kathryn’s gown, Chakotay released what he hoped was the right one.

The surprised gasp that escaped Kathryn as she clung to the bodice of the dress, confirmed he’d at least found the release for half of the dress.

Chakotay watched mesmerized by the sight of her bare back as the silk fabric pooled around her waist. He wasn’t sure if it was the wine, the planet, or the fact that Kathryn was nearly naked that prompted his next action. Perhaps it was a little bit of all three, in addition to the desire he’d felt mount for her during their journey to Khonsu IX.

Kathryn blamed the alcohol sloshing around in her blood for not realizing that her dress would for all intent and purposes fall off if Chakotay pulled the right sash. As it were, she barely reacted in time to prevent the front the dress from unraveling.

She bit her lower lip as she felt his fingers stroke the length of her spine. Kathryn's breath quickened as his fingers continued to pull the sashes at her lower back. As the skirt of her dress gapped open to reveal the small of her back and curve of her hip, she felt his lips kiss
the back of her neck minutes before his fingers tangled in her hair and turned her head, so this his lips captured hers in a soul searing kiss.

Chakotay deepened the kiss as he savored her intoxicating softness; she tasted of honey and rich wine. Slowly, Chakotay pressed her back against the mattress while his tongue danced with hers, as he lowered himself to lie on top of her. He caressed the skin of her back while he slowly pushed the hem of her gown higher. He rolled them onto their sides and groaned in pleasure, as Kathryn stroked him through the leather pants he still wore. Chakotay kissed her neck while he bunched the fabric of her dress higher. He slipped a muscled thigh between her parted legs, as she nipped his shoulder.

Chakotay's arousal was heightened as he watched their reflection in the floor to ceiling windows. He watched his bronze hands smooth down the expanse of Kathryn's pale bare back, as his other hand disappeared beneath the folds of fabric pooled around her hips.

Belatedly, movement beyond the patio door, in the shadows of the garden demanded his attention. He kissed Kathryn deeply to distract her as he lowered the hem of her gown, while he grabbed the edge of the bed covering to wrap around her shoulders, before releasing her from the kiss.

She knew Chakotay could see the desire in her eyes, and for once Kathryn didn't try to hide it. The tip of her tongue wet her lips before she leaned forward to kiss him again, as she stroked his manhood. Chakotay kissed her hard as he closed a hand around hers. He groaned in pleasure when she sucked his lower lip between her teeth momentarily. His eyes flashed onyx sparks as his gaze swept over her face, before caressing her cleavage.

“Make love with me, Chakotay,” Kathryn beckoned

“I would love nothing more, but you'd regret it in the morning, Kathryn” he stated knowingly.

“I won't,” she promised breathlessly as she nibbled his earlobe while she continued to stroke him.

Chakotay stopped her caress and pulled her hand from his pants, before briefly kissing her again. He smiled as he looked upon her face.

“Once were back we'll explore this,” he promised, “but right now, we have an audience,” he whispered.

“Oh, hell” Kathryn groaned as she rested her head against his shoulder.
Chakotay held her to him with his left arm, while Kathryn pressed the small blue jewel on the bracelet she still wore.

Earlier in the evening, Queen Isisea instructed to press the blue jewel, should they need to alert the palace guards regarding anything suspicious. If pressed, the gemstone would dispatch a stealth security team to the perimeter of their suite. The action would also initiate a bio-scan of the palace grounds.

The guards and the palace security system failed to produce evidence of an intruder, but everything in Chakotay’s being screamed that he and Kathryn had not been alone.

Upon their return to the ship, the opportunity to explore their feelings did not eventuate immediately. Between completing the requisite post away mission reports, attending mandated subspace debriefing interviews, and then answering an unexpected distress call, four weeks had passed since that final night on Khonsu IX.

The night Astraea set a course for Earth, for the second time, Chakotay and Kathryn finally found time to share an uninterrupted meal together in her quarters. After dinner, sometime between discussing the previous week’s events and Miral’s latest antic, they fell asleep on Kathryn’s couch.

She wasn’t sure what woke her, but when Kathryn opened her eyes she was tucked securely against Chakotay’s chest. Kathryn signed contently as she lightly traced the tattoo above his brow while he slept unaware of her action. Although, she guessed some part of his consciousness was aware based on the slight smile that touched his lips and by the way his arm tightened around her.

They hadn’t talked about what happened on the planet yet. Kathryn wasn’t sure what made her bold enough to lean forward to kiss him, and she didn’t question the action. It was the sound of his rumbling voice that stopped her.

“Don’t start something you can’t finish, Kathryn,”

“And how do you what I was about to do or not do?” She grinned.

“Can’t tell you...Temporal Prime Directive,” he joked
“Please, don’t even joke about that. You’ll give me a headache,” she warned as she tapped his chest to let her up.

“Come on,” she commanded with an outstretched hand, “we can’t sleep on this thing.”

“Kathryn?” Chakotay asked as he finally opened his eyes.

She dropped her head to the side before answering, “Just sleep, Chakotay. I’m too exhausted for anything else,” she answered honestly as he grasped her hand and allowed her to pull him to his feet.

While Kathryn changed into a nightgown in the bathroom, Chakotay removed his uniform down to his boxers and slipped between the sheets of the queen size bed.

When she finished in the bathroom, Kathryn quietly slipped under the covers. After she settled on her side, Chakotay spooned behind her as he wrapped his arm around her waist. The couple fell asleep easily as he pulled her securely against his chest.

That night set a precedent for each night there after.

Unfortunately, a week later, Chakotay’s suspicions regarding an intruder at the palace were substantiated. Unbeknownst to the crew of the Astraea, during the five week trip back to Earth, images of Chakotay and Kathryn surfaced and mysteriously found their way to several tabloid and news agencies.

There were at least a dozen, if not more, images of them as they shared an intimate candlelit dinner or while they relaxed at the beach. Images surfaced of them as they privately toured the palace gardens together. And of course there were was an abundance of vids and images, of Voyager’s former command duo, as they danced closely during the farewell ball.

If that wasn’t enough, an even greater matter of importance was leaked and was ultimately substantiated by images Chakotay had hoped would never be revealed to the prying eyes of the public. The pictures depicted him and Kathryn while he untied the back of her dress. And unfortunately, there were also a couple of he and she on her bed exploring each other as they kissed.

Chakotay cringed as he recalled his conversation with Annika. He tried to explain the situation, but Seven had been unyielding as she called off their engagement.

If he were honest, Chakotay was relieved. These last few weeks with Kathryn reminded him
why he fell in love with her. During their journey on Astraea she'd been... vivacious. It had been years since he'd seen that side of her; since he'd actually seen Kathryn, and not just Captain Janeway. The time together cultivated the love he held secret in his heart. The kiss was inevitable, it would have happened whether they were aboard the ship or planet side.

Since their return to the ship there were times when Kathryn gazed at him a certain way, and he was sure that she loved him, was in love with him. Her eyes reaffirmed her words that she wouldn't have regretted being intimate with him that night on the planet.

Chakotay paced outside Kathryn's quarters as he attempted to come up with a way to broach the subject. *How did she react when she found out?* And knew by now that she was definitely aware of the situation. Hell, the entire Federation was aware, and he'd still not heard from her yet.

Chakotay eyed the verification document in his hand uncertainly. He blamed tiredness and an elevated blood alcohol level, for his lapse of awareness during the Prime Ministers final speech of the night. For that benign little ceremony resulted in a legally binding marriage between Chakotay and his former captain.

The verification was so deeply embedded in the doctrine of cultural idioms, that Chakotay had almost missed it, but it was true. As far as the inhabitants of Khonsu IX were concerned, Captain Chakotay and Admiral Kathryn Janeway were now husband and wife.

And there was no quick annulment process available either; to annul the marriage was tantamount to committing a sacrilegious act against the Khonsuians.

Chakotay took a deep breath, it was now or never, they were due to dock at DS9 in thirteen hours. Chakotay rang her chime for admittance. After a few moments, when there was no response and the computer verified her location, he quickly keyed in her code and entered her living room.

"Kathryn?" He called as the doors slid closed.

Her husky voice floated back to him from the direction of her bedroom.

“Antonio, I--” Kathryn began.

“Katarina, there is no need to explain,” Antonio interrupted with a thick Italian accent.
“But there is,” she countered.

“No, Bella. I love you but I know that you only feel affection for me. I don’t hold your whole heart. And I never did. I knew that when I asked you to be my wife,” he revealed.

Kathryn’s eyes glittered with unshed tears as she gazed at him.

She’d already muddled through several emotionally draining conversations about the matter. She’d spent most of her morning speaking with her mother and sister, Owen Paris, her publicist, half of her former senior staff, Prime Minister Tpyge, and Annika Hansen.

“Do you love him? Katarina?” Antonio asked emphatically.

Kathryn closed her eyes briefly as she let the answer wash over her consciousness.

“I have seen the pictures, Katarina,” he began but stopped as he witnessed her blush. “I saw those too. But they are not the images I speak of. Not once have you ever gazed at me with such naked adoration and love. You must tell him,” Antonio beseeched.

“I hope you’ve found happiness, and if you’re ever in need of anything, like someone to love you, don’t hesitate to contact me. Ciao, Bella,” Antonio kissed his fingers, before touching the screen as he disconnected the call.

Kathryn was emotionally exhausted. Weariness resonated throughout her being and in one unguarded moment, Kathryn allowed a tear to escape down her cheek. When a second threaten to follow the first, she quickly wiped the moisture from her eyes and took a deep breath.

She turned with the intent of exiting her bedroom and froze in her steps.

“Chakotay,” she breathed.

"I rang but you didn't hear me," he explained as he entered her bedroom.

"I take it, you heard that?" She asked, referring to her conversation with Antonio.

Chakotay nodded solemnly as he stroked her arm.

"Are you okay?" He asked concerned.
"Not yet," she answered truthfully, as she moved to enter the living room.

Chakotay grasped her arm lightly to keep her in place, “Kathryn--”

“I’m not -- I promise I won’t shut you out, Chakotay. I just need a moment to think... about this ... And I can think more clearly ... about this ... if you’re not here. We both need to think,” Kathryn suggested with her back to him.

She took his silence to mean, he was in agreement with her. However, Kathryn couldn’t have been further from the truth.

Gently, Chakotay turned her to face him, before leaning forward to kiss her.

As his lips melded with hers, Chakotay felt her body melt into his frame. He kissed her slowly... softly, as he seductively, made love to her mouth.

His hands slid up her back to press her shoulders firmly against his chest. He held her firmly as his tongue delved into the warm recesses of her mouth. Chakotay groaned in pleasure when he felt her fingers slide into his hair. The kiss was intoxicating, like no other he’d share with a woman.

Chakotay sighed drunkenly as Kathryn breathlessly separated her lips from his. Her skin was flushed and her eyes were dark with arousal as she sucked her bottom lip between her teeth.

“Cha-ko-tay --” she whispered as she leaned away from him.

“Shh--” Chakotay hushed her with two fingers against her lips, “You think too much, Kathryn,” he whispered as he captured her lips again.

“Mmm” Kathryn moaned in pleasure he reclaimed her mouth.

His lips moved over hers sensually as he cupped her buttocks, while his free hand slipped into her hair.

Chakotay kissed her for a pleasurable eternity, before he slowly released her.

Kathryn moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue, as she swallowed against the desire within her while she attempted to regain her bearings.

“Prepare yourself, Kathryn,” Chakotay warned as his eyes swept the length of her body, “I don’t intend on letting you go. The minute we’re home, I plan on kidnapping my wife, for a
Chakotay delighted as her eyes grew dark with anticipated excitement. Lovingly, he cupped her face in his hands before leaning forward to kiss her again, “I love you,”

“You plan to kidnap me?” she asked as he nibbled her lips.

“Yup,”

“How are you planning to get by the press, the admiralty--”

“You seem to forget your husband was a Maquis once upon a time,” Chakotay fingers stroked the underside of her breast.

“Mmm...might get you past the press...maybe the admiralty...maybe,” she offered, “what about our crew,” she asked as he kissed her neck.

“They’d cheer me on,” Chakotay chuckled as her fingers traced his tattoo.

“I’m sure they would,” she stated with a lopsided grin, “but I doubt, they’d forgive us for missing the reunion.”

“True,” he offered as he kissed her.

Chakotay growled softly in the back of his throat, as her com unit beeped unceasingly.

“I already know who it is, but I’ll let it you answer it...just this once,” he ceded as Kathryn moved out of his embrace while he mentally formulated an exit strategy once they reached DS9.

A few moments later Kathryn smoothed her arms around his shoulders, as she knelt behind him on the bed.

“I love you,” she whispered as she kissed his neck.

“You’re trying to distract me, aren’t you?” Chakotay asked, before trapping her within his embrace as he rolled her beneath him on the bed.

Kathryn grinned, “Tuvok sends his regards.”

“Damn Vulcan,” Chakotay grumbled half heartedly as he hovered above her, “How does he
know? I swear every time...he does it every time. We’re not even within a parsec and still he just...knows,”

“These should be familiar images to everyone who remembers USS Voyager’s extraordinary return to Earth after a seven year odyssey in the Delta Quadrant. Voyager has captivated the hearts and minds of the people throughout the Federation, so it seems fitting that on this, the eve of their return Voyager’s former command team, Admiral Kathryn Janeway and Captain Chakotay confirm that they’ve exchanged this season’s traditional Silver Bells for Wedding Bells.

As you may recall each were previously engaged prior to embarking on the recent welcome cruise to Khonsu IX. Both Annika Hansen and Antonio Moretti wish the couple well.

In the midst of this joyous occasion and Christmas season, let us now take a moment to recall the sacrifices made by those members of the crew who cannot be with us. This is Celeste Fusari, reporting with FNN news, wishing you and yours a joyous holiday season.”

Fin.