

Divergence

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Author's note: Inspired by the initial reports of a new series featuring Picard and I'm always looking for a chance to revisit this pairing. My gratitude to Rocky for betaing this story. (Written in 2019)

"So, tell me, Jean-Luc, are the rumors true?" Will Riker reversed his chair and straddled it in his usual way and sat down. He leaned forward, elbows on the table, and observed his former commanding officer. In the background, the light twinkling against the champagne glasses and the clink of silverware punctuated the dull murmurs around them. Conversation at official Starfleet galas always seemed muted to Will. Perhaps it was the environment in the aftermath of the Dominion War; no one was willing to call too much attention to themselves and the extravagance was decidedly muted in deference to the austere budgetary measures that had recently been enacted due to the high cost of post-war reconstruction.

Jean-Luc Picard arched an eyebrow but kept his expression maddeningly neutral. "There are all *always* rumors, Number One."

Will bit back a smile. He'd had been in command of the *Titan* for more than a year now, but old habits, like nicknames, died hard. "You *know* which rumor in particular I'm talking about."

"Perhaps you would like to enlighten me."

Will glanced around nervously. Clearly Picard was not going to make this easy on him. "I heard they want you to run for office," he said in a low voice. "Is it true?"

Picard tipped his head to the side. "Outside," he said, indicating the French doors on the east side of the ballroom. "I need some fresh air."

Riker followed Picard out the door, exchanging a quick look with his wife, Deanna Troi, as he passed her; she was deep in conversation with two other counselors. Outside, a cool breeze off the Bay chilled the September air. The city lights twinkled in the darkness. Picard stepped to the edge of the stone patio and stared across the water to the hills of Sausalito.

"Well?" Riker said as they stood shoulder to shoulder.

"There are conversations," Picard said carefully. "That much is true." He turned to look at Riker. "Where did you hear this?"

Riker shrugged. "From a friend who heard it from a friend. You know how it is."

"I was hoping to keep it quiet for a little bit longer." Picard pressed his lips into a thin line as he stared into the distance. "How long will the retrofit of the *Titan* keep you and Deanna in San Francisco?"

Riker's lips twitched into a smile. "You're trying to change the subject."

"Perhaps."

"I assume you've discussed this with Kathryn." Riker was damned if he understood the relationship between his former captain and Kathryn Janeway. They seemed to move in and out of each other's orbit, one following the other on a trajectory destined to never meet. The last he'd heard – via Deanna, who'd likely gotten the information from Beverly Crusher – was that Admiral Kathryn Janeway had been instrumental in negotiating reparations between the Federation and the Cardassians as well as the Breen. The details of the settlement had been quiet, given the sensitivities, not to mention the ongoing tribunals trying Cardassians and Breen for war crimes, but Janeway had apparently won accolades for her diplomacy, her ability to keep calm in the most trying and delicate of situations, and reach consensus in a situation where emotions still ran high.

Picard sighed. "No."

Riker turned his attention back to the city lights blinking white across the dark expanse of San Francisco Bay. "I noticed she wasn't here tonight. Where is she?"

"Vulcan, visiting Tuvok."

"Lucky for you, Vulcans don't gossip, so if the rumor mill has gotten that far, Kathryn won't hear it through the grapevine," Riker said easily. He clapped his former captain on the shoulder. "You never answered my question. Are you running for office?"

"It depends how the conversations go."

Riker narrowed his eyes. "That's a yes, isn't it?"

Picard turned to look back at the ballroom, the crowds of uniformed personnel mingling inside. "I did not say that."

"But you *implied* it." Riker cleared his throat. Even after all these years, he could never quite read his former captain. On the one hand, rank and protocol had always stood between them, and on the other, there were times when Riker genuinely thought they were friends, not just colleagues. He had so many questions dancing at the edge of his tongue and without Deanna's gentle hand exerting pressure on his, reminding him to be careful, Riker felt free to challenge Picard. "Are you really *that* unhappy that you're willing to leave Starfleet?"

"Not 'unhappy,' Will," Picard said, with characteristic sharpness. "Rather say, I'm looking for a new opportunity, something to work for." He sighed. "The Dominion War has decimated our fleet and the deaths of seven million troops has created a void in those who are both capable and willing to lead; it will be another generation, perhaps two, before we completely recover from that loss of life. Now we're in a rebuilding phase, both physical as well as perspective. There's a lot of free-floating uncertainty, and dare I say, paranoia. This idea of what enemies still exist, how we can fight them, how can we prepare for the unknown." He took a deep breath. "This isn't Starfleet, Will, and you know it. Our mission to explore new worlds is now subservient to the fear of the Other."

"But during the war, the fear was very real," Riker said. He remembered the widespread blood tests when intelligence reported that a changeling had infiltrated Starfleet. Any deviance in behavior or personality seemed to be an opportunity to look at a friend or colleague with suspicion. Deanna had been exhausted with the effort of trying to discern what was real, what was not. "You can't discount what we went through."

“Not at all, Will,” Picard said. “I don’t mean to downplay the possibilities of additional security risk from threats we are aware of and those that we are not, but we also cannot forget what our primary mission is either. Progress is necessary.”

“I don’t disagree with you but you can’t just *steamroll* over what people feel or that we have so much work to do just to get the Federation back to where we were before the war.”

Picard’s expression was pensive. “I believe there can be, *should* be, a better way, and if anything, that is my motivation.”

“So that’s it, is it?” Riker couldn’t keep incredulity – tinged with intense disappointment -- out of his voice. “You’re tired of the rebuilding effort so you’re just going to leave when we need you the most.”

“That’s not fair, Will, and it’s certainly not what I said.”

“It’s not?” Riker’s eyes flashed. “What do you think it’s going to be like in government? You think it’s any less bureaucratic?” He tried to imagine Picard sitting in the hallowed office of the Presidential mansion in Paris; it was an impossible task. “If anything, I would think it would be even more frustrating. The Jean-Luc Picard I know would never be happy in a bureaucracy, pushing paper and posing for photographs, shaking hands or kissing babies’ cheeks.”

“I told them I was willing to listen to what they had to say,” Picard answered evenly. “No commitments. Just listening.”

Riker narrowed his eyes as he looked at his former captain. “But you’ve already made up your mind.”

At this, Picard sighed and then his lips turned up into a rueful smile. “I suppose you know me better than most.”

Even though he’d anticipated the acknowledgement, Riker still felt as he’d gotten a punch to the gut. Jean-Luc Picard, captain of the legendary *USS Enterprise*, leaving Starfleet. It seemed inconceivable and yet, here it was. In a way, Riker understood. Sitting at a desk as a member of the admiralty, had not suited Picard. Picard was a man of the stars, of action, and the idea he could be happy reviewing reports had always seemed preposterous to Riker. Making a change made sense, but this seemed drastic. Riker looked over his shoulder, but it was impossible to make out where Deanna was in the ballroom. Perhaps later, he could send her out to talk some sense into Picard.

“Starfleet has been my life for so long now. It will be a difficult transition,” Picard said thoughtfully. He gave a small laugh. “I’m not even sure what it *means* to be a civilian.”

“You may be a civilian if you resign from Starfleet to do this, but you’ll never be a private citizen,” Riker said gently. “You’ll still have the welfare of a lot of people on your hands.” He tipped his head to the side. “But I suppose you’d never be content just sitting at home, would you?”

At that, Picard smiled. “No. It would be a new phase in my life, perhaps not one I anticipated, but a challenge I think I would relish.”

“‘Challenge’ is an understatement.” Riker stroked his chin thoughtfully. He’d often wondered what he’d do if he ever left Starfleet and every possibility – from journeying from planet to planet as a traveling musician to retiring on Betazed – had never seemed satisfying. Starfleet – with all of its rigors and

protocol – was so deeply entrenched in his blood that he didn't think it would be possible to break free. And here was Picard, Starfleet to the core, suggesting he might do exactly that. "You're sure about this? Once you give up all of this—" he jerked his thumb back toward the ballroom "—there's no turning back."

Picard's smile was uneven. "It's as unnerving as making first contact." And then he looked sternly at Riker. "It was Beverly who told you, wasn't it?"

Riker shrugged. The cool night air seeped through the thick fabric of his dress uniform. "I don't reveal my sources." Another beat and then he said, "I always thought when you retired from Starfleet, you would go on an archeological dig, maybe try your hand at winemaking. But politics?" Riker shook his head. "Admiral—"

"You know I've always preferred 'Captain'."

"Is that what this is all about?" Riker asked. "You accepted a promotion to the Admiralty, and now you have second thoughts, so you're going to retire to run for office? That doesn't sound like you."

Picard's expression was tinged with sadness for a moment. "Perhaps I've changed."

Riker sucked in his breath. "So it seems." He turned back to look at the Bay. "If you're certain, then maybe this change will be good for you."

"I hope you are correct."

Riker decided not to push the subject any further. "Come, let's go inside before Deanna wonders what we're up to."

Picard was reading when the front door opened, and Kathryn walked in. She dropped her bag on the floor as she stepped inside.

"Jean-Luc."

He looked up. She was in civilian clothes, her hair loose and soft around her face. She looked casual, relaxed even. The last time he'd seen her, her hair had been pulled back severely from her face, and her stance rigid in her uniform, the bar of the admiralty prominent on her collar, sitting on the stage, her hands clasped together. He'd watched as Admiral Necheyev had delivered a stirring commendation regarding Janeway's post-war contributions, and then Admiral Ross had offered his own tribute. Janeway's face had been impassive during the entire ceremony and she'd accepted the plaque of recognition with the slightest of smiles, her eyes searching for and then finding his in the audience. Later, at the reception, Picard tipped his head in acknowledgement as she'd passed him. They were two admirals at that moment, nothing more to each other than colleagues. Now, he put the PADD on the coffee table and rose to greet her.

"I would have met you at the station if I had known if you were coming early." He kissed her lightly on the cheek.

“There was space on the 0800 shuttle from Utopia Planitia. Rather than waiting around for another four hours, I thought I’d surprise you.” Kathryn went to the replicator and ordered a coffee. She closed her eyes, inhaled the aroma, and then took a sip. “It’s been a long day and I just wanted to get home.”

He kept his expression impassive as he contemplated what she’d said. *Home*. “How is Tuvok?”

“He is fine. I was glad to see him. The neurologist says he’s responding well to treatment and they’ve managed to halt the deterioration of his neural peptides. His son, Sek, seems to be compatible with him so his doctors are arranging for the *fal-tor-voh* at the end of next week when they think Tuvok’s neural pathways will be strong enough to handle the mind meld. I plan to visit him again, but I’m not sure when my schedule will permit it. I was lucky enough to be able to make the trip this time.” Kathryn sipped the coffee, her hand cupped around the delicate white china. “I wish I could see him –*all of them* – more often. It seems I only see Harry at official events these days, and the others...” her voice drifted off.

Picard understood what she was talking about. He had been lucky enough to keep his crew with him for 15 years and he still saw most of them on a regular basis. Just last week, he’d had dinner with Beverly Crusher; the *Pasteur* had been docked at Utopia Planitia and Beverly had taken a shuttle down to attend a conference at Starfleet Medical as well as undergo a required command review. It had been nice to catch up over ceviche and grilled chicken, but there was a familiar pang of nostalgia tinged with sorrow when they’d parted outside of the restaurant. He knew the crew of the *Enterprise* had moved on to new challenges, just as he had and would, but he’d be lying if he said he didn’t miss seeing them. His new staff at Starfleet Command were competent, but he didn’t have the same ease with them as he’d developed with Riker, Troi, LaForge, and even prickly Worf.

“I understand,” Picard said evenly.

Kathryn settled onto the sofa and kicked off her shoes. She leaned her head back, closing her eyes. “God, I’m glad to be home.”

“I didn’t realize you felt that way,” Picard said.

Kathryn’s eyes widened. “Felt what exactly?”

He shrugged. “That this was some place more than where you stopped between missions.”

Kathryn delicately placed her cup on the side table. She leaned forward, clasping her hands on her knees as she looked Picard directly in his eye. This was one thing Picard appreciated about Kathryn; she never seemed to flinch or back away from hard truths.

“You are here,” she said. “That makes all the difference.”

Picard swallowed his gasp of surprise. There was a time when Kathryn hadn’t seemed to fit into this life, into this apartment, and there were moments when he thought she longed for the Delta Quadrant. After she received the promotion to admiral and left on the first of many diplomatic missions, he wasn’t even sure if she’d come back to him. And truth be told, Jean-Luc had spent so many years alone that he had indeed relished the quiet after Kathryn had first left. But time after time, she returned. He never asked what kept her by his side; she never seemed to ask much of him. Now he was about to ask something of her.

“We have to talk,” he said, moving closer to her, his knee brushing up against hers. She turned towards him, a curl of red hair brushing her cheek lightly.

Kathryn raised an eyebrow. “This sounds serious.”

“I’m thinking about making a career change.” He took a deep breath. “I’ve been asked to run for office.”

Kathryn sat very still. “By whom?”

“The Unitarian party.”

Kathryn frowned. “But you—you’ve already stated that you’re politically neutral.”

“I guess by accepting their request I will no longer be politically unaffiliated,” he said dryly.

“You would have to resign your commission to run for office.”

“Yes.” Picard watched her carefully. “You know I haven’t been happy lately. I imagined my experience as an admiral would be similar to yours – a series of diplomatic missions, the chance to make a significant impact on the Federation, but yet, it has turned out to be nothing less than a series of bureaucratic exercises in moving paper from one drawer to the other. It is not the life for me.”

Kathryn looked perplexed. “I thought that you weren’t happy overseeing the reconstruction. I never thought you were *ready to leave Starfleet*.” Her eyes flashed dangerously.

“I’m not unhappy,” Picard said softly. Rebuilding the Federation in the aftermath of the Dominion War was simply an effort of administrivia and budget allocations and project management. It was not inconsequential, and Picard knew he’d landed the task simply by being Jean-Luc Picard: competent, authoritative, and most of all, fair. Diplomacy and tact played into it as well, but there was also an element of stardom too. That the great Jean-Luc Picard oversaw rebuilding gave the effort more visibility, a signal about how *serious* the Federation was about uniting its disparate worlds together after the terrible years of brutal war. But the same skills that had earned him a corner office on the eighth floor of Starfleet Headquarters had caught the attention of the Unitarian Party. “I simply need a change, and this is an opportunity.”

“They’ll turn your—our – life inside out.” Kathryn got up and walked to the patio doors. She placed her hand on the door, paused, and then turned back to face Picard. “We’ll have to relieve *everything*. Every command decision, every personal detail, every relationship back, our records at the Academy... *Nothing* will be off-limits.”

“I know.”

“Including the Borg.”

Jean-Luc didn’t flinch. He knew his time as Locutus of Borg and the activities he’d conducted against humanity were well-documented.

“That was more than fifteen years ago,” he said. “I have fully recovered from that experience.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Then what do you mean?”

“The media will review every detail of that incident. They will question your fitness to lead, especially since the tactical knowledge the Borg obtained from you led to the massacre at Wolf 359. You might think memories are short, that everyone is focusing on the aftermath of our war with the Dominion, but you need to be prepared to answer for what happened at Wolf 359. Are you?”

“I am.”

“And that’s where you and I diverge.” Kathryn pressed her hand to her face. “I don’t know if I can go through that kind of media scrutiny again.” She turned to him. “More precisely, I *won’t* put my people through that kind of ‘Monday morning quarterbacking’ as Tom Paris would say.”

The furor over *Voyager* had died away in the five years since *Voyager’s* return, especially as its crew had dispersed to various parts of the Alpha Quadrant, some still in Starfleet, and others back in civilian life. But in the eighteen months following the return, the sensational trials for the Maquis, the review of Janeway’s command decisions, and most damning of all, the *Equinox* incident, had all made great fodder for the tabloids.

There were the sensationalist retellings such as ‘Violations: How the Crew of Voyager Survived’ to the sanctioned works such as ‘The Official Voyager Chronicle’ (written by a Starfleet-approved ghost writer based on crew logs and *some* actual, if anonymous, interviews). The attention had been unforgiving, debilitating, especially the fervor regarding her relationship (or lack thereof) with her first officer. No matter how often she’d issued denials, there was an always a whisper, always an undercurrent of speculation. Chakotay had escaped to Dorvan, taking Seven with him. Picard’s appearance at her elbow had calmed rumors as well. Over time, the public’s attention had shifted.

“What is there left to tell? The *Voyager* crew has moved on. You have as well and you are serving the fleet with distinction. The past is the past and there it will remain. After all, you are now a decorated admiral with many achievements to your name in addition to those you accomplished in the Delta Quadrant,” Picard said quietly. He hesitated as he watched Kathryn’s expression tighten, her eyes hard with an emotion he couldn’t quite name. “Is there something else?”

“No,” Kathryn’s voice was sharp. She turned back to the doors, and with a deliberate jerk, she opened them and stepped out onto the balcony. The sea air rushed into the room. Normally Picard found it refreshing, but today he simply found it uncomfortable. Kathryn stood at the railing, her hands resting on the top. His footsteps creaked on the floorboards as he came to stand next to her.

“I don’t have to do it,” he said.

“But you want to.”

“Yes.”

She turned to face him. “What if you lose? What then? Will they allow you to return to Starfleet?” Her expression turned doubtful.

“Not likely. It would be – *is* – a life-changing decision.” She did have a point and he hadn’t quite formulated a back-up plan. *I have no intention of coming in second place*, he thought, biting back a smile he knew Kathryn wouldn’t appreciate in her current mood.

She tightened her grip on the railing. "You could lose all that you've worked for. You're prepared to risk *everything*. Why?"

He'd pondered this very question for days. He knew returning to the stars was an impossibility. Starfleet needed their best and most experienced officers here on Earth. But staying behind while Kathryn explored new frontiers wasn't satisfying either. And he knew, as long as they were together, the situation would remain as it was. It would be, in a word, intolerable. He closed the gap between them, his lips close to her ear as he spoke.

Picard said softly, "This house isn't big enough for two admirals."

Kathryn cupped her hands around her coffee as she stared across the table at her former first officer. The warm afternoon sun warmed her bare shoulders, and the crash of waves against the nearby rocks relaxing. There was something about the Bay she found utterly mesmerizing. Even as a cadet at the Academy, she would find clarity staring across the waters. She hoped today, with the help of an old friend, to make sense of what was happening to her now.

"He's really going to do it then," Chakotay said. He rested his hand on the glass-topped table, his fingers dangerously close to hers. "He's leaving Starfleet." His dark eyes held a questioning look. "Of all the things I thought we'd discuss today..." his lips turned up into a slightly dimpled smile. "When I asked you to meet me here today, I imagined many things we could talk about. The great Jean-Luc Picard retiring from Starfleet didn't make my top one hundred." He leaned forward. "So, what is he going to do instead?"

"They want him to run for President."

Chakotay's reaction to the revelation was characteristically muted. "But he has no experience..."

"No *political* experience," Kathryn said sharply. It would be a lie to say she was in full support of Jean-Luc's latest ambition, but she was damned if people wrote him off at the start. "He commanded Starfleet's flagship for fifteen years, including numerous encounters with the Borg, the Romulans, not to mention diplomacy in first contact situations. His encounter with the Tamarians, for example, is legendary or when he managed to put Gowron in the Chancellor's office during the arbitration with the Klingons. And these last few years, his work on the rebuilding effort have won him plenty of attention, accolades even." Her eyes narrowed as she looked across the table at Chakotay. "In fact, I would say he has a more varied resume than most candidates do."

"That doesn't qualify him to be *president* of the Federation."

That Chakotay's assessment of the situation paralleled her own threw Kathryn for a moment, but she quickly regained her composure, feeling curiously defensive of her – well, who – no, more importantly, what – was *Jean-Luc* to her? He was possibly the most exasperating man she'd ever met, but also the most intelligent, composed, and definitive in all that he did. And that he knew he *who* he was one of his more appealing characteristics, especially since Kathryn had found herself floundering in recent years on that very question.

“Jaresh-Inyo’s experience wasn’t half as extensive as Jean-Luc’s and look where that got us. A weak president who gave in to martial law and the dissolution of the Khitomer Accords, simply because he didn’t understand the importance of Khitomer and he certainly didn’t see the corruption in Admiral Leyton,” Kathryn said, barely keeping a note of disgust out of her voice. “You know as well as I do the *only* qualification to be president of the Federation is to meet an age and citizenship requirement. The rest is determined by the voters.”

Chakotay held up his hand. “I’m sorry. I didn’t realize—” he stopped.

His hesitancy startled Kathryn. They’d always been able to say anything to each other and this pause caught her off-guard.

“What is it?” she said.

“I didn’t realize this was something *you* wanted.” He bit his lip. “I didn’t think you would want the attention.”

She took a sip of her coffee. “I don’t,” she said. This was Chakotay; she could be honest on this point at least. “But I can’t talk him out of it. Once Jean-Luc makes up his mind about something, it’s difficult to sway him.” She bit her lip. “Most times I don’t even try.” That was an understatement; most of the time she felt as she and Jean-Luc were talking past each other. The recent conversations over Jean-Luc’s political aspirations frustrated Kathryn; many times, she felt Jean-Luc simply did not hear what she was saying. She looked down at her coffee. Next to the cup sat a plate with a few lingering crumbs of muffin. “He won’t admit it, but he misses the *Enterprise*.” Kathryn smiled sadly. “Once you’ve had command of a starship, nothing else can quite replace that and I don’t think he’s found the camaraderie he enjoyed on that ship at Headquarters. He’s looking at life beyond *Enterprise* and nothing in his current purview will satisfy him quite like that ship did.”

“It’s how you feel about *Voyager*.”

“Exactly.”

“So, he’s definitively closing one chapter and opening another,” Chakotay said with feeling. “Searching for something that may or may not exist in the presidential manse in Paris.”

Kathryn pressed her lips together into a thin line. She knew how hard it was to recreate the alchemy of an experience. She would be forever searching for an adequate replacement for *Voyager*. Nothing can – *should* – go on forever, Janeway knew, and by necessity, all things needed to end. Yet, she found herself looking over her shoulder, caught in the odd memory here and there, knowing the present would never quite measure up to the past. “Jean-Luc has done all he can at Starfleet Command,” she said crisply. “This opportunity is coming at a natural turning point in his career.” Even to her own ears, the words sounded scripted.

“Does he think he can win?”

“He’s optimistic, but understands the field is crowded. President Chi’nta is extremely unpopular and that leaves an opening for many to take advantage of.”

“The Admiral doesn’t seem to be the type to join the crowd.”

“He’s not, that’s true, but you can depend on Jean-Luc to forge his own path.” Kathryn sighed, not bothering to correct Chakotay from referring to Picard as ‘admiral’ when he preferred the comfort of ‘captain’; after all, in a matter of months, they might be referring to him by an entirely different title. “He thinks he can make a difference. You can only do so much as an admiral. He thinks as president, he could direct policy more effectively, make sure the funds are going to the right worlds, ensure we’re properly defended. The fears over changeling infiltration remain to this day. Sometimes, it’s nothing short of hysteria. Jean-Luc believes he can be effective in balancing the needs of our security with our core principles.”

Chakotay sipped his tea thoughtfully. “His heart is in the right place, then, though to be perfectly honest with you, Kathryn, I imagined him more as an ambassador. His diplomatic skills are unparalleled.”

“Yes.” Kathryn stared at a spot just behind Chakotay, her eyes focusing on a stain that might or might not exist on the wall behind him.

“Plus, it must be hard having two admirals in the family, so to speak. Jean-Luc outranked you when you were captains, but now you are equals. He has been an admiral longer than you have been, but you’re the one who is getting all the glory. The only way to surpass you is to become president.”

At this, Kathryn jerked to attention. “I can assure you Jean-Luc is *not* trying to surpass me.”

Chakotay shrugged. ““Are you sure? Both of you are competing for the same opportunities in Starfleet. Ch’inta seems to have placed a great deal of trust in you. And with fewer opportunities to make a difference, even for admirals, there are not a lot of options.”

Kathryn stared at Chakotay and then finally said, “How did you know?”

He shrugged. “Isn’t it obvious? Rebuilding hundreds of worlds, a military organization – that’s not cheap, Kathryn. It takes time, money, manpower. All of this means the Federation is stretched thin right now, and as a consequence, so is Starfleet.” He offered her a lopsided grin. “You don’t need a level ten security clearance to know that.” He tapped his fingers lightly on the table. “In that context, it makes complete sense to me that Jean-Luc would run for office. The question is how the two of you would navigate that change.”

“We’ve made things work in the past, we can make it work now and in the future.”

“So, you do intend to support him?”

Kathryn was surprised at the question. “Of course.”

“Did you tell Jean-Luc that?”

“Not in so many words but I’m sure he knows. And even if I didn’t support him, I’m not sure what difference it would make.” Kathryn speculated Jean-Luc had made his decision before she’d even left for Vulcan. Jean-Luc’s mention of dinner with Beverly Crusher had been casual and she’d thought nothing of it when she’d gotten his note letting her know he’d be out in case she’d called. But now she knew better. Tension straightened her shoulder and a familiar band of pain wrapped around her temples. She pressed her fingers to her forehead. It had been years since Jean-Luc had commanded the *Enterprise*, but still Kathryn felt like she took second place to that legendary ship and its crew of heroes.

Chakotay looked off to the distance. “That doesn’t sound like the Kathryn Janeway I know.”

Kathryn regarded her former first officer with some affection. Even after all these years and all the things that didn’t or did happen between the two of them, he was still the only one who was completely honest with her. They’d grown apart over time as they’d pursued their separate lives – Kathryn practicing shuttle diplomacy wherever required in the Alpha Quadrant while Chakotay seemed content on Dorvan with Seven of Nine. The times they could meet for coffee on the Embarcadero was few and far between, but Kathryn would be deceiving herself if she didn’t admit she enjoyed catching up. The initial awkwardness following the revelation of Chakotay’s relationship with Seven had passed and now they had an easy, familiar camaraderie. But even now, there were things she couldn’t tell him.

“Things have changed,” she said softly.

“So, it seems,” he said. “And I did have something to share with you today.” His voice wavered slightly. “Seven and I are getting married.” He cleared his throat as he met Kathryn’s gaze across the table.

It took just a second longer than appropriate for her facial muscles to unclench and form a smile. She forced a note of genuine happiness into her tone. “That’s wonderful. When?”

“In a few weeks. It will be small, nothing big,” he said. “It’s a long trip to Dorvan, but I’d – *we’d* – love it if you could be there. You and Jean-Luc, both, of course.”

“Of course.”

Chakotay traced the rim of his cup with his finger. “We want a family,” he said softly. “I don’t know if it’s even possible but—” he shrugged “—after all this time, I had to make a decision about what I wanted the rest of my life to look like.” He lifted his chin and stared at her directly, the challenge evident in his gaze. “I don’t want to wait any longer, Kathryn.”

Kathryn watched him carefully. Had he come all the way to Earth to break the news to her in person? That would be such a Chakotay-thing to do. Beneath the table, she curled and uncurled her fingers. “I’m happy for you, for both of you,” she said. “Really.”

“And given what you just shared with me —” Chakotay shrugged “—it’s probably best for Jean-Luc’s political aspirations. This should eliminate all speculation about me as a romantic rival.”

He was right, she knew, but this wasn’t exactly the way she thought they would go their separate ways. Of course, there were many things post-Voyager that hadn’t quite ended up the way she’d imagined.

She paused and then asked, “Was there ever a moment, a moment when you *thought* your life would be different?”

At this, Chakotay offered her a sad smile. “Not just one. Many.” He watched as a group of young people at the next table over got up, their laughter and good-byes mingling with the sounds of the waves and sea birds quaking nearby. “And then I had to decide if I wanted to hold on to how I thought my life should be or go with what I was offered.” He shrugged. “So, I took what was offered. It’s not perfect, but it’s a life I can see myself living and being happy.” He waited a beat and then said, “Why do you ask?”

She shrugged. "It's something I've been thinking about lately. About the paths we take and the people we meet along the way and how and when we diverge from one another." She smoothed her hair back with the palm of her hand self-consciously. "And how we find each other again."

"Maybe we don't," Chakotay said. "Or at least not in the way we once thought possible." His shoulders relaxed as he leaned against the chair, his fingers drumming lightly on the table in front of him. "So, we just take the path that's in front of us, one step at a time."

At this, Kathryn smiled. "Is that your advice as my first officer?"

He leaned forward. "No, as your friend." He pushed his chair back. "It was good seeing you again, Kathryn, but I have a shuttle to Utopia Planitia to catch. I'll forward you details on the ceremony when they are finalized. I do hope you can make it. Seven will be so happy to see you." He stood up. "And please, give my best to Jean-Luc, and I wish him all the best in his new endeavor."

"I hope we can count on your support. And your discretion."

Chakotay's dark eyes revealed nothing. "Always."

It was unnerving to come home and see Jean-Luc in his civilian clothes carefully stacking his pile of uniforms into boxes. Kathryn watched from the doorway, her arms crossed against her chest. Things were moving faster than she'd expected. She'd thought perhaps Jean-Luc would take time to contemplate, to understand how his decision would impact her, and tangentially, the people who had served with her aboard *Voyager*, not to mention his own crew aboard the *Enterprise*. She pressed her fingers to her forehead, thinking about what was to come.

Before they'd parted ways at the transporter station, Chakotay had suggested she might be overreacting; after all, Jean-Luc would be just one of many candidates, and not even the most famous. Kathryn agreed with that assessment, but on her way back she felt a twinge of resentment; what *right* did Jean-Luc have to make a decision without consulting her?

"How is Chakotay?" Jean-Luc asked, not looking at her as he continued to fold

"You have his support." There was a pause. "And Beverly? What did *she* say?" There was an edge to Kathryn's voice.

"She has concerns but supports me. As do Will and Deanna." Jean-Luc wasn't the type to make a dig, but Kathryn knew what he was hinting at. She straightened but he'd already turned away from her.

"I'm sorry I won't be there for the announcement next week," she said softly now, looking at the curve of his back as he methodically folded away the life he had known for nearly forty years. That he could do it with such calm amazed Kathryn. The admiralty was nowhere near as *invigorating* as being a starship captain – and there were certainly moments in the Delta Quadrant when the job had been anything other than that – but she couldn't imagine leaving the 'fleet. That was the life she had chosen, and until a day ago, she thought Jean-Luc felt the same. "I'll try to watch it on the holovids."

"There's no reason why you should be there." Jean-Luc didn't look at her. "Your presence will likely elicit more comments or questions that we perhaps are not ready to answer at the moment."

Kathryn closed her eyes. Her headache was becoming more acute and she really needed to get an analgesic, but she remained rooted in place.

“What do you want from me?” she asked softly.

At this, Jean-Luc stopped what he was doing and faced her directly. “I appreciate this is not something you anticipated happening,” he said. “For this endeavor, I don’t want anything from you that you aren’t comfortable giving.”

She closed her eyes for a second, massaged her temples. It was nearly impossible to think clearly so she fell back on an answer that felt safe, if not quite answering Jean-Luc’s unspoken question. “The Federation needs me on Caledonia. The negotiations for Federation admission are critical. The economic aid package as well as the details regarding their defensive capabilities are crucial to understand before they can be admitted.”

“I recognize that,” he said in that same flat tone and she knew he did. After all, hadn’t he been on the forefront of so many of these types of negotiations himself? *What am I trying to prove?* Inadvertently, her gaze fell on the shelf at the far end of the room – the three middle shelves were stacked with the various plaques of recognition she’d won in the last few years. She’d displayed them for a while in the living room but then, in a fit of self-consciousness, had moved them away from the sight of most people.

“I’ll call you after the announcement.”

“Of course.” He stopped packing and then turned to face her. “When will you be back?”

She’d been on the edge of this moment at least a dozen times since she’d first encountered Jean-Luc Picard. Perhaps never, perhaps always, but indecision lingered, and she knew he felt it too. After all these years, she wondered what it was that kept them together.

“You know there isn’t a timeline for these things,” she said.

“Of course not. I just wanted to know if you had an idea—”

“What will you do if you win?” she asked abruptly.

Jean-Luc’s expression was nothing short of quizzical. “Accept, I imagine, and govern to the best of my ability.” He cleared his throat. “However, before that, I have to win the nomination and there are months to go before the initial balloting even takes place.”

Kathryn did the mental math in her head. The election was eighteen months away. The Caledonia negotiations probably wouldn’t take more than a few weeks. She knew she could hop-scotch the quadrant easily enough during that time period, lay low while Jean-Luc campaigned. After all, what was she to him? They weren’t married. They went months without seeing each other, sometimes even weeks without talking. Her absence could be easily explained, and they could drift away from each other. It could be so easy.

Except that he was doing this because of *her*.

The revelation hit her hard. She leaned against the doorframe for support. Why the hell couldn’t Jean-Luc have taken on wine making in his retirement? Why *politics*? And she knew the answer to that too; he still had things left to do. She cleared her throat.

“Why are you doing this? For once, be honest with me. Don’t give me any more lies about being bored just overseeing the rebuilding of the fleet,” she said. Her voice echoed in her ears. She leaned against the wall as she observed the man she’d spent the last five years with.

“You had *Voyager*, I had the *Enterprise*,” Jean-Luc said. “Nothing can ever compare to what we had when we had our own ships.” He looked at her wistfully. “I know you don’t understand why I have to do this, Kathryn. I’ve said this before: you seem happy as an admiral and I am not.” He grunted as he shoved the box of uniforms into the closet. “Nothing will ever compare to what I had on the *Enterprise* and it’s time I stopped looking. Nostalgia is a dangerous thing.” He paused. “As is pride.”

“So you do resent me,” she said softly.

Jean-Luc looked at her in surprise. “No, Kathryn.”

“When you accepted your promotion, you thought you would be the one negotiating with the Caledonians, for example.”

“My life hasn’t exactly lacked adventure; I did confront Shinzon—”

Kathryn dismissed Shinzon with a wave of her hand. “That’s in the past. Now you find yourself taking a backseat to me and that bothers you.”

Jean-Luc let out a heavy sigh and sank to the bed. The mattress shuddered under his weight as he looked down at his hands. Kathryn took the moment to grab a hypospray out of the top drawer of the dresser behind her. Relief was instantaneous. Jean-Luc, on the other hand, appeared pale. Finally, he nodded.

“More than I would like to admit,” he said.

“I see.” She pressed her lips together, thinking of Chakotay’s dark eyes, his skin weathered and tanned by the Dorvan sun, the whisper of his skin against hers. *This moment has passed.*

“I don’t expect you to stay,” Jean-Luc said conversationally, as if he were discussing nothing more serious than getting his boots polished. “I understand your concerns and I understand if you feel you need to take a diplomatic deep space mission.”

It was *such* a Jean-Luc thing to say, Kathryn thought. His continued equanimity both rattled and soothed her. He had been there in those heady days of *Voyager*’s unexpected return to the Alpha Quadrant. He’d told her then that he’d understood, that he *knew* how hard it had been for her in the Delta Quadrant. That was true, but life in the Alpha Quadrant wasn’t easy either.

She’d returned to a war-torn sector, the Starfleet organization in shambles and chaos after a bruising war, and uncertainty surrounding her future and her crew. Her focus in those first few months had been entirely around putting organization and discipline where none existed, and she’d found a kindred spirit in Jean-Luc Picard. He’d been a steady presence, expertly navigating her through both the professional and personal pitfalls that awaited her. For the first time in their relationship, she understood just how impossible it would be to be without him. *Nostalgia is a dangerous thing.*

“You mentioned there would be comments about my presence if I came to your announcement,” Kathryn said warily. “What sort of questions?”

“Some will be easy, such as whether as a Starfleet admiral you could make campaign appearances for me,” Jean-Luc said. “Of course, that would be impossible given Starfleet’s non-partisan policy and as such, easy to explain your absence.”

“What if I don’t intend to be absent?” Kathryn took a step closer to him. “What then?”

Picard’s expression turned to one of surprise. “I suppose there could be some question if you would act as the ‘first lady’.” He pronounced the archaic term with some distaste.

Kathryn took a deep breath. “As duties require, of course I would fulfil that obligation.” She lifted her chin to meet his gaze. “What else?”

“Where you would live if I win.”

“We’ll have to move to Paris if you win, of course,” she said finally.

Jean-Luc cleared his throat. “Likely, but I imagine we’ll keep this apartment as likely you will continue to have matters to address at Starfleet headquarters so you may not be often seen at the Champs Elysees.”

“Paris to San Francisco is not a long trip so it’s not likely that I will spend much time here,” Kathryn said. She took a step closer to him. Almost reflexively, she touched the bar at the collar of her uniform. It felt comfortable, a part of her. On the dresser in the corner she could see the small black velvet box that held Jean-Luc’s rank bar. He would have to surrender that with his resignation. He saw where she was looking and offered her a small smile.

“This isn’t the end, Kathryn,” he said softly. “It’s just a course correction.”

“Yes,” she said. “I know. And to be perfectly clear, I intend to navigate it with you.” Kathryn stepped towards Jean-Luc, placing her hand on his chest, and brushing her lips lightly against his. “My shuttle leaves in four hours.”

“That’s not a lot of time.”

“It’s enough,” she said, her fingers on the buttons of his white linen shirt.

~ *the end*

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