

Janeway returns the Alpha Quadrant and finds herself at a bit of a loss.

Written for slwatson's "Slice of Life" Story Challenge but very, very late (missed the deadline by three weeks).

Thank you to elem for the excellent beta.

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For the first time in seven long, hard years, Kathryn Janeway didn't have somewhere she had to be or something she had to do and she hadn't realised how this newfound freedom would impact on her life until she mentioned it to her counselor.

After Voyager's return to the Alpha Quadrant, the crew, including the ex-Maquis, were universally hailed as heroes. They'd been feted, admired and, after a cursory few days of health and personal checks, given a pat on the back and sent on six weeks leave, after which the official debriefs would take place.

Except for a few weeks early in their journey, Janeway hadn't had more than a day off in almost seven years, and now found herself with more time on her hands than she knew what to do with. The only thing planned was her mandatory weekly counseling appointment.

It was the offhand comment from her well-meaning counselor at the end of one of their sessions that started Janeway on her greatest challenge.

Janeway had repeated his suggestion to her family, who, in turn, had practically collapsed in hysterical laughter.

The good counselor had suggested that she learn to cook (he had actually said 'learn to cook something new'). Obviously, he had no knowledge of her legendary lack of culinary ability but, after the reaction of her mother and sister, Janeway had become determined to teach them a lesson.

She endured the good-hearted derision of her family and joined them in laughing at her own expense, but was a little peeved at their conviction that she was a complete failure in the kitchen.

Janeways did not like failure.

She could do anything, she told herself; even learn to cook. She was a qualified engineer, astrophysicist, scientist and pilot. Surely, once she turned her attention to the task, she could at least learn the basics.

The idea took hold but within a few days of resolving to learn to cook, albeit secretly, she realized that she didn't actually know where to start. There was no way in hell she was going to ask her sister. Phoebe had continued to taunt her mercilessly about her 'disability', as she called it, at every available opportunity. Janeway's mother tried to be supportive, but Kathryn could tell, from the look in her mother's eyes, that she was trying not to laugh at the thought of her daughter producing something edible.

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It was all very well to make the decision to learn to cook, but getting started was easier said than done.

Then inspiration hit. Phoebe had always said that Kathryn couldn't even boil water. Well, to her that seemed like the logical place to begin. Surprisingly, she discovered that it wasn't true that a watched pot never boils. In fact, it boiled, vigorously, even though she stared at it with a concentration so intense that it made her eyes water.

Ha! She could boil water! Water boiling was a piece of cake. Time to branch out a bit.

The next step now appeared obvious. Eggs. Boiled. Janeway was surprised at the amount of time it took to find a detailed procedure for boiling eggs and even then, the scope of the method was scant. Still, undaunted, she began.

What Janeway found truly amazing, after mastering egg boiling, relatively quickly, was that there were so many other foods that one could boil; rice, pasta, vegetables.

How long had this been going on?

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It seemed that as a consequence of that momentous occasion of egg boiling, the dam walls burst.

Janeway discovered that she loved cooking.

Treating each recipe as a scientific experiment, she recalled from her early chemistry lessons, that there's no such thing as a failed experiment. She was undeterred when her projects yielded 'unexpected results' and would studiously repeat each recipe, and associated techniques, until she mastered each one.

Once she began with the more involved and complicated dishes, she visited the holodeck and tried several famous chef programs. She also consumed half a dozen books recommended by her local librarian.

Soon, she was turning out more and more complicated dishes. Rice, pasta and soups.

It was liberating.

However, Janeway discovered her true culinary calling when she discovered desserts - plus they were so much fun to share.

Within two short weeks, she was turning out fruit pies good enough to distribute to the neighbors, and all her family were now receiving cookies, tarts and cakes at regular intervals - Phoebe's children being the principal beneficiaries.

It wasn't long before her six weeks leave had flown by and, after the coming weekend, she would be returning to Starfleet for the official debriefings.

She wasn't worried; in fact, she couldn't wait to see the crew again. She'd managed to keep in touch with Tom and B'Elanna, as well as Harry Kim, delighting them with gifts of pies or cookies when she visited. She'd even started investigating baby food recipes, for when Miral started on solids.

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Janeway passed the 'acid test', as far as she was concerned, when she had her mother over for dinner. She cooked three full courses; finished triumphantly with a delicious dessert and coffee made with a professional machine she'd recently added to her now, restaurant standard kitchen.

“Kathryn that was a truly exceptional meal. I can’t believe you’ve taken to cooking this well.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

“Have you decided to become a vegetarian?”

“No, why?”

“None of the things you’ve cooked included meat. Haven’t you noticed?”

Janeway laughed. “It must be a hangover from the Delta Quadrant. We never got enough meat when we re-supplied at most planets. It was so hard to be sure if a life form was sentient or not. I guess we just got used to doing without.”

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Although Janeway enjoyed her new found skills, she had to admit that her creations were much more fun when she shared them with others. In fact, she had just completed making a range of cookies, in quantities enough to allocate to the whole crew, who she would be seeing again in two days. She couldn’t wait to be with them all again.

Nevertheless, with two days to wait until her return to Starfleet, she still felt like there was something missing. Or maybe someone.

Then she remembered that she had an old, dear friend who had just had an unhappy breakup with his girlfriend and would perhaps benefit from some home-style cooking.

It had been much too long since she had spoken to him, so she didn’t hesitate to call him.

“Chakotay? How do you feel about joining me for lunch at my house? I have a few surprises for you.”