

Exceptions

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Summary: Post-Endgame. Kathryn Janeway loved routines. Changes of plans weren't welcome. Usually.

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Author's Note: This is a censored version of the original story. The P18 rated version is to be found on my website only.

Kathryn Janeway loved routines.

Ever since she was a child, a certain regularity to her life gave her a sense of security; of being in control. Life was hard enough as it was, with all its unpredictability, so everything she was able to control and predict was warmly welcomed in the daily craziness. Added to that, ever since her seven years in the Delta Quadrant, stranded in that unknown region of space with her ship and crew, she had learned to appreciate routines even more, and otherwise tedious everyday life seemed like such a thankful thing now.

Their return about a year ago had been everything she didn't consider predictable or controllable. The whole event they had longed for all that time had not been glorifying and exciting at all, but a mere haze, rushing by at high warp without any one of them really getting a grab of it. One second they were searching a way home from a few ten thousand light years away, and the next, Earth was more or less at striking distance, so to speak.

Speaking of daily craziness.

When the debriefings had started, promising to become long months of sitting in cold, grey rooms at large tables while being questioned - and keeping that promise, unfortunately - ever-optimistic Janeway had caught herself wishing she was back in the Delta Quadrant, on Voyager with her crew, her *family*, exploring new worlds and phenomena, and occasionally fighting off hostile alien species, but otherwise living with this odd feeling of inner peace.

Ten and a half months - in number more months than the years of their journey - it took Starfleet Command to finish the debriefings. Almost as long the former Maquis - and with them, as a gesture of sympathy and solidarity, the rest of the crew - had to fear whatever fate the admiralty had in store for them.

At last, they were lucky to be acquitted of every accusation against them. They were free to do whatever would please them - including returning into service as Starfleet officers for those who had been members of the organization before. Some took that chance, their experience and knowledge gained on their unique journey making them quite popular among commanding officers and other higher ranking officials in research or at the academy.

While Janeway cared about the whereabouts and future of every Voyager crewmember, the senior staff in particular was a matter near to her heart. Proudly she heard the news of Harry Kim having finally gotten his long-due promotion, now already ranking lieutenant senior grade with a rosy perspective of becoming lieutenant commander soon.

Her good friend Tuvok had returned to Vulcan, taking a leave of absence for an undefined period of time - mainly because of his mental state and need of help from his family, but also because beneath the hard, emotionless shell there nevertheless was a man who had missed his wife and children - and growing number of grandchildren - terribly.

Tom and B'Elanna had decided to add another member to their family, bringing a baby sister for little Miral on the way as soon as it was clear that no further lawsuits were awaiting them. Professionally, the couple had resumed their work as pilot and engineer; developing not only new technology, but new standards with it, and testing

together what they came up with. They were such an effective team that no one dared to request their help and work separately.

For the Doctor it had been not as easy. Janeway had to fight hard, together with him, to keep his status as an individual who was allowed to live a normal life like every other crewmember. He was, after all, considered to be a part of the ship, and not supposed to leave it - especially not permanently. Their effort, however, paid off in the end. The Doctor was free. He found himself a nice, cozy apartment in San Francisco bay, a job in Starfleet medical - and a girlfriend. A human one.

Speaking of girlfriends. Seven had soon ended her not-quite-relationship with Chakotay and taken over the task of teaching and taking care of Voyager's Borg children. She was quite popular, her insights an asset to Starfleet as well as the public. Seven was getting used to the attention she got better than Janeway or any of her crewmembers would have thoughts. But maybe that was partly thanks to a young man named Henning Lenhomb. One who stood by her side and helped her. In every way he knew and could.

As for Chakotay, he had been offered several positions at the academy and other universities to teach archeology and cultural studies, but requested some time to himself with the promise to then accept a professorship. His wish was gladly granted, and they all swore to keep the door open for the man who was generally considered highly intelligent, open-minded and very wise, despite his Maquis past. Or maybe because of.

And Kathryn herself? She was the same person as always. She loved her work. She had always loved it, always lived for it. She was born to be a Starfleet officer, and more so a scientist.

Well, almost. There were exceptions to every rule, and every routine. And right now, work and duty were the two least important things on her mind.

She had surprised many people with her decision, but mostly herself when she took, like Tuvok, an indefinite leave of absence right after her promotion to admiral. She desperately needed some time to herself, time to sort out and work through everything that had happened in the past seven, no, eight years, time to relax, to find back to herself. Surely had she opted to throw herself right back into work - and hadn't it been for some very insistent friends, she probably would have done just that. But the openness of those people who didn't want to watch her and her 'live to work' attitude any longer had gotten her thinking.

So she traveled around, visited her former crew members, now and then even calling in favors for them, tried to get up-to-date as to what had changed on Earth, visited her mother and family home in Indiana, met with her former senior officers, babysat Miral - and spent a lot of time with one very special person.

Because, when it came to the routines, there was one she had always held on to on Voyager, and hadn't given up after returning to Earth: her weekly dinner date with her former first officer and still best friend Chakotay. Strictly speaking, the meetings weren't weekly - to be entirely exact, they saw each other more often than just once a week. They talked about old times, took long walks, visited exhibitions, went on short trips and made visits to their crew together. That she came to him one day a week to have dinner which he always cooked from scratch - really *cooked*, not replicated - however, happened only on Fridays.

If possible, they had become even closer after their return, and were so comfortable around each other that both had door codes for the other one's homes. So when Kathryn arrived at Chakotay's small house just outside San Francisco's city borders this Friday, she simply let herself in without bothering to ring the door chime.

She immediately noticed that something was different. There was... she didn't... Why didn't she smell anything? Why wasn't there the familiar fragrance of cooked food? The intoxicating air that always seemed to draw her to his house even from far away?

"Chakotay? Are you there?"

"Right here, with you in a minute!" she heard him call back - it was coming from his kitchen, all right, so he had to be preparing something. Or so she thought.

"So, what's for dinner today?" She asked while putting her small purse down on the sideboard in the entry area and shrugging off her jacket.

"Nothing yet." Janeway frowned. So she hadn't been wrong.

"Didn't you have the time to cook? You should have called me, I could have gotten-"

"No, that's not it," he interrupted her when he emerged from the kitchen, walked over to her and gave her a brief hug. It had grown between them, this... whatever they didn't want to name and acknowledge yet, ever since they weren't the commanding duo of a starship or in any other official function anymore, but just friends who saw each other on a regular basis.

"Then... what is?"

"We'll cook together today. You're gonna help me," he stated matter-of-factly, as though she didn't have a say in it, and if it was for him, she hadn't. But, this was Kathryn Janeway. Whose biggest personal nemesis weren't the Borg, or the Kazon, or the Hirogen. It was a kitchen with a hearth.

"Oh no, Chakotay, you know I can't and I wo-"

"You will. Otherwise there will only be dry bread and water for dinner." A mischievous grin stole itself onto his face; in that moment, one could have mistaken him for the devil. A very handsome devil, that is.

"You know very well that I rather eat that than try my luck with the preparation of any real food," she challenged him, crossing her arms in front of her chest and giving him a smug grin herself. Chakotay only chuckled; he loved their light banter, the ease they showed around each other since the burden of bringing a crew back home from an unknown quadrant of the universe had been lifted from them.

"That is why you're going to learn it now. You can't rely on replicated food all your life, Kathryn. There is nothing more tasteful than real food, and there is nothing more satisfying than eating a dinner you've prepared with your own hand's work." He considered his second statement for a moment, before correcting himself to, "Well, there isn't much that is more satisfying." Janeway smirked at that, but it faded when he continued with a suddenly deadly serious expression, "Besides, don't you think the man you may marry one day would be happy to get some real food now and then? You know that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach, don't you?"

That caught her right off-guard. She stared at him dumbfounded and actually found herself stuttering. "Wh-What? Chakotay, what are you talking about?" And brave and confident Captain, no, Admiral Kathryn Janeway was claimed by a feeling she had very little experience with - she felt nervous. He eyed her intensely, as if considering in earnest how to make a good housewife of her. She was so taken aback by it that she at first didn't realize that he had broken into a wide grin.

"Your face was definitely worth it," he quipped when he turned on his heel and went back to the kitchen. Her mouth dropped open when her brain got hold of what had just happened. He had fooled her. All those years of a perfect poker face, and only now when no one and nothing threatening her life or that of a crew she was responsible for was distracting her... he had pulled her leg. She shook her head. Admittedly, if someone could do that, it was Chakotay, for she let her guard down when she was around him. And he had made use of it.

Oh, that demanded revenge.

Hope grew within her when she followed him. After all, he may also only have joked when he said dinner wasn't ready, but she has to cook with him.

"Someone had a clown for breakfast, huh?" she remarked, putting her hands on her hips when she entered the spacious, tidy room held in green where they spent almost as much time as in the living room. That was also the moment her hope died - there really was nothing prepared.

"Someone is just enjoying life," he shrugged and grinned happily.

"No kidding," she murmured, so quietly that he didn't hear it over the faint sound of the cooling unit he was rummaging through.

Half an hour later, Janeway found herself standing amidst his kitchen, in front of one of the counters, with an apron around her body and a knife in her hand. And yes, she was actually chopping vegetables. True, she never would have expected praise for it - she simply didn't deserve it. The supposed thin slices looked more like very creative geometrical forms, and by now she had started muttering under her breath, cursing the stubborn food that just didn't want to take the form Chakotay had demonstrated her earlier.

But she could do it. She had to. She shied away from nothing and no one; in all those years, she had taken up with every challenge. And that before her were no hostile aliens, only vegetables. How hard could preparing food and cooking be, anyway? No, she would fulfill her task, proudly. She could-

"I can't do it," she sighed quietly, her mouth suddenly deciding that her mind was only fooling itself. Frustrated, she put down the knife and her hands on her hips, glaring at the colorful nutrition. She heard Chakotay chuckle behind her, but ignored it the best she could. Yes, she had failed; no need to face the humiliation.

Her host, however, never said a single word. Not until he came over and murmured four words that she knew would be burned into her mind forever: "Let me show you." He stepped up behind her and - well, he *showed* her.

His body was practically wrapped around hers from behind, with his back pressed against her and his arms lined up with hers; with his hands enclosing hers and his cheek next to her ear. While her mind tried to ignore the sensation caused by the heat radiating from him, her stomach was already doing somersaults, jumping up and down and to and fro, and Kathryn had to do her very best to not let her head lull back against his shoulder, lean into his strong embrace too much. It surprised her that he was still able to explain calmly what she had to do, and work with hands not even trembling the tiniest bit, because if she wasn't entirely wrong and the bulgy pressure in her lower back was any indication, he wasn't unaffected by their little teaching session either.

His voice seemed to become deeper and huskier with every sentence, every word even, as he explained the action again and guided her hands while doing so. His movements were precise and skilled and for the fraction of a second she wondered if this was any hint as to how he would be as a lover. She chased that thought away quickly, practically mentally screamed at it to get out of her head. He was her friend, nothing more, and it was hardly appropriate to think about him like this. Or at least that was what she told herself. If her arousal had been a person, it would have stood before her then, arms crossed over its chest, and glared at her with raised eyebrows, silently demanding her to *do* something. Or him, for that matter.

Luckily, her arousal was only a tingling sensation consuming her, and a wet heat pooling between her legs. At least nothing she would have to 'face' now.

Chakotay, on his part, fought his own battle. A battle with self-restraint, responsibility, decency. No doubt she felt what she and this teaching session were doing to him. He didn't bother to hide it also; what use would it have been anyways? This was a game they both were all too aware they were playing - had been playing for years, though more subtle then - there was no pretending. Just slightly anxious waiting for the other one to agree to what they both knew they wanted.

For now, he knew it was best to concentrate on preparing their dinner. And that he did. He finished chopping the bell pepper he had been working on as a demonstration for her, and then unwillingly stepped back. He didn't miss how she shivered.

"There. Now you can try it again yourself." With that, he returned to his hearth, busily lifting lids, checking and stirring whatever contents he found inside. He more sensed than saw Kathryn looking at him, but prudently ignored her. Finally, after some minutes, he heard her tending to the vegetables again, the sound of slow, but nevertheless energetic chopping filling the room. Someone undoubtedly had to release some tension.

Ten minutes later, she had reduced every food he had given her to prepare to slices and dices, and while Chakotay continued his work with them, Janeway began to set the table. They deliberately kept some distance between them all the time... that was, until Chakotay offered Kathryn a spoon with some of the steaming fluid from one of his pots.

"Do you want to taste?" he asked, not thinking much of it. The gesture was completely innocent; they'd done this countless times before - he would offer her to try what he was cooking shortly before the meal was ready, and she would happily accept, always eager to find out what he'd come up with this time.

But this evening, everything was a bit different. Both still felt the aftermath of their earlier mutual seduction, and longed for an entirely different aftermath, but kept themselves in check for the time being. Or at least tried to. Because when Chakotay held up the spoon, she simply couldn't resist.

She walked over to him, took his free hand and dipped his index finger into the sauce on the cutlery. Then she licked the thick liquid from his digit, gently sucking at it. Hadn't Chakotay thrown the spoon back into the pot and held on to the kitchen counter with his other arm, his legs would have given out.

"Kathryn..." he groaned, sure that this was the moment they both would give in. His hardness strained painfully against his pants again, and it took all his will to remain calm; to wait for her to send him a signal, an approval. There were moments where he cursed himself for being such a gentleman.

She, however, simply cleaned his finger with her tongue, hummed, and said, "Tastes perfect."

Then she returned to setting the table.

Chakotay looked at her incredulously, but she ignored him, just like he had done before with her. Realizing that he'd still have to wait, he sighed deeply and returned his attention to making the last finishing touches. His finger still tingled from her touch, and the feeling crawled slowly into his every nerve ending. He needed to concentrate. On *cooking*. And even though he didn't know where he took the discipline from, he did just that.

Eventually, their meal was ready to be served, and Chakotay filled their plates with vegetables in a light tomato sauce variation and some rice, while Janeway poured some wine into two glasses, and added two with water as a finishing touch.

When both were finally seated, Chakotay raised his glass.

"Well then, enjoy *your* meal," he said, putting emphasis on the fact that it was her work as well, at which she smirked.

"You, too," she responded and toasted him with her own glass of wine, took a sip just like he did, and then turned her attention to the food in front of her.

Somehow they managed to actually eat their dinner without any more distractions - and seductions. At least the major ones. Neither of them could keep from an accidental brush of hands, or a meaningful stare into each other's eyes. They didn't talk, and the silence only added to the tension between them.

"This was absolutely delicious, Chakotay," Kathryn only said when she collected the last bit of sauce with a piece of bread, her voice still coated with hints of arousal, and he had to swallow, forcing himself to focus on something else.

"It is your work as well. Really not bad for your first time."

"Oh, but what tells you it was my first time?" She had barely finished the sentence when Chakotay choked on the wine he'd just taken a sip of. He coughed, and tears pooled in his eyes as the liquid invaded his respiratory system. "Sorry," Janeway added sheepishly and rose to pat his back, then reached to refill his glass with water. Only when he calmed down again, she returned to her seat.

"I survived... seven years in the... Delta Quadrant, and now... that I'm... home... my captain will be... the death of... me," Chakotay complained between coughs, and his friend couldn't help but laugh.

"That I may just prevent. I need you alive, after all."

"Now, do you?" His voice still sounded a bit restrained, though Janeway wondered if his choking really was the reason. Her answer was a simple quirk of an eyebrow and a promising smile. He stared at her and time came to a halt; only the candlelight between them began to flicker more nervously.

The same candle she blew out in a sensual movement only seconds later. Chakotay hadn't activated the main lights, but only a kitchen counter illumination, its soft glow making both human's features blurry in the other one's sight. And still the longing, the hunger in their eyes shone like a blazing fire in the middle of the night.

"We should clear the table," she murmured, her finger tracing the line of his plate and not-so-accidentally brushed his hand while doing so. He didn't answer, and tried to not think of any possible meaning behind this suggestion, but only nodded, and took both their plates when he rose from his chair. Taking a bowl that had contained the rice earlier, she joined him at the dishwasher. And while he opened the machine, she found herself something else to open.

"What are you doing?" he asked, baffled when she pushed his shirt from his shoulders.

"Helping."

By the time they had finished clearing the table and putting the dishes in the dishwasher, they were both stripped down to their underwear.

There was a long moment of silence between them when Chakotay finally turned to her after tapping the console to start the washer. A moment of clarity in which both were wondering whether this was a step they were both ready and willing to take; or better, to finish, as it was already half-taken.

Never had there been an easier answer to any question in both their lives.

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"That was a very delicious dinner, Chakotay. Thank you," Kathryn purred when they lay back in his bed exhausted, and she looked so sated and nevertheless seductive at the same time that he felt himself stir again, against what he knew should have been physically possible for him. He ignored it, though, and only let out a satisfied sigh while he pulled her close, molded her delicate form against his strong one, and pulled a sheet over their cooling bodies.

"We should have done that years ago," he then commented and grinned - at least until she shot him a serious, almost angry look. He feared he had crossed a line, said too much; that they'd never acted on feelings they both knew were there had been some kind of silent, but mutual agreement. At least that was what he knew she liked to tell herself. His worries were unfounded, though.

"I hate it when you're right," she scowled at him and pinched one of his nipples - gently, but still with enough force to elicit an 'Ouch!' from him. "So, tell me... was this another lesson of what I should learn before I find my future husband, or was all this," she motioned at their bodies, "included already and you just didn't tell me?"

"I'd say that depends on who your future husband is," he quipped, but inside, he didn't feel this light-heartedness quite that much. The ice he was taking tentative steps onto was so thin he could very well have walked over water only.

This time, her face was neutral, her expression, not even her eyes, giving away anything. She looked at him for a long moment, before she answered in almost a whisper, "I'm thinking it would be a pity if you invested so much work in it, but then didn't get anything out of it." Lying on their sides facing each other, they studied the other for countless minutes. They both knew what she was saying, and neither wanted to waste the chance to react in just the right way to assure both of them the happiness they longed for.

"I already got a lot more than I ever dared to hope for," he murmured, his hand tenderly trailing down her bare arm.

"And yet you can have so much more." It was a clear offer, spoken with an equally clear, and steady, voice. Overwhelmed, Chakotay did the only thing he was able to in that moment when words failed him - he pulled her to him and kissed her with all the love he felt for her.

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Chakotay woke up the next morning with the feeling that something was missing. Or someone.

Kathryn.

Sitting up quickly, he looked around, squinting his still-sleepy eyes. Indeed, she wasn't in the bed anymore - the bed they'd made love to each other in during the night again - and her clothes were nowhere to be seen.

A strange feeling overcame him. Maybe she had thought the better of their conversation, their subtle agreement to stay together and even make things between them official, if not legal, sooner or later. Maybe without the drugging feelings of afterglow, old logic and hesitation had been able to possess her again.

Failing to find his shirt he'd worn the evening before and brought into the bedroom along with their other clothes the evening before, he made a quick detour to the bathroom to get his robe, before walking out into the living room and-

What was that smell?

Curious, he followed the scent that seemed so familiar - and the moment he entered his kitchen, he knew why. It was his favorite tea, and judging from the steam that rose from the pot, it was freshly brewed. However, he didn't care about that much then. He was more distracted by the woman who, only dressed in *his shirt* that covered her almost down to her knees, assembled several fruits on the workspace before her.

Chakotay had never felt this relieved in his whole life.

"Good morning," he greeted the woman he loved and she turned at the sound of his gentle voice.

"And to you." Her smile - more a beam, actually - made his heart skip a good number of beats. She turned back to her work at hand, and he took a few steps into the room. Only after grabbing a knife, she faced him again, a mischievous grin on her face. She showed him the knife and pointed at the fruits. "Mind helping me?"

When they finally ate their breakfast, his tea was cold.

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