



Episode 9-04 - Caught in the Undertow

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Kathryn Janeway stood on her bridge, looking silently at the viewscreen along with the rest of the mute bridge crew. The image displayed was one of mass destruction - remnants of ships, along with general debris and other bits and pieces of flotsam littered the area of space, giving it the look of a general junkyard.

However, this was no junkyard. This was the aftermath of a fierce battle. The bridge was silent as the officers surveyed the wreckage, the same thought on everyone's mind.

Only the Borg could have left wreckage like this - the sharp corners of the remains of the ships, the glowing green lights that flickered occasionally, and especially the amount of debris and the size of the pieces themselves all added up to the same conclusion.

However, nobody, including Kathryn, was prepared to voice his or her thoughts until the preliminary scans were complete, as if saying it aloud would make it a reality. For if the Borg had been defeated by the Sernaix, then the whole of Starfleet had a far slimmer chance of

successfully defending themselves in the event of a battle than previously thought. And Kathryn wasn't prepared to acknowledge that until she absolutely had to.

A beeping sound broke the quiet on the bridge.

"Captain," Harry said, "we're receiving an incoming transmission from Starfleet Command."

Kathryn could almost hear the tension on the bridge increase in intensity. Nobody had been expecting anything from the general direction of the Federation for a while yet.

"Put it through to my station," she ordered.

She read it, her face setting into a hard line. When she looked up, the bridge crew feared the worst, but she simply gave one order.

"We're going to war."

* * *

Kathryn stood with her first officer on the bridge, waiting for final battle preparations to be completed so that they could begin the short trip back to Federation space. The bridge was silent, everyone busy, and the only people standing were her and Barton, surveying the progress.

She'd already begun to lose patience with her new first officer. Barton seemed intent on questioning Kathryn's every move, arguing endlessly until Kathryn finally had to put her foot down

and pull rank. She seemed to be purposely trying to make Kathryn's job difficult. What she wouldn't give to have Chakotay by her side these days... Oh, she missed him terribly, longed for his calm strength by her side...

She snapped herself out of her thoughts with a jerk. She could think about that later.

"Mr Tuvok," she asked, turning to the security station, thankfully located in the same spot as it had been on the old Voyager, "have all preparations been completed?"

"Affirmative, Captain," came the chief's reply. "All systems are at maximum efficiency."

Kathryn nodded. "Helm, lay in a course for the Alpha Quadrant and engage when-"

"Belay that," Barton interrupted.

Kathryn turned to face her, incredulous. "I beg your pardon?" she demanded.

"It's too dangerous to return to the alpha quadrant right now. The risks are too great."

Kathryn couldn't believe what she was hearing. That this woman actually had the audacity to contradict her on the bridge...

"We have orders," she stated firmly, not wanting to waste time arguing when their friends back home could be in trouble. "We're needed back there."

"If we go back," Barton argued further, "in all probability we will not survive. The odds are against us - we should remain here and wait it out."

"Damn the odds!" Kathryn snapped angrily, her patience rapidly running thin. "Am I the captain, or are you?"

"Captain, I still believe..."

Kathryn idly wondered whether this woman was actually worried about the good of her fellow officers. Because right now, the way that she was acting, including the way she seemed to want to avoid returning to Federation space at all costs, pointed to the contrary, and Kathryn had a hard time believing that anybody could be so cowardly. No, she had a feeling now that there was something else going on beneath the surface, something that was the underlying reason for the first officer's reluctance to reenter Federation space. And Kathryn was going to find out what it was if it killed her.

"I don't need to justify myself to you," Kathryn hissed, finally losing her cool. "Helm, set course for the Alpha Quadrant and engage, **now*!*"

Tom knew better than to speak. Silently, he set in a course and engaged it without further ado.

Kathryn was still seething as the ship made the smooth transition into transwarp. She didn't know what her first officer's problem with her was, but she intended to get to the bottom of it. Soon.

B'Elanna gently rocked the sleepy child in her arms, standing by the huge viewport in their quarters, but paying no heed to the starry streaks behind her as she watched intently while Miral suckled at the bottle, more out of habit than out of hunger. She drained the container of its final white drops, then yawned widely as B'Elanna removed the teat from her small mouth, casting the bottle aside and discarding it onto an available surface. Moving Miral to an upright position so that

she looked over B'Elanna's shoulder out towards the starry darkness behind her, B'Elanna gently began to pat her back, rubbing it softly so as to bring up any trapped wind that could be painful to the child. She had become a natural mother, and this was almost second nature to her now.

From his position over on the sofa, surrounded by PADDs, Tom watched for a moment, pausing as he took in the scene. B'Elanna was almost a different person when around her child - a person that most of the crew rarely got to see. Miral brought out her inner qualities; her affectionate, loving, maternal side. The contented, satisfied look that more often than not graced her features while Miral was present was usually replaced with one of strength and command while she was around the rest of the crew. It stemmed from childhood, he knew, and her being cautious to let her guard down, allowing her emotions to be on display for the rest of the crew. But in some ways, that made it all the better to watch her and Miral together; he was better able to appreciate how much of a mother B'Elanna transformed into while in Miral's presence.

He enjoyed watching as Miral worked her magic on her mother. There was something about a mother and a child, a bond that could almost be sensed between them. Tom was fascinated by the way B'Elanna could hold Miral in exactly the right, comfortable position, as though the child was grown to fit against the curve of her body, and by the way B'Elanna looked at her child, it was instantly obvious to any onlooker that Miral was her daughter, even without the giveaway of the Klingon ridges.

B'Elanna gently moved from side to side, watching as her daughter's eyelids grew heavier and heavier, the lids falling shut over the expressive brown eyes she had inherited from her mother. Turning around slowly towards the sofa, she mouthed to Tom, 'I'll just put her down,' then moved towards Miral's room, just off the main sitting room, treading barefoot on the light beige carpet.

A moment later, B'Elanna emerged from the room, Miral still in her arms, and a worried look on her face. "Tom," she called urgently, in as quiet a tone as possible, looking towards her husband for guidance.

Tom rose immediately, moving hastily to join her outside Miral's door. "What is it?" He asked quietly, trying to keep his voice down so as not to wake the child.

"Look," B'Elanna whispered, gesturing into Miral's bedroom. Tom peered around the corner of the door, then paused in astonishment. A small teddy bear was hovering in mid-air, spinning lazily around, about a meter or so from the light carpet.

He looked back to B'Elanna, a confused expression on his face. "What on earth?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," B'Elanna intoned quietly. "Any idea what it could be?" She clutched Miral protectively in her arms; naturally responding to the threat of the unknown.

Tom shrugged. "Faulty gravity plating?"

"Maybe we should call someone," B'Elanna suggested, watching as the teddy spun in mid air, almost eerily. "I don't want Miral sleeping in there, Tom."

"Put her down on our bed, for now," Tom instructed, taking a brave step into Miral's room. B'Elanna froze in the doorway, curious as to what was occurring. However, her need to keep her child safe ran out, and she moved back across the living space, taking Miral to her own bedroom where she hoped she would be safe.

Once B'Elanna had left, Tom plucked the teddy out of mid air, and was surprised there was no resulting effect or consequence. He wasn't entirely sure what he had been expecting, but remained there for a moment, waiting for any delayed reaction. But none came, and Tom was left standing in the middle of the room, clutching a teddy bear nervously.

Finally, he resigned himself to nothing happening, and placed the teddy back on the shelf, amongst Miral's other toys, then made his way back into the main sitting area. B'Elanna was already there, standing by the window, looking out towards the stars. Upon hearing Tom's entrance, she turned back to him.

"Well?" She demanded.

Tom shrugged. "I've no idea. Maybe we should get it checked out."

"Definitely," B'Elanna agreed. "I was thinking maybe it could be the inertial dampers malfunctioning again. After all, Harry's been having a hell of a time with them recently."

"Could be," Tom said, approaching her by the window and wrapping his arms lovingly around her slim waist. B'Elanna relaxed into the embrace, leaning slightly back against him.

"We'll have to get Harry to come have a look when he's not too busy," she decided, smiling as Tom kissed her neck gently.

"Sounds like a good..." Tom interrupted his sentence with another kiss, then finished with, "idea."

B'Elanna smiled, wrapping her arms back to clasp around the back of his neck.

The Dreadnought ship loomed almost eerily in space, all jugged angles, contours and sharp edges. It lacked the sleek appearance of the Federation style ships; in comparison, like all the other Sernaix ships it appeared to be insectoid, almost biological and grown. If it's eerie shape wasn't enough to be intimidating, its colossal size made it moreso. Other ships were dwarfed in its foreboding presence, even the largest of the fleet paled in comparison.

Valiantly, ship after ship of the Federation fleet approached the larger one at varying speeds, each trying a different attack strategy, a different formation, in the vain hope that it might succeed. And one by one, they were shot down in the early stages of the approach, each taking large amounts of damage - the Dreadnought was a force to be reckoned with.

After numerous attempts to destroy, or to inflict at least some damage upon the Dreadnought to a critical system, the Freedom finally took one hit too many. Blazing directly through the shields, the blue torpedo from the Dreadnought caused the smaller ship to explode in a cascade of sparks, and a shower of debris as the warp core breached, destroying the ship, and taking seventy crewmembers with it.

It sparked a series of destructions, and before long, the larger ships in the fleet were nothing but debris and space dust, the death toll rising dramatically by the minute. The Dreadnought had yet to be damaged in any way that would even slightly hinder its defence capabilities. The armour was unlike almost anything the Federation had ever come across. There was no shield frequency to isolate, nothing that could break through it. It was seemingly impossible to do any real damage.

Debris floated in space, the remnants of a battle, and all that was left of a formerly sturdy ship and its brave crew. It hung in the darkness, almost as a warning to anyone entering the sector. Segments of bulkhead drifted amongst the rubble, noticeable registration plates and names floated between clusters of metal.

It seemed impossible.

The lights in his quarters flickered again as Chakotay sat uneasy telling himself that Grant knew what he was doing. Except that was exactly what worried Chakotay. Whatever Grant was hoping to accomplish here, Chakotay still had a nagging feeling that he wasn't seeing it all and it didn't just have to do with winning a battle against the Sernaix.

The ship rocked slightly again as there was another near miss. Chakotay knew it was only a matter of time before the larger ships of the Federation fleet started running out and the Sernaix decided they were a worthy target. He had no illusions that it was the skill of the crew, the ships cloaking device or anything else that were keeping the demonic enemy away. No, they just didn't hold enough honour, enough glory for them ... yet.

Chakotay drew himself up, steeling himself to confront Grant one more time. He'd have rather been facing Kathryn during the Equinox incident. At least he understood her, her goals, her agenda and in the end, they were on the same side. He hated dealing with the unknown and that's what Grant was, an unknown and he had the irrefutable feeling he wasn't an ally.

His decision made, Chakotay moved out of his cabin and heads to the bridge taking only enough time to survey the damage. Light so far. Damn. In some ways it would likely be easier to convince Grant to retreat if the damage to the Logan were heavier. As it was, Grant was more likely to fight on to the bitter end. He stepped into the turbolift, his last sanctuary to compose himself and his arguments. His mind drifted to all the times he'd done this before going to see Kathryn. "Kathryn, if I make it out of this, I promise never to consider you hard to convince ever again. Even if you are." A small smile came to his lips as his voice echoed in the small lift compartment then his smile faded. And if I don't remember that I love you and I'm with you whether you see me or not."

The turbolift opened onto the bridge in the normal chaos that battle brings. A brilliant flash on the main view screen from the one of the Sernaix cannons made his head whip away from focusing on Grant as the energy pulse enveloped a Galaxy class ship. When the flash cleared there was nothing but debris. Another near miss rocked the ship, and Chakotay stumbled down to the main command area. "If nothing else that *has* to convince you that we're serving no purpose by staying in this battle." Chakotay gestured to the screen where bits of the ill-fated Galaxy class spread out over the battle field. "If we retreat now, Starfleet may be able to gain something from this battle from the tactical data we've collected."

Grant looked up disdainfully at Chakotay. "I think, Mr. Chakotay, that you were in the Delta Quadrant too long. Running from your enemies there might have been a valid tactic, with only one ship and a limited crew. Here in the Alpha Quadrant, with a full fleet as back up, retreat only means one thing..." Grant left his words hanging to be interpreted as Chakotay will.

It took every ounce of will Chakotay could bring to bear, to stop himself from reverting to 'the Maquis way' and forcibly removing Grant from command of the Logan. His fist clenched tightly and he could feel his nails digging into his palm, the pain giving him the edge he needed to stay in control. "If you're going to be on the bridge, make yourself useful. If not..." again the unspoken inference "I'd suggest you go back to your quarters."

Chakotay steeled himself and moved to tactical. 'I take it back, Kathryn.' Chakotay thought as he targeted a Sernaix scout. 'Compared to Grant, you are the easiest person in the Galaxy to get along with. Hell, Q is easier than...' His thought was never finished as another wrenching shake pulled his attention to reinforcing their shield integrity.

* * *

A rent in the fabric of space split the tableau of crossfire, of ships locked in deadly battle. Slowly, surely, a fleet of huge, unearthly-looking ships emerged, moving gracefully towards the droves of Federation ships engaged in fruitless battle against the Sernaix dreadnought ship.

Their grace belied their deadliness and their power. The battle had not been proceeding favorably for the Federation. No matter how powerful their ships were, or how hard they pummeled the dreadnought, nothing seemed to have an effect on the huge ship. It continued relentlessly pounding them with no mercy, driving Starfleet warships further into retreat every time it weakened the fleet.

Options had rapidly been running out. Retreat had been becoming more and more viable by the moment; however, doing so would have allowed the Sernaix to advance further into Federation territory unchecked. On the other hand, however, if the Federation did not retreat, the loss of life and ships would soon surpass that of the conflict with the Borg at Wolf 359. And the Borg had been a picnic compared to the Sernaix.

But with the addition of the newcomers, everything changed. For the Ayrethans, as they were called, joined the fight on the Federation's side, and the tide of battle turned.

Suddenly Starfleet's ships were not so hapless in the fight. Combined with the Ayrethans' power, they were able to deal more striking blows to the dreadnought, finally letting them inflict a reasonable amount of damage on the large warship. Slowly they began to wear down the dreadnought's defenses, thanks mostly to the intense firepower possessed by the Ayrethan ships.

The Sernaix seemed, at long last, to sense that they were outgunned. Hastily, unwillingly, the Sernaix retreated. They would have to accomplish their ulterior mission at a different time.

Starfleet and the Federation breathed a collective sigh of relief when the Sernaix ships disappeared into the throes of subspace. Almost immediately the decision was made to retreat from the area, and one by one the remaining Federation ships began to pull back, still half stunned from the battle and the incredible losses involved.

Losses that now officially surpassed the ones incurred at Wolf 359.

It was enough to make anybody sit up and heed the truth that so blindingly stared them in the eye.

The Sernaix had to be stopped.

* * *

Tom smiled as Miral thrust a small toy into his hands, as though it were a present. "Thanks, sweetheart," he said softly, kissing her gently on her forehead. Miral giggled, then turned back to the toy that currently held her attention. It was a small replica of a starship, and had numerous sound effects that constantly amused her.

Tom was kneeling beside her, on her bedroom floor. The small room, despite being aboard a starship, had been made to be as much like her nursery on Earth as possible; with a curving pine crib, toys surrounding the room, and a rug and various accessories in an attempt to lighten the dreary gray room. It worked, to a certain extent. Splashes of colour strategically dotted about the room helped dramatically to make it appear more cheerful, and more of a suitable bedroom for a child.

Soft toys lined the upper shelves, and small framed illustrations were dotted about the walls in diagonal lines. Christening gifts had been placed on the waist-height shelves, and numerous cards still from her first birthday adorned the slightly higher shelves.

In the corner, stood a cluster of toy boxes, each with designs on the outside of clowns and small animals. Inside were various toys being stored in the colourful boxes for when Miral might want them. Having the privilege of being the only child on board, Miral was spoilt, adored by the vast majority of the crew, and as a result, she constantly had a full to bursting toy box, and along with it, a large number of honorary aunts and uncles.

Tom smiled as Miral turned her attention to a huge cuddly panda from beside her. It had been a gift, and was already amongst Miral's collection of favourite toys. Hearing B'Elanna dictate commands to the replicator through the open doors, Tom smiled down at Miral, and gently picked up the panda. He placed the plush toy on the shelf beside her numerous other toys. Miral waved her hands, looking longingly towards the panda, the box on the floor suddenly forgotten. Tom chuckled.

"Don't be greedy, sweetheart," he told her affectionately, touching the tip of her nose with his finger. "You know, I think Mommy's just replicated our dinner, which means..." He groaned as he picked her up - she was definitely getting heavier. "It's time for your nap."

Miral squirmed, protesting as he picked her up and moved towards the pine cot that stood in the corner. She was familiar with her daily routine, and disliked napping during perfectly good time when she could be playing. He smiled indulgently at his daughter. "You can play later, sweetie. Right now it's nap time."

There was a sudden thump behind Tom, who abruptly turned around, immediately pulling his daughter closer to him protectively by way of a reflex action. With relief, he saw that the source of the sound was Miral's panda, which had fallen to the floor.

Turning back to the crib, Tom kissed her gently on her forehead, running his finger gently over the faint Klingon ridges that he adored. "Sleep tight, angel," he said, placing her down onto the soft mattress in the cot, and covering her with the pale blue blanket. He reached to the mobile above her crib, and gently spun it, watching in adoration as Miral's eyes were drawn to the rotating Romulan Warbirds and Voyager.

"Tom?" A call from B'Elanna pulled him out of his reverie, and he left Miral staring wonderously at the mobile.

"Yeah?" He asked her, as he entered the main seating area of their family quarters. B'Elanna was stood beside the replicator, waiting for his opinion. Already the table was set for dinner, along with a bottle of wine and two long stemmed glasses. A small candle was in the centre of the table, lighting the room with its flickering glow.

She turned towards him. "Lasagne or Risotto? I can't decide."

"Lasagne," Tom replied without missing a beat. He smiled at her. B'Elanna returned his smile.

"Did I even need to ask?" She asked herself rhetorically, while punching the appropriate instructions into the small panel beside the replicator. "Oh - have you set up the baby monitor?"

"Not yet," Tom replied, immediately retreating into Miral's room to fetch the small piece of technology. It was by no means a modern invention, however it was a necessary piece of equipment - a small square that could be placed on a side board, and opened a one way comlink so that the baby's activities could be easily monitored. He and B'Elanna were unfailingly conscious about having the baby monitor on, and rarely left it off while they were out of the room.

Grasping the small cube, he made to exit the room, then paused by the side of Miral's crib, resting his palms on the wooden side, and leaning over watching his baby girl already deep in peaceful sleep. Her face was calm, and she clutched a small panda teddy bear in her arms,

holding it almost protectively. Tom smiled as he lowered his hands into the crib, preparing to automatically put the panda back on the shelf, then stopped himself, deciding it wasn't important.

He admired his daughter sleeping for a few more moments before returning back to the main room.

* * *

"Good job, everyone," Chakotay genuinely congratulated the Bridge Crew, clapping the Helmsman on the back as he spoke. Grant had already left the bridge, heading for Sickbay to have wounds from an exploding console tended to, immediately after the Ayrethans had joined the fray leaving Chakotay in command. Despite the bitter battle in which they had just participated, there was a feeling of warmth in the air that there hadn't been before. Teamwork had brought them together, united them. It had given them a sole purpose, and had made them operate as one unit, a necessity to survive.

The ship had not escaped the horrific nature of the battle -- far from it. It was in bad shape, and there had been casualties. The Bridge itself had been severely hit; they had targeted the command center of the ship. As a result, bulkheads had fallen, twisted metal and dust covered the previously immaculate carpet, and smoke billowed from overhead, in addition to twisted pieces of metal hanging from the ceiling. Already, the crew was working together once more to clear the bridge, pushing aside debris that was blocking critical stations and access ports that had to be available.

He smiled to himself, deciding that this had the elements of a good crew and good command structure after all. "All right," he said, taking charge. "Get repairs underway. Estimate how long overall it ought to take and report back to me. Put emphasis on the Warp Drive and Weapons as well as Shields, right now they should be our main priorities."

As the crew began to bustle around to begin work, Chakotay informed the Chief of Security, "You have the Bridge," and left via the Turbolift. "Deck Two," he commanded, feeling a slight jolt in his stomach as the Turbolift dropped down a level, then opened onto the corridor.

Chakotay smiled at a passing ensign as she walked by, then turned his thoughts back to the previous battle. It had been dangerous, and it had been a long time since he had been in a battle of that scale. It was always unnerving, no matter what the cause. Even in the days of the Maquis he had despised battles, clinging to the belief that there were ways to solve disputes without violence, but appreciated that given the mentality of the Cardassians they were dealing with, violence was the only way to solve it. But that didn't stop him from abhorring bloodshed that was completely unnecessary.

Suddenly, there was a sharp blow to the back of his head, and Chakotay fell to the hard floor, the tang of blood in his mouth. Feeling dizzy, he sagged as he was hauled to his feet against his will. He tried to speak, but found he was unable to, the dizziness and feeling of nausea in the pit of his stomach made it nearly impossible. The pain in the back of his head was increasing, stabbing like knives, not fading into a dull ache. Chakotay was almost certain he was about to collapse, the world was spinning uncontrollably before his eyes, whirling around, blurring in and out of focus.

Finally, things suddenly went dark, and Chakotay felt himself being flung into a chair of some description. With the distant whirr of a forcefield, Chakotay realized he had been secured into the chair with no means of escape. He tried to open his eyes but he was unable to see anything, the room was pitch black, with no source of light, although he wasn't entirely sure that his eyesight hadn't temporarily given in.

Gradually, he became more aware, and was able to think through the pain and dizziness that it brought - it was easier when sitting down. There was no light - that meant it had to be one of very few rooms on Deck Two - since he had no recollection of a Turbolift. But who had captured him?

His answer came in a voice with silky tones. "Commander Chakotay."

Chakotay spoke hoarsely, trying not to allow the immense pain he was in to enter his voice. "Captain Grant."

A low chuckle was his response. "Very good, Chakotay, I'm impressed."

Chakotay paused for a moment. "What do you want?" He asked.

There was another brief pause. "Information," came the slow, casual drawl.

"What about?" Chakotay choked out, coughing slightly. The faint tang of blood was growing slightly stronger in his mouth, making the presence of some minor scrape well known.

"The Sernaix," Grant began calmly. "Tell me all you know about them."

Chakotay remained silent for a moment, unsure of what information to specifically give, and what he should withhold.

"Answer me!" Grand bellowed, his demanding tone echoing throughout the room.

"We encountered them last year, on stardate-"

"No!" Grant interrupted him loudly. "Give me information of use - of value."

"I don't know what you want," Chakotay told him.

"Fine," Grant said, suddenly regaining his cool composure. "Let's talk about something you do know about, then. Kathryn Janeway."

Chakotay was instantly on his guard. "Wh-What about her?" The pain had suddenly been forgotten as he worried for Kathryn.

"What is she like as an adversary?" Grant asked in a casual tone of voice.

"Fearsome," Chakotay said, allowing a small amount of pride to seep into his tone. "Resourceful."

Grant took that in, before firing his next question. "What are her weaknesses?"

"She has none," Chakotay lied.

Grant closed on Chakotay, he could hear the footsteps approach him. 'A room with a hard floor,' he thought to himself, storing it mentally, adding it to his list of what he knew about the room. When Grant next spoke, Chakotay could slightly feel his warm breath on his face. "You're lying," he said in infuriatingly calm tones. "Do share. What is Kathryn Janeway's weakness?"

"I don't know," Chakotay responded, sounding as honest as he could.

Grant sighed. "I knew you would be awkward, Chakotay. There was something about you... there's something infuriating... you just don't see it."

"See what?"

"There are forces at work here, Chakotay," Grant informed him, knowledgeable. "Powerful forces. You should be on the winning side."

"As far as I'm concerned, I am," Chakotay informed Grant solemnly.

Grant shrugged in the darkness. "Well, I gave you the choice, in a manner of speaking. Now then, you really are quite skilled at this, aren't you? Diverting my attention from this. Kathryn Janeway, I believe we were discussing. Now then, what's her style in battle?"

"How do you mean?" Chakotay asked, trying to draw it out for as long as possible. He had interrogated a fair few people in his time, and had a fair idea of how his questioning would end. The longer they talked, the longer for someone to discover them.

"What's the first thing she does when approached with a threatening ship full of hostile aliens?" Grant queried.

"She raises shields," Chakotay said obviously, not wanting to give too many of Kathryn's tactics away.

Grant laughed. "You're protective of her - too protective. You won't tell me about her. But maybe... maybe you'll tell me about Mr Kim."

"Harry?" Chakotay's surprise registered in his voice. "He's the operations officer aboard Voyager. He plays the clari-"

"If I wanted his personnel file, I would have read his personnel file," Grant snapped.

Chakotay suddenly ventured a question. "So why are you on this 'winning side'?" He asked calmly. "Isn't that a bit cowardly?" He waited for a response in the dark enjoying the fact that he'd been able to return the dig that had been tossed in his face on the bridge, then suddenly yelled out loud as a fist made contact with his face, without warning.

There was far more than a tang of blood this time, and he found himself spitting it out by the mouthful, the side of his face aching painfully, and his nose most possibly broken. He could even taste bile rising at the back of his throat, the taste of blood making him feel physically sick.

"Never call me a coward," Grant said slowly, his voice icy cool. Finally, he sighed. "I can see you've been about as much use to me as you're going to be." Pausing, he shook his head. "It's a pity," he muttered, removing the forcefield, and dealing Chakotay another blow that sent him spiraling into unconsciousness. "You could have been very useful to us."

Turning up the lights to full-illumination, Grant began to sort out his quarters, mopping up blood from the floor, and removing the blinds from his windows. Finally, he stared down at Chakotay's lifeless body, lying on the floor, and shook his head. He had to be disposed of, quickly, but it had to be clean. If the crew found out and held him responsible...

Grant moved over towards his bedside cabinet, and took out the top drawer entirely, laying it on the bed. He reached his hand inside the open space it had left, and felt the top of the inside of the piece of furniture until he came across the hypospray. Pulling it out with a click as it disconnected, Grant wandered back towards Chakotay's limp form, and pressed it to his neck with a hiss. Wasting no time, he tapped his commbadge, realising that with all the repair work underway, there would be no internal sensor scans. "Grant to escape pod one. Beam Commander Chakotay directly and launch."

Chakotay dematerialised in front of him, disappearing in a shimmer of sparkling blue light. Grant shook his head to himself at it all, then set about putting away the chair.

* * *

Tom Paris often wondered what forces he had to thank for making him the happiest guy in the Universe.

At that moment in time, he was watching his daughter, Miral Paris, playing on the colorful, patchwork play mat with one of the many 'educational toys' she had been given for her birthday. Every now and then she giggled, clearly enjoying the game.

He smiled as he watched her give the large button on the toy a good, hearty thump with her balled fist, and then giggle with glee as a miniature, holographic giraffe appeared, hovering over the white box. Miral outstretched a hand to stroke the holographic giraffe, giving it a beaming smile and cooing as it moved its head to nuzzle her fist.

Over on the couch, B'Elanna stirred slightly. Tom glanced over, concerned. Ever since they had returned to space, she had been having trouble sleeping at nights. After her shift, she had returned to her quarters, and promptly lay down on the couch. One arm was draped over the side of the sofa, the other over the arm rest, as she lay sprawled out over the uncomfortable piece of furniture.

As she shifted slightly, and settled back down, Tom's eyes went back to his baby daughter, who was now curiously petting a miniature, holographic white rabbit that was hovering directly in front of her. He smiled as she stroked its fur the wrong way, not knowing any better. Being a holographic rabbit, it did little but twitch its nose at the contact.

He was glad that someone had seemingly had the foresight to give Miral the gift. The name of the giver escaped his mind, but both he and B'Elanna had agreed it was a brilliant present. It was looking as though Miral would be brought up in space, with little chance to appreciate 'real' creatures.

Standing from the chair, Tom walked over to the replicator. Acutely aware that B'Elanna was sleeping, he instructed in a low tone, "Orange Juice, blend 28." He took the beverage as it materialised on the silver tray, and then returned to his seat by the coffee table in the living area of their quarters.

Miral had tired of the game, and a duckling had been left hovering in mid-air above the discarded toy as she picked up a toy beside her. Tom recognised it instantly as the Betazoid music ball. It picked up the mood of the child when touched, and transferred the impulses into musical sounds. As gentle music began to break the previous silence, Tom quickly stood up, and took the toy from Miral's hands, casting an anxious glance over his shoulder to where B'Elanna slept restlessly.

"Sorry, sweetie," he apologised to Miral as he put the toy a few meters away. He was aware that she could still get to it, however Tom hoped that her attention would be distracted by another toy so he didn't have to remove it completely.

Miral protested loudly, her large eyes filling quickly with tears. Tom felt remorse suddenly shoot through him, but knew he had to stay firm. He picked up a toy from the box beside her, and placed it in front of her, operating it himself for a moment, in a vain attempt to pique her curiosity.

It failed. Miral was beginning to scrunch up her face, and Tom knew his young daughter well enough to know that she was about to begin crying loudly, and knew she would wake B'Elanna up in the process. B'Elanna was a natural mother, and despite her fatigue, he knew from experience that she would awake at Miral's first sob.

"Shush, shush," he attempted to pacify his daughter quietly. "Come on Miral, you don't want to wake up Mommy, sweetheart... shush... come on."

Miral became suddenly quiet, a look of intense concentration on her face as her teary eyes looked at Tom. Then suddenly.

"Ow," Tom yelped as something hit him in his foot. Turning around, he saw the culprit was the toy. It continued towards Miral, sliding along the floor and into her hands. Immediately, soft, low music filled the cabin.

Too surprised to remove the toy from Miral, and forgetting about B'Elanna, Tom watched as she smiled with glee, moving her hands over the ball. Colours swirled beneath its' transparant surface, and soft music continued, flowing smoothly and calmly.

"Ugh." Tom turned around at the noise from behind him, still speechless. B'Elanna had woken up, and was now sitting upright on the sofa, rubbing her eyes. She ran her fingers through her hair before standing up.

"How long was I out?" She asked, approaching him slowly, willing her sleepy eyes to focus.

"Miral..." Tom trailed off, still in shock.. He turned back to look at his daughter on the playmat in awe. "Miral just..."

"Miral did what?" B'Elanna was immediately concerned.

"She..." Tom trailed off again. "No," he said, shaking his head. "No, she can't have."

"What are you talking about?" B'Elanna asked her husband impatiently.

"She... made a toy come to her."

The answering silence from his wife was broken only by the noise from Miral's toy.

"I'm sorry?" B'Elanna asked, looking at Tom in disbelief. "She made a toy come to her? Tom, I think you're the one that isn't getting enough sleep."

"B'Elanna, you have to believe me," Tom told her urgently. "Miral made the toy come to her, it just slid across the floor... hit me in the foot."

"It's a ball, Tom, it rolls," B'Elanna stated, trying to hide her amusement at the situation.

"B'Elanna, it..." Tom trailed off once more, unable to come up with a suitable comeback to her point. "I know what I saw," he said stubbornly.

"Tom, she's a baby," B'Elanna tried to argue reasonably, desperately fighting the urge to laugh. "She can't just make a toy come to her... that's ridiculous!"

"She made it come to her," Tom said, his tone a little hurt. "B'Elanna, I'm not crazy, I know what I saw."

B'Elanna placed her hand on his shoulder, in a gesture Tom saw as a little patronising. "Tom, I'm not saying you're crazy. It's because you're a first time father -- all fathers need to think that their child is better and more gifted than everyone else's..."

"B'Elanna-"

"And while it's sweet," she interrupted, determined to continue her speech. "Tom, think about it for a moment. It's ridiculous. What if Sam Wildman had come to you back in our Third Year in the Delta Quadrant and said that Naomi commanded a toy to come to her with no help whatsoever? Would you have believed her?"

"I would have at least taken her seriously," Tom said, his tone still hurt.

"I am taking you seriously, Tom," B'Elanna said, wearily. "But think about it - Miral is a child. How could she make a toy just come to her? And for that case, how could most adults accomplish that without technology? Or without being of or descended from a race with advanced mental powers? Miral isn't, she's a regular child. and as much as I believe that you believe what you say you saw, I can't believe for a second that Miral managed to do that."

Tom sighed. "I know what I saw, B'Elanna. And what you say is more logical... and in the same situation with roles reversed, I probably wouldn't be able to believe you. But I know what I saw - I know what our daughter did. We're just going to have to agree to disagree... because I won't accept that it didn't happen."

B'Elanna hid a smile at his obvious refusal that he could be wrong. "Fine by me," she told him gently. "Anyway, time to hit the shower, I think. I've got a duty shift in..." She looked across the room, squinting to read the time on the Chronometer. "Two hours," she groaned, shaking her head.

Tom waited for her to leave the room, then knelt down beside his child, who was now happily engaged playing with the musical ball. He took the ball from her hands, ignoring the pang of guilt as the look of glee on her face vanished, and placed it at a certain distance away from her again. "Sorry sweetie," he told her gently. "Now come on... come on..."

He stared at Miral, urging her to make the toy come to her. Miral stared back at him, her blue eyes huge and pleading.

"Come on, Miral," he said more forcefully. "Sweetheart, come on... just make the toy come to you..."

Miral seemed unenthusiastic. She continued to look at Tom, her eyes filling with tears.

"All right..." Tom quickly turned to her toybox, and pulled out another toy, this time a soft bear. He placed it a shorter distance than between her and the ball, however still out of her arm's reach. "Come on, Sweetheart. Get the teddy..."

Miral looked at the teddy bear for a moment, then her gaze flickered back to Tom. She looked unimpressed by his bizarre actions.

"Uhm..." Tom looked away and began to rummage through the toybox once more for inspiration. Finally he pulled out a small toy 20th century train that Harry had given her. "Here we go..." He placed it on the floor. "Come on sweetie, you love your train..." He stretched out his hand and pushed it slightly forwards along the soft carpet to give her the idea, watching as it lit up while moving along.

Miral watched, entranced by the train's lights. When Tom stopped moving it back and forth, the lights stopped, and Miral looked up at him. "Go on," he said encouragingly. "Get the train. You can do it... Come on..."

Tom turned around abruptly as he heard the familiar sound of the doors opening. B'Elanna walked back out into the main living area in her bathrobe. "Forgot a towel," she explained, and then paused as she took in the scene. "Tom, what are you doing?"

"I'm testing her," he explained sheepishly.

"You still think she...?" B'Elanna looked amused, shaking her head gently in disbelief, then continued to wander barefoot across the room. "And?"

"And we're working on it," Tom said defensively, not wanting to confess their lack of success to his wife.

"Right," B'Elanna didn't seem convinced. She re-emerged from their bedroom carrying a lilac towel, and strode back across the living quarters. "Well... have fun testing," said teasingly. "What are you trying to test anyway?"

Tom looked back towards his daughter. "Whether Miral can bring a toy to..." he trailed off as he saw her pushing the train backwards and forwards, beaming as the lights altered colour on the toy. "She did it," he exclaimed.

"Sure, Tom," B'Elanna rolled her eyes at her husband, and walked back into the bathroom.

Tom stared at his child in frustration. "You had to do it while I wasn't looking," he told her, in a slightly irritated tone. She looked back at him, her eyes unfazed, her smile wide. "Come on..." He slid the train away from her, level with him, and then turned his gaze back to Miral, who looked at him, seemingly confused by his actions.

"Come on," he said encouragingly, gesturing towards the train. "You can do it sweetheart - come on!"

Miral blinked at him, and he sighed at the lack of response. "Come on, Miral," Tom encouraged her, lying down on his front and moving the train again, watching as the coloured lights rotated in quick succession. He smiled as she focused intently on the train, and felt sure she would summon it to her. Gradually, Tom ceased to move the train, and allowed it to slide to a halt a few feet from Miral.

She looked back to him, gurgling incoherently as she did so. "Go on," Tom said encouragingly. "Come on..."

He paused for a moment, suddenly certain that she would mentally pull the train towards her as she gazed at it. Then, as nothing happened, Tom sighed, and sat up properly, looking at her. "You're a tricky customer," he informed his daughter, gently tapping her nose with his forefinger as he spoke. "But we'll find something yet... let me see..." He turned back to the toybox, beginning to rummage, then turned back as something caught his eye.

The train was sliding smoothly along the carpet into Miral's waiting arms.

Tom felt his jaw drop as his daughter picked up the train, cooing happily as she grasped it. "B'Elanna," he called hoarsely, watching in utter astonishment as Miral pushed the toy back and forth along the carpet.

There was an annoyed grunt from the bathroom, and B'Elanna stuck her head around the doorframe, her hair wet and tousled. "What?" She asked quickly, obviously irritated.

"She did it," Tom said, tearing his eyes away from Miral for an instant, and turning to B'Elanna, who was leaning on the doorframe, clad in her bathrobe. "I saw her - I saw her do it!"

B'Elanna groaned. "Tom, she can't have done... Have The Doctor check out your eyesight - you're obviously seeing things."

"B'Elanna, I'm not joking," Tom said urgently, his blue eyes serious, begging her to believe him. "She made the train come to her - she really did."

"She can't have done, Tom, it's not possible," B'Elanna said, rolling her eyes as she launched into another speech. "She's a child, there's no way she can make objects come to her! It's just not..." She trailed off, her brow furrowing as she focused on her only daughter. "...Possible," she whispered, finishing her sentence in a tone of awe and disbelief, as she took a step closer to her daughter and husband.

Tom turned to see what B'Elanna was gazing in amazement at. To his surprise, the caramel-coloured teddy bear was jerkily moving towards Miral, scraping along the floor. "I told you!" Tom exclaimed, turning back to B'Elanna.

B'Elanna was staring at her daughter in complete and utter disbelief, her mouth hanging open as she watched, almost hypnotised as the teddy bear moved closer to her daughter, finally falling into her arms. She looked, speechless, towards Tom, her mouth opening and closing slowly, like a fish.

"I know," Tom said, smiling, with the annoying tone of one accustomed to the event. "You should have believed me."

B'Elanna, however, was paying no heed to her husband's words. She had returned to staring, wide-eyed at her child, sitting on the playmat and hugging the teddy. Finally, she turned back to Tom, still stunned. "Did... you see... Miral. teddy...?" She managed to splutter.

Tom nodded. "Yes, I saw it," he told her, turning back to look at Miral, still slightly shocked, but more puzzled.

B'Elanna knelt down at the edge of the playmat next to Tom. "What's going on?" She whispered, looking at Tom. "What's wrong with Miral?"

"I don't think anything's wrong," Tom reassured his wife gently, noting the slightly anxious tone her voice had taken on. "Miral's perfect. But I think we should have the Doctor take a look at her... just in case."

B'Elanna nodded her agreement, staring down at her daughter with concern, her serious expression not even lifting as Miral turned her attention away from the teddy to smile up at her parents, happily gurgling as she did so.

* * *

The green tunnel of transwarp twisted and turned outside the viewport as the Voyager-A flew on its way to the battle. The mood was tense; a feeling of uneasy anticipation hung over everything and everybody as they approached the determined coordinates, knowing that the scene would most likely not be pretty.

Kathryn sat mutely, fiddling uncomfortably with her hands. She knew that the battle would have had to have been of epic proportions if it had involved the Sernaix node ship, and while part of her mind was screaming at her to relax, the other part had been helplessly drawn to the possibility that Chakotay had been one of the many casualties of the battle.

That was a possibility she could not face - yet, she was unable to push it from her mind. And she knew she would not obtain relief from the worry for hours, possibly days. She would just have to live with it, and pray - yes, pray - that he was alright.

To her left, Commander Barton sat, uncharacteristically still. In fact, the whole bridge was still, the only sound that of muted breathing and the soft thrum of the warp engines as they powered the ship.

At long last a console beeped, alerting them to their imminent arrival at the coordinates of the battlefield, and Tuvok spoke up.

"Captain, I am not detecting any Sernaix ships in the region, nor any signs of an ongoing battle. I believe we are either too late, or that the Sernaix have retreated."

Well, at least they weren't going to be fighting - that was one good thing. But if it was the former case and not the latter, and they were too late...

Kathryn stood, ignoring those thoughts. "All stop. Helm, bring us out of transwarp, and let's see what we're dealing with here." She pushed away the momentary flutter of nervousness that washed over her and braced herself for the picture.

Her premonition had been right. It was not pretty.

"My god," Kathryn breathed, stepping forward slowly, unable to believe what she was seeing.

It looked more like the aftermath of a tornado than a battle. Debris littered the space around them: all types of flotsam, pieces of ships, warp nacelles, you name it, floating slowly through space, twisting and turning with no apparent rhyme or reason. And most were recognizable as being parts of Starfleet's ships.

The carnage was horrible, mind-blowing, and an involuntary shudder passed through all those who watched from the relative safety of Voyager's bridge. The area was completely dead, with only a few remaining Federation ships disappearing into warp one by one, leaving Voyager alone to look on the scene.

"Scan for life signs, Tuvok," Kathryn ordered, her eyes not leaving the viewscreen. "Survivors, escape pods, anything..."

His reply went unnoticed by her as she stared out the viewscreen, her mind in turmoil. They were too late after all... thankfully however the Sernaix seemed to have retreated for some reason, or otherwise the few surviving ships even would not exist.

But even that was small comfort against the overwhelming losses. From the amount of debris and broken ships on the screen, Kathryn knew that thousands of lives had to have been lost thanks to one ship.

Thousands of lives.

How would they ever regain this? Yes, the lost men and women had known this was a risk they would face in serving as Starfleet officers, yet it was still unpalatable to think that their deaths could be blown to such epic proportions.

Such a waste of life.

Kathryn sighed. She had to find out why the battle had abruptly ended. And there was only one way to do that.

"I'll be in the ready room," she threw in Barton's direction. "You have the bridge." She stalked off the side, taking a deep breath against the 'Yes sir!' she knew she would hear.

"Yes sir!" came from Barton as Kathryn disappeared, and despite her mental preparation she felt a rush of annoyance at the other woman's defiance.

But this was not the time to worry about that.

"Computer, open a secure channel to Starfleet Headquarters, and patch me through to Admiral Paris. Priority urgent"

"Channel open," came the voice of the computer. "Initializing message."

Kathryn dropped into her comfortable desk chair and gazed at the Federation insignia, waiting for the computer to connect to Admiral Paris's office, trying not to dwell on the dreadfulness of the scene still visible through the ready room viewport. Suddenly the possibility of Chakotay's death had become ten times larger, and she couldn't afford to let her mind wander in that direction.

She was saved when the admiral's face appeared on her computer screen.

"Admiral"

"Captain." His face looked drawn, worn, and Kathryn knew that this would be a formal conversation.

"What happened?" she asked simply.

"We fought the a new type of ship," was his terse reply. "We were outgunned badly... I'm sure you can see the results."

Kathryn took a deep breath. "But the Sernaix could have destroyed the entire fleet if they so wished, and there was nothing to stop them from doing so. Yet something did. What was it?"

Paris paused for a moment, as if deliberating what to tell her.

"The Ayrethans."

Kathryn felt a chill rush through her. The last time they had seen the Ayrethans had been almost a year ago, in the bubble which they supposedly never left. If the Ayrethans were here now - and had left the bubble - then the situation must be far more grave than they had thought. Although if the Ayrethans had exited the bubble too, then it was just possible that Starfleet could form an alliance with them, since both groups had a common enemy.

With a start she realized Admiral Paris was speaking again.

"Captain, you may have the most technologically advanced ship in the Fleet and as such, you stand the best chance of defeating the Sernaix, should you be forced to battle them. However, I want you to keep a careful watch on the area. We don't know where the Sernaix went, or when they will return, but we do know that they most certainly will return. Until then, we have to keep on guard at all times and at all places. We can't risk a surprise attack."

Kathryn nodded. "I'll keep that in mind."

Admiral Paris nodded and the screen went blank, leaving Kathryn staring at the blue and white Federation symbol. Not for the first time did she find herself wondering whether she'd made the

right call in using such destructive force to liberate Voyager from the 'bubble' so long ago, yet she knew that if she hadn't the entire crew most likely would not have survived. Yet the repercussions of that one act were horrific...

Did that mean that in some way she was responsible for the carnage outside?

She couldn't debate that now. At this moment, her place was on the bridge, not cloistered up in here while her first officer had command.

Her first officer.

There was an incentive to return to the bridge. She didn't want her precious ship in that woman's hands for longer than necessary, not after Barton had done everything in her power to get under her skin and undermine her confidence.

Standing quickly, Kathryn spun out from behind the desk and glided onto the bridge.

"Commander," she addressed Barton, thinking of Admiral Paris's orders, "keep a standing scan of the area running and-"

She was cut off by Tuvok's sharp voice announcing that he had found a survivor. Her head immediately snapped towards him.

"Where?" she demanded, feeling a rush of excitement in her stomach. Finally, someone who had actually been at the battle, who could give them a first-hand view of the events.

"In an escape pod, approximately thirty degrees off our starboard bow. However, the life sign is extremely faint. Transporting him immediately to sickbay would be the recommended course of action at this point."

"Do it," Kathryn ordered. "And Mr Kim, beam the pod to cargo bay two." She waited, arms crossed, while the pod and survivor were transported aboard, and then turned to the ops station.

"Lieutenant, I want you to assemble a team and analyze-"

For the second time in two minutes she was cut off by her combadge chirping.

"Doctor to Janeway."

"Janeway here. What's the status of our patient, Doctor?"

There was a slight silence as the Doctor considered his reply, and Kathryn felt a sense of uneasiness wash over her. What was really the matter with that survivor?

"Captain, I strongly recommend that you report to sickbay immediately. We can discuss the status of the patient then." The urgency in his voice belied the manner in which he spoke, and Kathryn knew that it must be important, whatever it was.

She'd better get down there quickly.

"I'm on my way," she told the Doctor, moving quickly up the steps from the command platform to the turbolift. "Commander, you have the bridge," she finished as the doors shut behind her.

What had really happened? The Doctor normally wouldn't call her to sickbay immediately upon receiving a patient. Something serious must be the matter. And if the Sernaix had been involved...

* * *

The sickbay doors swished open to admit Kathryn in a hurry.

"Doctor," she began immediately, stepping hurriedly forward and looking around for his figure, "what is the-

She stopped dead.

There on the biobed lay Chakotay, deathly still. No... was the only thought that flew through her brain as she rushed to his side. She reached out to touch his face in amazement and realized that he was in even worse condition than she had thought. His skin was a pale, almost green color, and his breathing was slow and shallow. He looked like he was on the verge of death. She felt a lump in her throat choking her and bit her tongue hard. She couldn't lose him now, not after everything that had happened. Starfleet had taken him away from her in the first place and she was not going to regain him now only to lose him again.

"Doctor?" she croaked. "Why... what happened...?" She felt as if the world was spinning around her, leaving her and Chakotay and the bed the only solid things in place. She still couldn't actually believe that it was him lying there so motionless.

The doctor looked at her sympathetically. "He was poisoned."

"Poisoned?! By whom?"

The doctor sighed sadly. "We can only guess." He administered a hypospray to Chakotay's neck and stepped back. "Captain, I'm sorry... the poison seems to have spread rapidly. I'm not a hundred percent certain that I can even save him yet." He watched compassionately as Kathryn's eyes widened in shock and her hand slowly covered her mouth, stunned.

"I have been working to stop the spread of the poison, and I have injected him with general antitoxin while I am trying to determine the nature of the poison and synthesize an antidote. What remains to be seen is if I can do that before the general antitoxin loses effectiveness. The only thing I can assure you of at this point is," he continued, trying to cheer her up somewhat, "without Voyager's intervention, even if we had been just an hour later before we found him, he would have most certainly been dead." It was small comfort to Kathryn as she stood transfixed, her gaze on the still form of Chakotay, for a few seconds. She forced down the pain and the ache inside her and turned back to the Doctor, captain's mask firmly back in place, still trying to come to terms with the shock of what had happened to Chakotay.

"Thank you," she said softly. "I'll... stay with him for a while, if you don't mind." She moved to the chair by his bedside as the Doctor respectfully left them alone.

Only then she let her mask slip. She felt her heart constrict painfully as she watched, wishing he would move, groan, do something to indicate he wasn't completely gone.

But he didn't.

The doctor pattered around in the background, readying equipment and supplies, and Kathryn sank into the chair and swallowed hard over the lump in her throat that had reasserted itself. This was Chakotay, the man she loved with all her heart, lying there likely dying, and what could she do? Nothing.

Kathryn leaned over the bed and touched his face softly, then grasped his hand and brought it to her lips.

"I love you, Chakotay," she whispered as a few solitary tears rolled over their clasped hands.
"Please come back to me..."

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