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Title: Questions Burning in Her Heart

Rating: PG

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It was a hot summer night. A full moon shone down on Earth and twinkling stars embellished the cloudless dark sky. After the day's relentless heat, a soft breeze now tickled sweaty skin with a promise of cooling. It was a beautiful night; a night to remember.

The beach party, a gathering of a great deal of Voyager's former crew, had been going for hours, but people still weren't tired of exchanging news of what they had done throughout the last months. Although one year, three months, twelve days and eight hours had passed since Voyager had reached home people still felt the closeness that had connected them those seven long years in the Delta Quadrant.

They sensed that with time these informal gatherings would be fewer and that they'd be slowly scattered by the winds. They all knew that they would change by coming experiences, but deep down they were sure whenever they'd meet by chance or purpose they would feel the echo of the bond formed.

Kathryn Janeway who, at some distance, stood with her back to the camping fire was oblivious to the noises, the music and the chatter. For some time now she had been staring at the ocean and listening to the never ending sound of waves breaking against the shore.

It wasn't that she didn't enjoy being together with her Voyager family, quite the opposite, but after hours of talking with almost everyone that was there she needed some time to herself. She had had hoped to find answers for questions seeming to burn in her heart. Instead of having the chance to meet with her inner demons though, she found herself facing more questions than ever before.

She sat down on the sand, not caring that the fine grains got caught in the pleats of her dress. With a sigh she took off her sandals and buried her toes in the cold sand, waiting for the soft surge to cool her feet and wash the sand away.

While she gave her body and especially her feet this much needed rest, she allowed herself to get lost in memories. And as often since the time they had finally reached home, her memories were haunted by the appearance of Admiral Janeway. Her memories were so life-like she could hear the Admiral's voice loud and clear and like back on Voyager, she was forced to listen to what the Admiral had to say whether she wanted to or not.

She still felt a chill when she remembered the Admiral telling her about the additional sixteen years in the Delta Quadrant, about Tuvok's illness, about Chakotay and Seven...

There it was, the familiar stab to her heart. Although everything she had heard had pained her, the news about the starting relationship of Chakotay and Seven had hurt her most. Without any conscious effort her thoughts got caught in a maelstrom of questions that seemed to haunt her since their arrival on Earth.

Why hadn't she sensed anything at all?

She always had thought that she did take care of her crew; that she would notice when something bothered them or when they were especially happy, but it seemed she had been mistaken.

"Or was it that she had registered the growing tension between the two of them but hadn't wanted to see?"

She shook her head and let it fall into her hands that were resting on her knees. In hindsight she could see that in the weeks before the Admiral's visit Chakotay had seemed more relaxed, happier somehow. He had smiled more often and sometimes when he seemed to have thought that no one was watching he had looked lost in thoughts. It was on these occasions she could see a certain gleam in his eye...

If she had registered this gleam in his eye, then what the hell had she believed he was thinking about?

She simply hadn't connected his improving mood with the former Borg drone Seven had acted as always. She had worked hard and efficient and whenever they met in astrometrics or the mess hall she was friendly and a bit subdued, as they had come to know her to be. Seven had still struggled with human emotions and it had always been hard to tell what was going on behind her calm mask.

Why hadn't Seven come to her for advice in this newly blossomed love life?

At the beginning of her time on Voyager Seven regularly came for her advice. Janeway and the Doctor had been the first people to teach Seven about humanity. There she was, back at point one. Sometime during the last half year in the Delta Quadrant Janeway had lost her connection to her crew. Still, Seven should've known she always had an open ear for the former Borg.

Or could it be that Seven knew about the attraction between Chakotay and her? An attraction that had faded before Seven came on board?

There was no need to deny that there had been a time when she and Chakotay had been close. Before, but even stronger after New Earth there had been a perceptible tension between them. In those times their contact with each other had been marked with by easy, almost flirtatious banter. That was only normal when two human adults were forced two spent weeks in a row alone in such close proximity, wasn't it? With time this attraction wore down though, like a plant starving of malnutrition.

Chakotay was her First officer and she couldn't have given in, even if she wanted to. She had to follow protocol, hadn't she? It lay in the nature of living beings that they needed rules they could follow. Without any rules at all there would be anarchy. Her crew needed rules. Without rules they never would've made it home. So she had to be symbol for them. What would they've thought if even their captain wasn't able to follow protocol?

Then why did she still feel that Chakotay and Seven had betrayed her?

She wished for them both to be happy. She cared for them deeply, like she did for all of her crew. So why couldn't she be happy that they seemed to have found this happiness with each other?

Because all of her argumentation was based on a lie, that's why. Because her feelings for Chakotay had never died. Because she was still in love with him.

Angrily she kicked the sand with one of her bare feet.

In more than one of those many lonely nights on Voyager she had consoled herself with the otherwise forbidden thought that if they would find a way home she would be free to explore her feelings for Chakotay, free to see where it might lead her. Now these options seemed to be gone forever. Chakotay's feelings for her had died and he belonged to Seven. She had lost the one man that meant the world to her, the one that understood her better than anyone else.

Even now, after over one year had passed, she didn't want to think about it. She still hadn't taken the time to sort out her feelings. In fact she had done what she had perfected throughout the last seven

years, namely suppressed her feelings. Furthermore she had done everything possible to avoid meeting Chakotay and Seven.

At the beginning when the turmoil around Voyager was still fresh she couldn't help meeting them regularly at HQ or at one of the banquets given to celebrate their homecoming. Each time the meetings left her drained, despairing. Even if they never showed their affection openly she was sure to see it in the way they looked at each other, in the way Chakotay placed his hand at the small of Seven's back when he guided her through a room.

So when the hype slowly died down she did her best to retreat from public, to retreat from them. In fact she hadn't seen Chakotay or Seven during the last five months.

She laughed bitterly. If she was honest with herself she knew exactly what made the Admiral so bitter.

Deep in her heart she had hoped, almost wished to see Chakotay and Seven today. As she had never allowed herself to admit that her heart was an open wound there had never been a process of healing. But someday she would have to try to become whole again, she couldn't live like that forever. A part of her had believed that if she would see them together tonight she would be forced to admit the truth and it would give her some kind of closure.

But neither of them were here tonight. Now, as she finally was ready to move on she was confronted with even more questions and this feeling of helplessness made her angry.

Where was Chakotay? Where was Seven? What was the reason that neither of them showed up? Could it be that they ...

"Shouldn't the Captain be the glorious centre of this party instead of sitting here all alone, watching the sea?"

The familiar soft voice joking startled her from her reverie and she was sure her heart missed a beat. With an outward calm demeanour she turned around and saw warm, brown eyes looking down at her.

"She was. Her feet refused to obey her anymore, though. They vehemently insisted that shift was long over," she said with a sigh, but gave him a playful wink at the same moment.

Although she didn't feel like bantering with him at all, she didn't want to show him that she was troubled to the core either. As he was here now she would get the answers to her questions soon enough.

He laughed out loud at her remark, his eyes twinkling with humour.

"I'm impressed. Kathryn Janeway finally learns to listen to her body's signals."

"I'll pretend I didn't hear that, Chakotay. I'm a quite reasonable person as you should know." She gave him a fake stern look.

"Quite. You said it yourself."

Still grinning he sat down beside her and while he was taking off his shoes, she gave him a secret sideways glance. He looked wonderful and if it hadn't been for his eyes that couldn't quite hide a troubled mind, she would have thought to see a perfect content man. She was curious to know what it was that bothered him, but didn't dare to ask.

With a sigh Chakotay leaned back on his elbows, like her not caring that the sand spread all over his clothes. He turned his head and as his intensive, inquiring gaze met hers, she quickly averted her eyes. She was not ready for the emotions a simple look could stir in her.

"Is everything okay with you? You look exhausted." There was more than a trace of concern in his voice and when she turned to him she tried to look reassuring.

"I'm fine, really. It's only that I worked a bit too much the last few weeks. What about you? How are you and why are you so awful late?" Her eyebrow raised she waited for him to answer.

Unlike her he never shrunk away from discussing personal matters and he gave her a long thoughtful look before replying.

"Well, I guess you could say I'm fine, too. As you surely know I'm about to be promoted to Captain and that'll mean I'll get my own ship in the near future. So when it comes to work I cannot complain."

He paused for a moment and his gaze strayed away from her to rest on the night sky.

"That's about the positives though. I'm troubled, Kathryn. That's the reason I'm late. For the last hours I was trying to meditate, to get back at least a bit of my inner peace before coming here. It's like I'm standing at a crossroads and I cannot decide which way to go. I know which way I prefer, but whenever I try to go this road I find obstacles I don't know how to overcome."

He fell silent and his gaze wandered back to her, again so intense that it seems to burn her skin. Again she looked away.

"It's about Seven, right?" Her voice was hollow but she couldn't help it, the knot in her stomach had tightened and even breathing was an effort all of sudden. As he remained silent she looked at him, finding the look in his eyes unreadable.

He sat up and brushed down the sand from his clothes, his gaze never leaving hers.. He still hadn't said a word but then he sighed quietly.

"You're right. It's about Seven." His voice was bitter.

For a moment sadness threatened to overwhelm her but then she brushed the feeling away, silently counting to five. This wasn't the first loss she faced nor would it be the last. There was no way that she would let Chakotay see the hurt his words gave her. As she spoke her voice was sympathetic and bore no trace of her feelings. The Janeway- women always had been exceptionally actors when need required them to be.

"Did the two of you fight? Do you want to talk about it?"

"I would love to. But Seven and I did not fight although my problem is about her. Better put, a part of it is. But you got me wrong, I'm afraid. Like so often before." His voice, first bitter became more gentle and he reached for her right hand, gently stroking it with his other hand.

"My problem is not only about Seven. It's about boundaries, parameters defined long ago. It's about you, Kathryn. It's about you and me."

"But..." she tried to interrupt him; but he withdrew the hand that had caressed hers only moments ago and placed one finger softly on her mouth.

"Kathryn, please. Give me the chance to explain myself. We missed so many chances and this might be our last one."

She nodded lightly, unable to speak.

"I know that you think that Seven and I are engaged. The fact is we're not and have never been. We're good friends, but that's all. It's true that we had a few dates when we were still on Voyager. But they were quite harmless in nature and they stopped with the Admiral's visit altogether."

"He stopped to see if she understood what he tried to tell her and he must've seen something he searched for in her eyes because he continued speaking a moment later."

"I don't know what this bitter old woman told you but I beg you, don't let it matter anymore. From the moment the Admiral arrived on Voyager the future had been irrevocably changed."

Another sigh escaped his lips. "I won't tell you that I wasn't interested in Seven because I was, but the moment I knew we really would reach home my wish to know her better diminished as my hope that there might be a chance that we could be together after all increased."

The smile he gave her was warm, but his eyes betrayed his feelings; she could see there the love he felt for her, but also the fear that she could reject him."

"When we were back on Earth there were so many times I wanted to talk to you, but you avoided me like the plague. After a while I thought this would be your way of telling me that you're not interested, but I knew that I had to try to talk to you at least once. I just can't go on like this anymore. Kathryn, I don't want to be with Seven. I want to be with you? Won't you give the two of us a chance?"

She let out the breath she had been holding for the last moments. Could it be really true? Did he really return her feelings? The look in his eye said he did and that was all what mattered at the moment. She knew that life didn't always offer certainty and sometimes you simply had to jump and take your chance.

As she spoke the relief she felt was evident in her voice.

"I will, Chakotay."

"His smile deepened and the last thing she saw were his eyes, twinkling with joy that barely covered the passion lying underneath. Then her eyes closed involuntarily and his lips softly brushed hers."

The moment ended as soon as it had begun and when she opened her eyes reluctantly a few seconds later, Chakotay was standing before her, his hand reaching out for her.

"Will you grant me the honour of a dance?"

His question brought their surroundings back to her attention and near the campfire she could see some pairs dancing in close embrace. Although they were quite apart from the others the faint wind carried the rhythm of some Latin American music all the way to her ears.

She got up on her feet.

"I would love to. I have to warn you though. I'm a horrible dancer."

"That doesn't matter. Just relax and for once let me be the one to guide you. Trust me, you know you can."

He pulled her close to him and she shivered at his closeness. Under his soft guidance they soon lost themselves in the rhythm of the music and for some time she forget about the world. All that mattered was feeling his warm body that held her tight and seeing the love in his eyes.

Maybe they had been destined to be together.

Maybe this was how her life was meant to be.

As his lips found hers again all the questions, the maybes vanished from her mind. This was reality and at that moment she swore to make the most of it.

The End