

## ***The Future is Ours – Part 9***

### **“Communications Gone Awry”**

By Dawn

Rated R

Summary: Kathryn and Chakotay go to visit Sekaya

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Captain Young extended his hand in greeting after Kathryn and Chakotay materialized in the small transporter room. “Admiral, Captain, welcome aboard the Pioneer. I'm Captain Bernard Young, and it's a pleasure to meet you both.”

“Thank you, Captain.” Kathryn and Chakotay each accepted a handshake in turn as they stepped off the pad.

Kathryn said warmly, “I hope we haven't delayed your ship from attending to other business.”

“No, sir, of course not. We're honored to have you aboard, and I have to tell you that my crew is very excited to meet you.”

Chakotay nodded and said, “We'd be delighted to meet them, as well.”

Kathryn added, “Absolutely, and you don't need to address me as sir. Admiral will be fine if the need arises, but since I'm on vacation, please call me Kathryn.”

“And please, call me Chakotay.”

“I will, and call me Bernie.” He was very cordial. “If you'll follow me, I'll show you to your quarters.”

Bernie told them all about the Pioneer while they walked down the corridor to the turbolift. Kathryn felt a strange sense of déjà vu, not having been in space since Voyager docked. She almost felt like she'd never been planetside. If not for Chakotay's hand in hers, she might've thought their return had all been a dream.

They arrived at the VIP suite and followed Bernie in. He turned to say, “I hope these quarters are suitable. If you need anything, please don't hesitate to ask.”

“Thank you,” Chakotay said as he looked around. “This is quite elaborate. I can't imagine that we'd need anything else.”

Bernie smiled in agreement. “The Pioneer was built a year ago to be a diplomatic vessel. She's small and discreet, but under cover, she's heavily armed and has the bio-neural

circuitry that I know you're familiar with. We have only ninety crewmembers onboard, but we have many amenities for accommodating a large number of dignitaries."

Kathryn asked, "Why do I have a feeling that Admiral Khurma sent us on this ship for a reason?"

Bernie nodded, "I didn't want to bring up business until you got settled in, but Admiral Khurma would like us to get acquainted because the Pioneer has been assigned to be your flagship for the foreseeable future."

Kathryn chuckled. "I suspect that I have a message from him regarding that, but I haven't checked in since Friday afternoon." Kathryn glanced around the room. "Are these to be my permanent quarters?"

Bernie said, "If they're acceptable to you. However, I can show you all of the options if you'd like."

"I'm sure this is more than adequate," She set her bag down on the desk and peered into the adjoining bedroom to see that it had its own sitting area as well. "I think this suite must be twice the size of the captain's quarters on Voyager."

"Yes, and twice the size of mine, as well," Bernie commented. "But that's why we call it a VIP suite."

"Well, thank you. Although I don't know yet how often I'll be traveling, it'll be nice knowing I have a little 'home away from home' here."

"I'll give you a tour later, but on this deck, there are eight available officer's quarters, a conference room, small dining room, and a private office for you and your staff to use. Do you know how large your staff will be?"

Kathryn was a little surprised with the extent of the space that would be available to her. "At the moment, only four, but I may add more as needed."

"We'll be able to provide for whatever you need. And of course, my entire crew is at your disposal for security, research, or anything else you need. Meanwhile, I'll see to it that your office has enough space for six, just in case."

"Thank you, I'm sure that will be more than sufficient." Kathryn was still getting used to the fact that she was an admiral and had such resources available to her.

"I'll leave you to get settled, and we'll be on our way to the Banora colony if you're ready."

"Thank you, Bernie." Chakotay shook his hand again. "I appreciate that you'll be looking out for us this week."

“It’s our pleasure. I’m well aware that your celebrity status puts you at risk, and we’ll do our best to safeguard you while you’re on leave.”

Kathryn waved it off. “I’m sure that this will be a very dull week for you.”

Bernie and Chakotay exchanged knowing looks. Bernie replied, “I hope it will be. Perhaps you can put us to work for you while you’re gone.”

“I don’t want to think about it this week, but I would love to get more acquainted with you en route.”

“Perhaps you would like to join me and my first officer, Commander Ral Melis, for lunch and then she can take you on a tour of the ship?”

“Bajoran?” Chakotay asked.

“Yes,” Bernie answered. “She was a captain in the Bajoran militia and recently graduated from Starfleet Command School.”

“Impressive,” Kathryn noted. “We’d love to join you both, please let us know when.”

“I will. Welcome aboard.” Bernie nodded and left them alone.

Kathryn sighed and plopped down on the couch. “Well, I guess I might as well make myself at home.”

“An entire starship at your disposal and you don’t have to command it,” Chakotay sat next to her. “Will you be able to manage?”

“No, I want to go fix that skip I feel in the power grid.”

“I wondered if you noticed that.”

Kathryn nodded. “Captain Young seems like an amenable man.”

“Yes, but he would have to be, as Captain of a diplomatic vessel.”

“I should read the crew compliment and start getting to know some of these people.”

“I think you should relax. We have a day and a half to ourselves, and I believe you promised me some time alone.” Chakotay looked at her suggestively.

She agreed even though she felt like working. “Yes, you’re absolutely right. We should mingle with the crew a little since they’re excited to meet us, but other than that, I’m all yours.”

“Besides, you can get to know them on the way back, when I'm not here.”

“Very true.” She pushed him back so that he was reclining on the throw pillows and then stretched out on top of him. “I need to get as much of this in as I can.”

“I'm more than happy to help you with that.” He threaded his fingers through her hair.

“Are you, now, Captain?” She kissed him softly.

“Absolutely, Admiral. I'm here to serve under you.”

She laughed at their old joke and then got serious. “No, you aren't.” She touched his face reverently. “We're in this together.”

He lifted his head, encouraging her to kiss him again. She didn't hesitate.

“Kathryn?” he asked between soft nips on his lips.

“Hmmm?” she responded as she kissed along his jaw.

“Would you like to inaugurate this couch or the bed?”

She paused in her kisses to answer, “Both. I want to remember making love to you all over these quarters.”

“That might take some time. These are large quarters.”

“Mmm hmmm,” she answered as she kissed him again. “Better get started.”

“I'll see what I can do.” He got to work.

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That evening after dinner, Kathryn and Chakotay stayed in the Pioneer's mess hall so they could socialize with the crew. They were the star attraction, and everyone wanted to ask questions and hear stories about the Delta Quadrant.

Kathryn stepped away from the group to refresh her coffee and pulled Chakotay aside. “Should we go back to our quarters?”

“I think they'd be very disappointed if we left now.” He guided her to a quiet spot.

She almost giggled. “They're as exuberant as the group of scientists that we went out with two weeks ago.”

“Yes, they are.” He smiled at her excitement. “You might run into this little bit of hero worship everywhere you go.”

Rolling her eyes at his comment, she said, “I don’t know that it’s hero worship, at least I hope not. There’s just a certain excitement in hearing about the unknown. Maybe someone should write some fictional novels based on our adventures. They’d be a lot more interesting.”

“I’ll suggest that to Ensign Taylor. She has a real flare for creative writing.”

Kathryn laughed. “I can’t wait to read them. It has to be better than that dreadful ‘Photons Be Free’.” She placed her hand on his shoulder, “But don’t tell Dr. Joe that I said so.”

“Dr. Joe?”

“Do you like it? I’m trying to use his new first name. I’ve got three former crewmembers who all want me to start calling them something different, and now there are all these new ranks to remember. At least I can call four of them commander.”

“Three new names?”

“Annika, Joe, and Lanna.” She sipped her coffee.

“She asked you to call her Lanna?”

She nodded. “During debriefings. We were engaging in a bit of girl-talk, mostly talking about you,” Kathryn winked and continued, “and she said that it would mean a lot to her if I would call her that. It was what her mom called her.”

Chakotay frowned. “I’ve heard you saying that, but I thought I just misunderstood.” He did a double take as they started walking back towards the gathered crew. “You talked to B’Elanna about me?”

Kathryn assured him, “Nothing much, really. She was trying to get some gossip about you and Annika, but I didn’t give her any.” At his unconvinced look, she stopped and laid her palm over his heart. “Trust me.”

He grimaced slightly, but nodded. “I do, Kathryn. I’m just not entirely comfortable with it.”

Worried, she said quickly, “Chakotay, I assure you that I’d never...”

“I know.” He squeezed her hand and relaxed. “It’s fine. You know how that whole affair embarrasses me.”

She raised herself up on her toes and kissed him. "I'm sorry that I brought it up."

He smirked. "You just kissed me in front of a group of strangers again."

"I know," she said with amusement. "It's getting to be a habit. I hope you don't mind?"

"Of course not." He squeezed her shoulder. "Now go amaze these people, and I'll go talk about you with Bernie."

She rolled her eyes again and said, "Just don't tell him how stubborn I can be."

"You? Stubborn?" Chakotay pretended to be taken aback. "Wouldn't believe it for a moment."

Chakotay nodded at Bernie who left his conversation to join him at a table on the far side of the room.

Bernie commented, "The crew is enamored with her. She's fascinating to watch."

"Yes, she is." Chakotay nodded. "But I'm rather biased since I'm in love with her."

"May I pry into your personal life? How long have you felt that way?"

Chakotay furrowed his brow, not expecting such a direct question. "Why do you ask?"

"Commander Ral has only been with us for a few weeks. My former first officer and I are in a relationship and decided that it'd be best if we weren't serving together."

"Oh? Where is she now?"

"On Earth, working at Starfleet Command. We're getting married in a month. I just wondered how you managed to work together and love each other."

"By doing our damndest to ignore it." He glanced at Kathryn. "We never acknowledged the attraction while on Voyager, and she's got such a good poker face that it was really hard to tell how she felt. We were best friends, enjoyed each other's company, and were there for each other during the hard times, but it was never more than that."

"I'm sure that was difficult without the opportunity to change assignments. I've considered asking Judy, my fiancée, to travel with us, but I'm afraid she'd be bored without anything to do. At least with Kathryn being primarily stationed on Earth, I'll be back there often."

"I sure hope so, since I'll be on Earth, too." He looked wistfully at Kathryn, but turned his attention back to Bernie. "What is Judy's position now?"

“She’s working for the public affairs office, tracking all of the facts and reports that Starfleet sends to the Federation Council for press releases and so forth. It’s not a command position, but she’s very good at it. She always helped me keep my facts straight while ferrying around all the diplomats.”

“Really?” Chakotay was very interested.

“Yes. That’s what the Pioneer has been doing for the last year. The changes are not easy to keep up with, but it certainly hasn’t been boring.”

Chakotay had an idea. “How would you feel about Judy working for Kathryn?”

Bernie sat up a little straighter. “Would that be possible?”

“She wouldn’t be your direct subordinate, and I think Kathryn could still use another staff member.”

“To do what?”

“Well, all four of her current staff are from Voyager, and none are familiar with current politics and recent history.”

“And that’s what Judy excels at.” Bernie looked excited. “Do you think Kathryn would be interested?”

“She could use someone knowledgeable. I’ll mention it to her.”

“Thank you. I won’t mention anything to Judy until I hear back from you. Don’t want to get her hopes up.”

“And I’m going to try my best to keep Kathryn from working this week.”

“I’m sure she needs the break.” Bernie looked over at Kathryn and asked, “Is there anything about her that I should know?”

Chakotay took a sip of his tea as he thought about it. “I don’t think she’d like it if I told you about her idiosyncrasies.”

Bernie laughed. “I bet not. I just want to make sure our working relationship gets started off on the right foot. With all the good publicity she’s been getting, I think she can really do some good out here. Just by watching her today, I can tell that she’s terrific with people. They obviously adore her and they’ve only known her for an hour.”

“You don’t have to convince me.” Chakotay smiled. “I started adoring her the minute I met her.”

“I’d just hate it if something I did or said resulted in making her job more difficult.”

“I don’t think you have anything to worry about. She’s very clear about her expectations, and if she doesn’t like something, she’ll tell you. Voyager was a closed community, and we all had no choice but to get past any differences. She set the tone for that. Although she may be stubborn and demanding at times, she’s also very gracious and forgiving.”

“I suppose there’s a reason why she’s so popular with her former crew and the press.”

“She’s pretty easy to work with once you get used to her attention to detail. Nothing escapes her notice, and she’s exceptionally intelligent.”

“I read her profile. She has a PhD in Cosmology?”

Chakotay nodded. “The philosophy and structure of the universe. She’s a scientist at heart.”

“Well, if Voyager was going to be stranded with anyone in command, sounds like you were blessed to have her.”

“Without a doubt.” Chakotay thought carefully about what to tell Bernie before asking, “If I may be candid with you?”

“Of course.”

“She’s going to be pulled in a lot of different directions, each contingency wanting her to do their bidding.”

“I have no doubt.”

“You might offer to be a sounding board for her, but I believe that between President Zife, Admiral Khurma, and the Security Council, she’s going to have plenty of parties telling her what she needs to be working on.”

“So you’re suggesting that I merely follow orders as opposed to offering suggestions?”

Chakotay shook his head. “Not exactly. I’m sure she’ll want your advice, especially since you’ve been out in the trenches. Just be sensitive to the fact that she’s juggling several agendas.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, although if I may be equally as candid, President Zife is the problem and any agenda that he has will be the wrong one.”

Chakotay was getting a feel for Bernie and decided that he was a good match for Kathryn. They’d work well together, and Chakotay felt good about entrusting Kathryn’s



safety to him. He continued to talk to him for well over an hour while Kathryn captivated group after group of enthusiastic listeners.

When they finally managed to get away, it was after ten o'clock. Kathryn said, "I'm really sorry that we stayed so late."

"Don't be," Chakotay smiled as they got into the turbolift. "I didn't have any plans except getting you to bed, and it's not too late for that."

Kathryn laughed and took his hand as they were deposited on their deck. "You were rather chummy with Captain Young. Anything I need to know?"

"Yes, you should ask his fiancée to work for you."

"Oh?"

"She's exactly what you need – someone who knows what's going on out here, and she'll likely want to help, too."

"Is she onboard?"

"No, she works for Public Affairs on Earth, but she was his first officer until recently."

"Really?" Her eyes widened. "The plot thickens."

Chakotay laughed as they entered their quarters. "Look her up in the morning. For now, however..." He took her into her arms. "We've got other things to attend to."

She was about to comment when he silenced her with a deep kiss and all thoughts of work drifted away as he worked towards that goal of making love to her in every possible location in her quarters.

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When they arrived on Banora the following afternoon, the first thing Kathryn noticed was how lush and beautiful the planet was. "Wow, this is wasn't what I expected at all."

"No?" Chakotay asked as he carried their bags to the ground car that was waiting for them. "What did you expect?"

Kathryn gave the driver a kindhearted smile while she answered Chakotay. "A desert, although I have no idea why. I'm glad it's warm like I suspected. I brought all summer clothes."

Chakotay quipped, "There's probably a desert on this planet if you really want one."

“No, no, that’s quite all right,” she laughed. They rode out of the large town and into a more rural area that reminded Kathryn a lot of the hilly regions of New England. The big difference was that most of the fields hadn’t been cultivated for crops.

“Penny for you thoughts?”

“Hmm?” She turned her head to look at him.

“You’re very quiet.”

She rested her hand on his thigh and gave him a warm smile before looking out the window again. “I’m just admiring the beauty of the landscape. I can see why you want to spend a few months here.”

“I’m reconsidering that.”

Kathryn looked at him in surprise. “You are?”

“I’d still like to spend a couple weeks here, but I really don’t want to be away from you all summer.”

She casually waved away his concerns. “I’m likely to be working and traveling a lot, and we wouldn’t be able to spend much time together. You should spend the time here with your sister.”

“Traveling already?” He sounded a little put out. “How much do you think you’ll be gone?”

“Not sure, yet,” she shrugged. “But I plan to use the time while you’re gone to get out there and meet people. I don’t believe I’ll be very effective from a desk on Earth.”

“I didn’t realize you’d be leaving already,” he mumbled and looked out the window, away from her.

She looked at him, wondering why he was acting brusque with her. Surely he realized that she’d be traveling a lot. They’d even talked about it. Shaking her head, she dismissed it, figuring he was just nervous about seeing his sister. Her hand was still on his thigh, so she gave it a gentle squeeze, which he returned when his hand covered hers.

They soon arrived at Sekaya and Steven’s house, and Kathryn felt at home right away. She knew that Sekaya was close to her due date, but was surprised to see just how pregnant she was. Kathryn was welcomed with open arms and they all fell into easy conversation. They gave her and Chakotay a quick tour of their homestead, and then Sekaya coaxed Kathryn into the kitchen to help fix dinner.

Sekaya was undeterred by their warnings of Kathryn's cooking abilities and vowed to turn her into a master chef by the end of the week. The dinner turned out well despite Kathryn's involvement, and they spent the rest of the evening out on the veranda, playing cards and talking about Voyager, politics, and their families. Steven and Sekaya were active in local politics and had strong opinions about the current state of the Federation.

Kathryn would have thought it a perfect evening if Chakotay hadn't been so detached. She couldn't figure out what was on his mind because every time they were alone long enough for her to ask, Chakotay made an excuse to go into another room. He was even ignoring the signals they had developed long ago for silent communication. When she crawled into bed next to him, he was already asleep, so she didn't have a chance to talk to him then, either. She chalked it up to his being in an irritable mood and figured a good night's sleep would resolve his sulkiness.

The next day was the colony's Autumn Harvest Festival. Kathryn had imagined it would be a religious ceremony, but except for a blessing of the food, there was nothing religious about it. It was a full-fledged carnival, art fair, and music festival. Chakotay was pleasant throughout the day, but he wasn't openly affectionate with her, nor did he go out of his way to see to her comforts as he usually did. She didn't need him to cater to her, but she was surprised that he remained distant.

The following morning, Sekaya encouraged Kathryn and Chakotay to take a short trip into the capitol city to shop in the capitol square market. Chakotay was looking for a new belt, and she felt like perusing the clothing to see if she could find anything unique. When she finished looking in one shop, she realized that she'd lost track of where Chakotay was and decided to go to the front of the store to see if she could spot him. While she was waiting, a large man walked up to her and said, "Admiral Janeway."

She quickly scanned her surroundings. They were being watched by everyone in the immediate area, and several men who were focused on them periodically scanned the vicinity. Her hackles were up instantly, and she squared her shoulders. "And you are?"

He smiled genuinely and took a step back. "Forgive me for alarming you, Admiral. I'm used to being recognized without introducing myself." He extended his hand, "I'm Grant Cameron, Governor of Banora."

She relaxed and accepted his handshake as Chakotay stepped up to join them. "I mistook your security detail for henchmen."

Laughing, he said, "That's not far from the truth, but I'm surprised you noticed them."

"She has a knack for it," Chakotay said as he offered his hand as well. "Governor Cameron, I'm Chakotay."

"Yes, Sekaya's brother. She speaks very highly of you, Captain."

Kathryn said, "Your colony is delightful, Governor."

"Thank you, Admiral." He bowed his head slightly. "I hope that you enjoyed the Harvest Festival yesterday?"

"Yes, very much," Kathryn smiled. "I'm impressed with how vital the entire community is. Everyone seems to know each other, yet it's a rather large colony."

"We have almost two hundred thousand people living here, but most say that it feels like one big, happy family."

Kathryn agreed, "Banora is very welcoming and hospitable."

The Governor said, "Admiral, would you accept my invitation to join me for a meal while you're here? I would welcome the opportunity to engage in a discussion about the current state of affairs."

"I'd be honored, Governor, but I'm trying not to think about work this week."

He looked slightly deflated. "That's completely understandable, Admiral, and I commend you for taking what I'm sure is a much-needed vacation."

"Thank you for understanding, Governor." She felt bad for turning him down, but knew that Chakotay probably wouldn't be very happy with her if she accepted. "Perhaps when I'm ready to return to my ship at the end of the week, we could find some time to speak?"

"I would be delighted." He pulled a card out of his pocket and gave it to her. "Steven and Sekaya know how to reach my office, but that is my private comm line. Please use it any time, and if you happen to find a free moment, I'd love to chat with you."

"Thank you, Governor." She tucked it into her pocket. "I'll be in touch."

He cordially took his leave and then Chakotay asked, "Why didn't you accept his invitation?"

She furrowed her eyebrows. "Because I'm on vacation with you."

"But when someone of that importance asks you to lunch, you should go."

After mulling that statement over for a moment, she calmly said, "I was under the impression that you didn't want me to think about work this week."

He shrugged and looked away. "Is that possible?"

She responded with a low, cool voice, “Not entirely, but I didn’t think you’d appreciate it if I made an appointment to discuss politics with a government official during our last week together for awhile.”

Without meeting her eyes, he said, “It’s just one lunch. Besides, I don’t expect you to work your schedule around me.” He quickly changed the subject, “Do you see anything here you’d like to buy?”

“No,” she was annoyed with him, but tried not to show it. “We can head back, if you’re ready.”

“Not yet. I’d like to check out a leather-works shop that’s just up the street, if you don’t mind.”

“Don’t mind at all,” she extended a hand for him to lead the way out of the shop. When he couldn’t see her face anymore, she let her eyes roll slightly and sighed. Something was bothering him, and she was frustrated that he was using snide comments to give her hints rather than coming right out and saying what was on his mind.

She decided to let it go to avoid an argument in the middle of the public square. After all, she wasn’t unfamiliar with his moodiness. He just hadn’t been that way since they’d been a couple.

After dinner that evening, Sekaya invited Kathryn to go on a walk. They were both eager to let the men have some bonding time and get away to talk for a bit. Kathryn had high hopes that she could develop a strong friendship with the woman she hoped would eventually be her sister-in-law.

As they walked, Sekaya told her all about the homestead and what they’d done to cultivate it since they settled on the land five years earlier.

Kathryn asked, “May I ask what brought you to Banora?”

“Steven,” she said. “We met while I was studying economics on Tezra Prime with full intentions of trying to rebuild Trebus. He was visiting one weekend for an agricultural economics symposium, and he propositioned me in a bar.”

“Propositioned you?”

“Yes,” Sekaya laughed. “There was a sleazy alien who wouldn’t back off and things were about to get tense when Steven came up and put his arm around me as if we were already an item and asked, ‘Darling, is this man bothering you?’”

“And what did you do?”

“Well, you’ve seen how gorgeous Steven is... tall, muscular.”

“I try not to notice those things about someone else’s husband,” Kathryn said with a wink.

Sekaya laughed and continued, “The alien was a small, slimy man, and was immediately intimidated. I gladly accepted the exchange of suitors and when we were alone, he kept talking to me as if we were a couple – asking about my day and if I’d had dinner yet. The rest is history.”

“That’s a great story,” Kathryn commented. “And Steven grew up here, right?”

“Yes. He’s never lived anywhere else.” Sekaya looked out over the meadow. “I love it here... so peaceful. Quite different from Earth.”

“Oh, I don’t know. My home town is pretty quiet, although you can’t find this much wilderness on Earth unless you’re in a jungle or a park.”

“I’ve only been to San Francisco, and I didn’t care for it. Too big and too many buildings.”

“I agree. I have a house there for convenience, but I’d like a second home in a woodland setting.”

“Two homes?” Sekaya asked. “Sounds like a lot of upkeep.”

“Well, in the city, there’s not much upkeep needed, and I can hire anything done. I’ve had to do that for every house I’ve owned because I’ve spent so much time living on a starship.”

Sekaya was quiet for a minute. “May I ask you a personal question, Kathryn?”

“Of course.”

“Is your relationship with my brother a permanent one?”

Kathryn tilted her head and smiled. “I certainly hope so, but we haven’t discussed it. We’ve only been together for a few weeks.”

“The way he talked about you in his letters and especially over the last month during our calls, I assumed that he was madly in love with you.”

“You say that as if you doubt it.” Kathryn focused her attention on a tree branch as they walked past it.

She fidgeted a moment before continuing, “I know you’ve only been here three days, but I expected him to act different with you around. Something feels wrong.”

Kathryn nodded. "How was he when he visited you before?"

"I could tell that all wasn't right with his spirit, but his life had just changed abruptly and some unrest was to be expected. Although we haven't spent much time together since we were children, I still think I know my brother. It seemed like he was forcing himself to be in a good mood, if that makes sense."

"It makes perfect sense. I've seen him do that often."

"And when he spoke to me last week about you coming, I could tell that something significant had changed because he was buoyant and openly expressive. I expected to see that same happy man when you arrived."

"You don't think he's happy?" Kathryn asked.

"I hope you don't think I'm meddling in your relationship, but I'm worried about him."

"I don't think you're meddling because I don't believe you'd bring it up if you weren't sure that I love him."

Sekaya agreed. "You are the closest person to him. I was hoping you could reassure me that he's okay and not suffering from the hardships in his life. I don't know him well enough, yet, and I figured that if you love him despite his sullen behavior, you must know what's in his heart."

Kathryn thought about that for a long moment before deciding what to say. "He periodically ruminates on his past, but I don't believe the memories haunt him like they used to. However, I won't argue with you that he's not in good spirits at the moment. He's annoyed about something that I haven't figured out, yet. His bad mood began on the drive to your house."

"I guess we're all entitled to our moods. Me especially," she touched her protruding belly.

"That we are. I wonder if the changes in our lives are just starting to sink in for him, or if he's anxious about the future. I'll see what I can do to bring him out of it so that he's not a bear all summer. It's probably something to do with me, although I don't understand what."

"I'm looking forward to having him here. We've been apart for the better part of thirty years, and I'd like to get to know him again. I hope it'll be good for his spirit to reconnect with family."

“I hope so, too.” They walked along for another half an hour, telling each other stories about Chakotay. Kathryn told Sekaya about how optimistic Chakotay could be and how he was an unending support to her.

Sekaya stopped to sit on a large rock that afforded a striking view. “This was probably a mistake.”

“What was?” Kathryn looked out over the hills and valleys spread out before them. “The walk?”

“Sitting down. I'm going to need your help getting back up.”

Kathryn put her hand on Sekaya's shoulder and sat down next to her. “I'll be happy to when you're ready.”

“I assume you don't have children?” They both leaned back and stretched their legs out.

“I've had some crewmembers that felt like children, but none of my own.”

Sekaya hesitated before asking, “Do you plan on having any?”

“Yes,” Kathryn said without thinking about it. “I'm not sure when, but I'd like to.”

“May I offer a piece of advice?”

“Of course,” Kathryn bit back a smile.

“Don't listen to anyone who tells you pregnancy is great. I'm not a fan.”

“I'll keep that in mind,” Kathryn chuckled. “I can't imagine that it's very comfortable, but still, I think it will be an incredible feeling to have a baby growing inside me.”

“Well, that part is pretty great.” Sekaya rubbed her belly. “Would you like to feel him?”

“Are you sure?” Kathryn knelt down and let Sekaya put her hand on the baby. She shied away when she felt the rolling movement under hand. “Is that painful?”

“Not at all. It feels like someone pushing against me from the inside.”

Kathryn put both hands on Sekaya's stomach and savored the movement of the child within. “Thank you for this.”

“You're welcome.” Sekaya smiled at Kathryn. “You're not what I expected at all.”

“I'm not?” Kathryn raised an eyebrow.



“No.” Sekaya shook her head lightly. “Despite the friendliness that you radiate when on camera, I thought you’d be a hard-nosed, militant woman in person.”

She laughed. “I can be.”

“I’m sure. I don’t think you would’ve survived out there otherwise, but most successful military leaders I’ve met have their commanding personality with them all the time. Very rough and strict.”

Kathryn retook her seat next to Sekaya. “I’ve met the type, but I prefer to motivate my crew by bolstering their confidence rather than scaring them into obedience. I’m more of a diplomat and scientist than a military strategist, although when attacked, I become more of what you were expecting.”

“I can see that about you.”

“Thank you. I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“It’s meant as one. The more I get to know you, the more I can see why my brother loves you.”

“I just hope he can tolerate me in the long run.” Kathryn stood up and looked out over the valley again. “I love him very much, but I worry that we are too strong-willed for each other.”

“I doubt it. As you said, he’s just in a mood.”

Kathryn nodded quietly as she looked at the sun dipping low on the horizon. “Yes, but I know how difficult I can be. I’ve wondered if he’d be better off with someone who needs to be taken care of.”

“And that’s not you?”

“Not in the traditional sense.”

“But as a woman who is under a lot of public pressure, surely you need someone to be yourself with, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Kathryn agreed. “I do, and he’s been that for me since we first developed our friendship. Somewhere along the way, we fell in love but refused to acknowledge it. Now that we have, it’s opened up a whole new level of complication to our relationship.”

After a long, quiet moment, Sekaya said, “We’d better head back. We walked for over an hour, and it’s going to be dark soon.”

Kathryn helped Sekaya up and they got underway, walking quicker this time to get home before dark.

On the way back, they talked about plans for the rest of the week. Kathryn told Sekaya about meeting the Governor, and Sekaya agreed that Kathryn should accept the invitation, regardless of the mixed messages she was receiving from Chakotay.

Fifteen minutes into the walk back, Sekaya suddenly stopped and gasped.

Kathryn turned around. "What is it?"

"A cramp," Sekaya took a deep breath and held her hand against the side of her belly. "Probably walking too fast."

"Let's slow down a little. We probably have at least a half hour of daylight left, and I bet we can make the last fifteen minutes in the dark."

Sekaya nodded and they began walking again, this time not saying much.

"Oh, no..." Sekaya stopped again and held her hands tight against her stomach, her eyes wide with worry. "This can't be happening now."

"You think its labor?"

"It's too soon," she said with alarm.

Kathryn calmly asked, "But you're due in less than a month, aren't you?"

"Yes, but that's a whole month. I'm not ready for this."

"Perhaps the walking triggered it."

Sekaya covered her mouth with a shaky hand. "Kathryn..."

"It's all right." She tenderly put her hand on Sekaya's back. "Let's rest for a few minutes and maybe the cramps will subside."

While they were resting against a tree, two more cramps happened within five minutes of each other. The sun was dipping below the horizon and Kathryn was getting worried. "I think we'd better call for help."

Sekaya asked with a slight panic in her voice, "But how?"

Kathryn pulled a communicator out of her pocket. "With this."

"Who can you call?"

“We have several options, but first we’ll try Chakotay.” She tapped the communicator and said, “Janeway to Chakotay. Do you read me?”

The line was quiet for a moment until it clicked in response. “Kathryn? Are you all right?”

“Yes, but we need help getting back.”

“What’s wrong? Where are you?”

Sekaya said, “We walked to the rock. Steven will know.”

Kathryn added, “It appears that Sekaya has begun early labor, and we’re afraid that if she does much more walking, it’ll progress too quickly.”

“Labor? Already?” Chakotay said, slightly panicked.

Kathryn said calmly, “You’re not helping ease her concerns, Chakotay.”

“Sorry,” he said quietly. “I’ve found Steven and will fill him in.”

Sekaya said, “Tell him we’re more than halfway.”

“Understood. Sit tight for a minute.”

After the com channel closed, Kathryn suggested, “Maybe it’d be best if I contact the Pioneer, or is there a medical transport system we could use?”

“No!” Sekaya was adamant. “Don’t use a transporter on me!”

“All right,” Kathryn said calmly. “Is there a reason?”

“I hate them. I’ve been transported twice and I just can’t stand having my molecules scattered like that.”

“Only twice?”

Sekaya scowled. “The reason I love living away from Earth so much is that we use significantly less technology here. No transporters, no replicators. There are some things that are just unnatural.”

Taking a deep breath, Kathryn said calmly, “Okay. No transporters.” This was going to make getting help significantly more challenging.

Clenching her belly again, Sekaya took a deep breath and blew it out. “That one was stronger.”

“How bad does it hurt?”

“Not too bad, but it’s unsettling. They feel like strong menstrual cramps.”

A couple minutes later, her commbadge chirped, followed by, “Chakotay to Janeway.”

“We’re here. What do you know?”

Steven asked, “Sekaya? Are you okay?”

“It’s not bad. I’m just worried,” she answered.

“Okay, we’re going to head your way on the four-wheeler. It’s the only vehicle that we can get down the path.”

Sekaya cringed and Kathryn asked, “Don’t you have any kind of medical shuttle that could come to our location?”

“Yes, but that’s only to be used in life-threatening situations. I’m not sure this qualifies.”

Kathryn suggested, “I could contact the Pioneer to send a shuttle.”

“No,” Sekaya said. “I don’t want an entire starship coming to my rescue over some cramps.”

Steven said, “I contacted Dr. Lotha, and she said it would be best if you didn’t try to walk much until she can assess the baby.”

“All right,” Sekaya acquiesced.

“We’ll be there soon, honey,” Steven responded before a click ended the com signal.

Sekaya breathed through another cramp and then asked, “Do you always carry one of those communicators with you?”

“Yes, as a safety precaution. The Pioneer is standing by if the need should arise.”

“An entire ship just waiting out there while you’re on vacation?”

Kathryn nodded. “Starfleet is a little over-protective because of all the publicity.”

“Will a ship be watching Chakotay while he’s here?”

“No, but I think he and I should set up a regular check-in time.”

Sekaya was quiet for a few minutes, and reached for Kathryn’s arm as another cramp hit. “Sorry, Kathryn.”

Kathryn covered Sekaya’s hand with her own and shook her head. “Don’t be sorry. Hold onto me as much as you want.”

When the pain subsided, Sekaya said, “I’m scared.”

“Of labor?” Kathryn held Sekaya’s hand for comfort.

“I’m not ready for this,” she choked on her words. “I haven’t even got diapers, yet.”

It was hard not to be amused at something so insignificant, but Kathryn understood how unrealistic fears could frighten people in times of stress. “We can get diapers for him at a moment’s notice.”

“I know, but I still had three solid weeks to finish things. I wanted everything to be perfect when we bring him home.”

Kathryn assured her, “I know you do, but he’s not going to know. All he cares about is having a warm place to sleep, your milk, a dry bottom, and your love. The rest of it is just a bonus.”

Sekaya breathed through another pain. “I hope he’s okay. We’ve been trying for so long to get pregnant.”

“He’s going to be just fine. Steven and Chakotay will be here soon and we’ll get you to a hospital, and then you can focus on bringing him into the world.”

“I’m scared of that, too,” Sekaya cringed. “I want to do this naturally without drugs, but I don’t know if I can.”

Kathryn put her arm around Sekaya who was beginning to cry, and said, “Just take it one step a time. The pain will build gradually, and if it gets to be too much, ask for medication. Our bodies are made for this, and you may find out that although it’s exhausting, you’ll have the strength you need to cope.”

“How do you know so much?” Sekaya wiped at her eyes.

“Only because I’ve been through some pretty tough situations that I didn’t think I could bear, but the strength was there when I needed it.”

“I’m sorry,” Sekaya sniffed and wiped her eyes on her sleeve. “You must think I’m a blubbering mess.”

“Hardly,” Kathryn held her close. “I think you’re doing just fine.”

“But you’re a really famous person that I barely know, and I’m going on and on.” Sekaya stopped talking as another contraction hit.

Kathryn held Sekaya’s hand firmly. “I may be famous, but I’m just a regular woman who hopes she’ll be your sister soon.”

“Really?” Sekaya relaxed again.

“Yes, but don’t tell Chakotay. He should come to that conclusion on his own.”

“Mum’s the word, but I hope so, too.” Sekaya laughed as she said, “Maybe in a year or so, I’ll be sitting next to you telling you to not worry about whether the nursery is painted with teddy bears.”

Kathryn laughed. “And I’ll be asking for pain meds. You can hold my hand while my sister, Phoebe, goes and paints them.”

“I need to think of a name,” Sekaya said all of a sudden. “We have a long list, but I don’t know which one.”

“Remember that list of what the baby needs?” Kathryn asked. “A name is not one of them.”

“Do you think Chakotay would be upset if I gave him our father’s name? I was going to talk to him about it this week.”

“Kolopak?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t think Chakotay would mind. He’d probably be very proud.”

“Yes, but I didn’t know if he planned on using the name for his own son. It’s a tradition to pass it down among the men.”

“You can still ask him before you name the baby.”

“Do you want a son named Kolopak?” Sekaya asked.

“I haven’t given it much thought, but this isn’t about me. You should talk to him.”

Sekaya winced in pain again. “I think I hear them.”

Kathryn's ears picked up the noise of an engine. "I do, too." She wanted to stand up and wave them down, but decided not to let go of Sekaya. When the men came into view, she could tell by the way they slowed down that she needn't have worried about being seen.

Steven jumped off the four-wheeler and ran over. "Honey? Are you okay?"

Sekaya lunged into his arms, "I'm scared."

Chakotay helped Kathryn to her feet and whispered, "Is she okay?"

Kathryn nodded and whispered back, "She's just worried about everything. A pretty normal reaction."

Steven walked Sekaya over to the four-wheeler until she dug in her heels. "I don't know about this. Being bumped around on that thing could be worse than walking."

"I'll go slowly."

"How will Chakotay and Kathryn get back?" she asked.

Chakotay held up his wrist lamp and said, "We'll walk."

"The sooner we go, the sooner we can see a doctor," Steven said as he hopped onto the seat. "Chakotay, will you help her get on behind me?"

"Of course." He and Kathryn both helped Sekaya get settled.

Sekaya grabbed hold of Steven's waist and held on tight. She said, "Kathryn, thank you."

"You're welcome. We'll see you soon." She patted Sekaya's back.

Kathryn and Chakotay watched as Steven turned the vehicle around and drove back up the trail. She looked at Chakotay who was absorbed in watching them leave. "She'll be fine."

Chakotay spoke loudly. "Steven is a nervous wreck. That baby is three weeks early."

"I know, but she'll be okay. The contractions were really light and the doctor might be able to stop them."

"Why did you walk so far?" Chakotay asked with annoyance.

Kathryn could tell that his emotions were running high, as happened often when he decompressed after a rescue operation. "She knew the path well, and I assumed she

knew her own limitations. She couldn't have anticipated that she would go into labor tonight."

"Still, taking a pregnant woman all the way out here?"

Kathryn pursed her lips to contain her escalating anger. "She invited me."

"Yes, but you have better training than this."

Trying to avoid fighting with him, Kathryn looked towards the sky and took a deep breath. "Let's just get underway, shall we?"

"Fine." Chakotay turned on his wrist lamp so they could see where they were stepping on the path, and he started walking without taking her hand.

His behavior was infuriating, but she wasn't prepared to argue with him when he was stressed from worrying about his sister. She took a steadying breath and followed along behind him.

They had walked for about ten minutes when Chakotay said, "You know, this is just like you to wander off."

"I beg your pardon?" Kathryn stopped in her tracks, deciding enough was enough.

"You do this. You leave yourself unprotected in dangerous situations, just so you can see a little nature or get some fresh air, and this time you had a pregnant civilian with you."

"I wasn't unprotected." She glared at him. "This wasn't dangerous. We merely went for a walk."

"What if someone had followed you out here? I thought you two were just going down to the edge of their property."

"That was the edge of their property. They have a lot of land. I had my commbadge. Why are you so worked up over this?"

"You'd been gone for over an hour."

"Yes, and you could have contacted me."

"Kathryn, do you have any idea how concerned I was when I heard my badge chirp?"

She rubbed her neck in an attempt to tamp down her anger. He knew she could take care of herself. Why was he being such a jerk? "Chakotay? What's going on with us?"

"Oh, so you've finally noticed?"



“What the hell does that mean?” she asked. “If you have something to say to me, then just say it. You’ve been sulking around for three days, doing your best to avoid talking to me. I don’t appreciate what you’re implying.”

“I didn’t think you realized I was even upset. I’ve been trying to figure out if this relationship is one-sided and if you were aware of my emotions at all.”

Kathryn’s mouth dropped open in shock. “I can’t believe you think that. After all we’ve been through? All the promises we’ve made to each other? You seriously think that I don’t love you?”

“It’s not that,” he said angrily. “I know you love me, but I’m not sure that you’re invested in this relationship. It seems like I’m the one doing all the work.”

She hung onto her self-control and avoided smacking him for saying that. Instead, she said, “As soon as we know that Sekaya is okay, I’m calling the Pioneer back.” She’d been afraid that her career would hurt their relationship. She just didn’t expect it to happen so soon.

“You’re leaving?” Chakotay threw his hands up. “Of course you are. Fine!”

“I don’t know what else to do, Chakotay. How can I possibly convince you that I want this relationship beyond what I’ve already said and done over the last two months? I’m not going to stand here and plead my case in hopes that my words will somehow prove stronger than my actions.”

“I’m not upset about the last two months, Kathryn. I’m upset about the next two.”

“Why? Because I don’t want to spend them here?”

He glared at her. “No, because you don’t want to spend them with me and you seem to think it’s okay to make decisions for both of us. I’m not under your command, Kathryn.”

She threw her hand up in exasperation. “You said you wanted to spend the summer here so I made my own plans!”

“Yes, and you didn’t want to leave Earth, but now you are.”

Her voice loud, she asked, “Don’t you think the situation has changed a little since I said that? You’re the one who helped me make the choice!”

“Yes, but when I offered to spend the summer with you, you just dismissed it without giving it a moment’s thought.”

“Because I thought it was important for you to spend time here!” She was getting angrier at his irrational behavior by the minute. “Let’s just get back to the house.”

He walked along with her, but kept talking. “Did it occur to you that I could’ve traveled with you?”

“No, it didn’t. Is that what you want?”

“I thought you were planning on easing into this job from Earth.”

“You’re talking in circles.”

“Dammit, Kathryn! You don’t have to be rude!”

“Rude?” She stopped and glared at him again. “You think I’m the one being rude?”

“Yes, I do.”

“I came here so we could have a nice week together before having to be apart, and since that first day in the car, you have been dismissive and short with me. I don’t appreciate it one bit. I forgo a conversation that could be work-related so that I can spend time with you, and you admonish me for it. I try to establish a friendship with your sister, and then you yell at me for going on a damn walk with her. What do you want from me, Chakotay?”

His voice was low as he said, “I want you to want to spend time with me because you can’t bear the thought of being apart, not because you feel obligated to.”

She pinched the bridge of her nose to force back the tears that threatened. “I can’t do this, Chakotay. I love you, but I don’t think I can be the woman you want me to be.”

Alarmed, he asked, “Are you breaking up with me?”

Her voice faltered as she answered, “I certainly don’t want to, but if you need me to languish when I’m not in your presence, I’m never going to be that woman. I’ll love you, I’ll miss you, and I’ll look forward to being together, but I’ll never allow myself to suffer because I can’t be physically close to a man. Surely the last seven and a half years are proof of that?”

Backing off from his anger, he said, “Kathryn, that’s the last thing I’d ever want. I just wanted you to be happy that I offered to give up my summer plans to be with you, and I was hurt when you weren’t.”

“That’s it?” She couldn’t believe it.

“That’s what started it,” he admitted.

“All of this angst just because you wanted me to swoon with happiness that you changed plans at the last minute?”

“Don’t make it sound so dramatic,” he admonished.

“It is,” she glared. “Chakotay, I really don’t need this from you.”

“What do you mean by that?” he asked defensively.

“I mean that if I’m going to survive being pulled in ten different directions at once, with the burdens of the Federation on my shoulders, I would appreciate it if you could be straightforward with me. If you want more time with me, then tell me. If you want to empower me to do this job, you’ve got to trust me when I tell you that I love you, and you’ve got to give me room to maneuver. I can’t do this if I’ve got to continually worry that I’m not filling your needs, and I can’t read your mind.”

Deflated, he said quietly, “I’m sorry, Kathryn. It was never my intention to make your life more difficult.”

He looked so dejected that her expression softened. “You haven’t made my life difficult, only the last three days.”

He extended his hands to invite her to hug him. When she settled in, he wrapped his arms around her and said, “Please don’t leave, yet. Would you stay for the rest of the week?”

“I don’t want to go.” She couldn’t stop the tear that fell as she relaxed into his embrace. They hadn’t hugged since they’d been in Banora and she missed it desperately.

“I love you,” he choked.

She swallowed the lump in her throat. “I love you, too.”

They walked back to the house in silence, but holding hands. When they arrived, there was a message on the comm that gave them contact information for the hospital. Chakotay placed the call while Kathryn got a glass of water.

Steven answered, “Did you just now get back?”

“Yes, we took it slow because it was dark,” Chakotay said as an excuse. “How is she?”

“The doctor got the labor stopped, but she has to remain on bed rest until delivery. We’re hoping she can make it at least another week or two so the baby’s lungs can fully develop. He’ll survive if he’s born, but it would be better to keep him in the womb for now.”

“That’s good. Is there anything we can do?”

“Not tonight,” Steven answered. “I’ll call you in the morning.”

Kathryn stepped up, “Is she awake?”

“Drifting in and out of sleep.”

“Would you tell her that I’ll paint teddy bears for her tomorrow?”

Steven smiled. “Yes, I will. Thank you, Kathryn.”

After the comm closed, she said, “I’d like to take a shower and call it an early night, if that’s okay with you?”

“Sure. I’m feeling tired, too.”

Kathryn managed a small smile and squeezed his shoulder in reassurance. “I won’t be long.”

Less than an hour later, Chakotay crawled into bed with her. She smiled to herself at the loose pants he was wearing, because he’d never worn so much clothing to bed before. At least, not that she knew of. Even during the last two nights, he had only worn his boxers. Of course, she’d also been wearing pajamas every night they’d been here. She’d felt the need since she was a guest in someone else’s home.

His muscled chest was bathed in moonlight, and she longed to touch it. Pushing down her feelings of sorrow that stemmed from their argument, she rolled to her side and snuggled up against him for comfort. He lifted his arm to make room and then wrapped it around her shoulders in a loving embrace.

“I’m really sorry, Kathryn.” He laced his fingers through hers. “I’m worried about you, and about us, and how all of this is going to work out.”

She studied their hands in the moonlight, and watched the shadows they cast upon his bare chest. “I’m not perfect, and I know that this job is going to consume most of my time and energy, but you are the most important thing in my life, and I hope I never give you reason to doubt that.”

He squeezed her shoulders and kissed the top of her head, too emotional to speak.

She brought his fingers to her lips, gracing them with warm, lingering kisses. Her eyes closed as she relished the feel of his warm skin under her cheek. He smelled of soap with a light touch of the spicy aftershave that she adored. Her emotions swelled as she

thought about their argument and how she'd come close to ending this. Tears stung her eyes and she released his hand to wipe them away.

"Come here," he said as he pulled her up so that she was lying completely on top of him. He arranged the sheet over them, but his hands remained underneath to casually run his fingers up and down her back.

The simple and loving touch was enough to comfort her and keep her tears at bay. She sighed contently, relishing the way she fit so completely against him.

Chakotay combed his fingers through her clean hair and gathered it to the side of her neck. He slid his fingertips over her shoulder as if he was inspecting it.

She asked, "What do you see?"

"I'm looking for dents."

"Find any?" She smiled.

"Not yet. Maybe your skin got tougher."

"No, if anything, you've made it softer." She pushed up on her hands and looked down at the V of her neckline. She pointed to the center, right above her breasts and said, "I think the dent is here this time."

He touched the spot she pointed to and then let his finger slide down. "It's a terribly long dent."

Shivering, she said, "I think you're right."

Wrapping his arms around her, he rolled them over so that he was lying almost on top of her. He kissed the 'dent' on her chest, starting at the top and working his way down, pushing the v of the tank down to give his lips access.

Kathryn felt the beginnings of a warm gush between her legs. "You know what we've never been able to do before?"

"What's that?" he asked between kisses.

"Have make-up sex." She ran her hands over his muscled arms, grazing his nipples with her thumbs.

"That's true. I hear it can be pretty amazing." His erection was growing hard against her leg.

"Almost reason enough to have an argument."

He shook his head. "Next time, let's just skip ahead to the sex."

"Agreed." She crossed her arms to grab the edge of her tank and lifted it over her head. "Although just think how many times we could've had make-up sex on Voyager."

His chuckle was low in his chest as he nipped at her breasts. "Well, if your former first officer hadn't been so obtuse."

"And if your former captain hadn't been so obstinate." She gasped as his lips covered her nipple and his tongue stroked broadly over the pebbled tip. "Oooh, Chakotay."

He released her breast and settled down beside her. The soft pads of his fingertips examined the curves of her face, going over each line, each freckle. Kathryn's breathing was shallow as she watched his lips and focused on his touch. A long moment of tense anticipation ended as their eyes locked and he whispered with reverence, "My Kathryn."

She felt a chill from the pure devotion that she could see in the way he looked at her. His lips descended slowly, as if a magnetic force attracted them towards her. The soft warmth surrounded her as all of her senses were drawn towards their kiss.

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Kathryn stood on Sekaya's veranda watching the last sunset she'd see on that planet for awhile. She was alone in the house because Chakotay and Steven had gone to the hospital to visit Sekaya while Kathryn had gone into the capitol city to talk with the Governor.

She heard noise in the house indicating that they'd arrived home, but she decided to stay put so she wouldn't miss the beautiful scene laid out before her. As loving arms enclosed around her from behind, she settled back against his warm chest and said, "I'm going to miss this."

"The scenery or the hugs?"

"Both."

They quietly watched the sun settle low on the horizon, its bright glow sending rays of soft orange light stretching into the pale blue sky.

Kathryn asked, "How's Sekaya?"

"Bored, but fine. She asked if you would stop by in the morning before you leave."

Nodding, Kathryn said, "Of course. Did you tell her that we finished the nursery?"

“Complete with diapers and little socks. She was happy, but wished she could’ve been the one to do it.”

“I know.” She nestled her head under his chin. “I wish I could stay until the baby is born.”

“We all do, but we’ll send pictures. She’s going to name him Kolopak.”

Kathryn smiled, remembering their conversation the night Sekaya went into labor. “Are you okay with that?”

“Of course. Why wouldn’t I be?”

Shrugging nonchalantly, Kathryn suggested, “What if you have a son?”

He became quiet and she wished she could see his eyes. Finally, he said with strained emotion, “There’s no guarantee that I’ll ever have a son, and I’d like to honor my father by giving his name to his first grandchild.”

“I think he’d be very pleased.” She squeezed his forearm.

Steven came out on the veranda with a tray of tea and coffee, breaking the intensity of the moment. “Kathryn, I know this is your last evening with us, but would you mind terribly if I excused myself to get some work done?”

“Of course not,” she said. “Is everything okay?”

“I’m fine. Just a little behind and I’d like to catch up before the baby decides he’s waited long enough.”

“By all means,” Kathryn waved. “Go crunch numbers to your heart’s content and we’ll enjoy this beautiful sunset without you.”

They all chuckled lightly and then Steven bid them goodnight and went back into the house. As he poured their drinks, Chakotay said, “This was nice of him.”

Kathryn took the coffee and sat down on one of the four wicker chairs. “I wish there was a settee out here so we could snuggle.”

“We can head inside after awhile,” Chakotay said as he sat down near her. “First, however, I have a birthday present for you.” He handed her a medium-sized gift bag.

She protested, but accepted it. “You didn’t have to get me anything. My birthday’s not for another week.”

“Of course I had to give you something. I never miss your birthday.” He helped her by taking the thin tissue paper she had removed from the bag.

“And I treasure every gift you’ve given me.” She lifted out a folded piece of deep blue, rich fabric. “A scarf?” It was very soft and felt luxurious under her fingers.

“A wrap. I saw you looking at it earlier this week in one of the shops. The clerk called it a pashmina, although I don’t know what that is.”

“It’s beautiful.” She unfolded it and wrapped it around her shoulders. “A pashmina is a wrap made from silk and cashmere.”

“The blue really brings out your eyes. You look stunning.”

“Thank you,” she smiled warmly. “I’m looking forward to colder weather so I can wear it.”

“I wasn’t sure what to get you. It’s our first gift exchange as a couple.”

She folded the wrap back up and tucked it in the bag for safe keeping. “It’s perfect,” she said graciously. “And it tells me that even when you’re angry with me, you’re still conscientious about what I’m doing.”

“It’s second nature for me to watch you. I’ve been doing it for so long that I can’t help it,” he admitted. “Not that I’d want that to change.”

She caressed his arm. “I wouldn’t either.”

He bowed his head for a short moment before saying, “So, tell me about your conversation with Governor Cameron.”

“It was enlightening.” She picked up the tri-corder she’d brought outside in case he wanted to talk, and set up a dampening field so they wouldn’t be overheard by anyone who might be trying to spy on her. When she was done, she said, “As you know, I’ve heard many opinions that the President is the reason behind the Federation’s problems, but until today, no one had offered a viable hypothesis.”

“Oh?”

“Cameron believes that the President is playing favorites. He wouldn’t go on record with any specifics, but he indicated that I should examine the business contracts that the Federation council made for the post-war rebuilding effort.”

Chakotay said, “It’s pretty obvious that Zife is involved in some kind of embezzlement scam. How else could he have come into so much wealth while in office?”



“It doesn’t sound like embezzlement. It’s more likely graft.”

“What’s the difference?”

She explained, “Embezzlement is when someone takes money or resources entrusted to them for their personal use. Graft is when someone uses their influence for extortion and receives gifts or money in return.”

Chakotay grunted. “Well, I don’t care what you call it, he’s doing something illegal, and that’s not the only reason his popularity is declining rapidly. What made him okay as a war-time president doesn’t make him right for the rebuilding effort, not that I believe he was good for that, either. He lacks any charisma. I want to slap that smirk of his right of his face and take his expensive tastes and cram them down his throat.”

Kathryn raised an eyebrow at Chakotay’s vehement reaction. She couldn’t help but crook a smile. After all, it wasn’t anything new to see him getting worked up over politics. She said, “I think his lack of charisma is definitely a factor in his lack of overall popularity, but I suspect that he’s very personable to the right people. He was quite affable to me because he thinks I’m going to help him.”

“So long as he doesn’t become lecherous towards you,” Chakotay’s eyes flashed with anger.

“Don’t worry, love.” She patted his arm. “I can hold my own.”

Chakotay looked off in the distance as he dreamed. “What I wouldn’t give to be a fly on the wall in his office when all of this comes crashing down around him.”

Ignoring his comment, she got back to the subject at hand. “What surprised me today was Cameron’s insight. He suggested that we study where the raw materials have come from and check on the current status of those planets.”

Chakotay looked at her incredulously. “Do you think he’s granting special privileges to those members?”

“Quite the opposite. Cameron alleged they were told that it was their duty to the Federation to provide the materials at cost, and then were ignored when they needed help.”

“Help with what?”

“He wouldn’t say.”

Chakotay was quiet for a moment before asking, “Do you feel like you can trust Cameron?”

“Yes,” Kathryn said slowly. “Because he’s right.”

“How can you be sure?”

She contemplated how much to tell him, but she knew she could trust Chakotay more than anyone else. He alone could be an unbiased, although not a dispassionate, sounding board. “It’s the same thing that I was led to believe before I took this job. However, it’s just now becoming clear where the corruption is and I’m guessing it involves some major players in Federation politics.”

“Led by whom? Patterson and Paris?” Chakotay frowned. “I don’t think you should rely on their information until you know who their sources are.”

Shaking her head, she said, “I think they suspect about the same as you do – that he’s come into too much wealth too quickly. This corruption has to involve a lot more people than him, which will make it difficult to prove.”

“So, who knows about it then? Khurma?”

“I’m not sure yet, but I have a plan for how to find out. Let’s just say a little birdie told me, and it’s a bird that I can trust.”

His expression was worrisome. “How can you be so sure? If you’re right about this, then you’re going to need a lot of proof.”

She hesitated before saying, “You’ll have to trust me.”

“I was afraid you were going to say ‘temporal prime directive’.”

Not expecting him to get it right, she choked on her coffee.

“Kathryn?” He handed her a napkin and took her cup.

“Fine,” she held up a hand to stall him until she regained her composure.

“That can’t be it, can it?” When she nodded, he asked angrily, “What do you know? Have you had another time travel experience that you haven’t told me about?”

“No, you know all about it,” she said firmly.

“Obviously not all.” His jaw set in frustration, “Damn it, Kathryn. Have you any idea how dangerous this is?”

Her voice was calm. “Yes, but we’ve discussed that.”

“Not at this level, we haven’t,” he spat. “Until now, I was only concerned with how his corruption would affect your career, and if you would get caught in the middle of the political fallout from all this. I thought maybe the most dangerous part of this would be if someone wanted to hurt you in order to make some political statement. Now you tell me that someone from the future told you that there’s some kind of large scale, organized extortion going on? This is dangerous business you’re dealing with here!”

“I realize that,” she held his arm in an attempt to calm him. “But we’ve always known there was some kind of corruption. I just have to be smart about this and stay one step ahead of everyone else. What I know gives me leverage that he can’t possibly be aware of.”

He wasn’t calm. “Care to fill me in or are you going to take back your promise to build our future together?”

She squared her shoulders under the weight of his accusation. Without a doubt, she knew he was only lashing out because he was afraid, so she looked directly into his eyes to assure him. “I never meant to keep you in the dark about this. I didn’t realize until talking to Cameron today how much I already knew.”

“I don’t understand.”

Choosing her words carefully, she said, “When I was taken by the Relativity, I was told that there was a political force at work that would eventually undermine the longevity of the Federation. If I discover it, I am to do whatever is in my power to repair the damage. In the timeline that no longer exists, Voyager returned to a Federation that was burdened with political distrust and a Starfleet that was severely handicapped because of a lack of faith. In the future of this timeline, the same problem exists, but because of the hope that came with Voyager’s return, the outcome was less destructive. My role, whatever it may be, is significant enough to alter the long-term strength of the Federation.”

With a low voice, he said, “So much for the temporal prime directive.”

“I know. Their goal was not just to protect the timeline, it was also to protect the Federation. Without Starfleet, the temporal review board doesn’t exist, and so by empowering me to create a temporal incursion, they’re safeguarding the timeline from future tampering. When Q asked me to pursue the Romulan alliance, I believed that he was giving me a hint as to where to start. I thought the political distrust must have started with further dealings with Romulus. By taking this job, I believed that I would be put into a position to work on an alliance, but now I believe I’m dealing with two separate issues.”

“And you don’t know why Q made his request?”

“No,” she shook her head. “Only that he wants to fix Quinn’s mistakes.”

“There has to be more to it than that.”

“I suspect he’ll show up at some point and tell me. Until then, I can only concentrate on what’s in front of me. At the moment, it has nothing to do with Romulus.”

He sighed heavily. “I have a bad feeling about this.”

“I trust your instincts, but knowing what’s at stake gives me a purpose to make sure I do this right. It may take a long time, but I intend to bring light to the problem and let Starfleet put two and two together. If I ask the right questions to the right people, I can set things in motion without getting my hands too dirty. The patriot group that Patterson and Paris are working with can do a lot of that.”

Chakotay thought about this for a moment and then asked, “How do you know the exact nature of what Zife is doing? And how do you know who you can trust?”

“Trust will have to be earned. I plan to keep all the intelligence guarded so I don’t inadvertently encourage anyone to dig around where they shouldn’t. As far as specifics about what’s happening,” she sighed, “I’m just putting pieces together. After talking to Cameron today, I really think that Zife is at the crux of the problem, although I can’t imagine that he’s pulling this off alone. His business associates are likely pulling some strings.”

He shook his head. “This is huge.”

“I know. I was tempted to call Captain Young to get him started on research, but I decided that if communication were being monitored by Starfleet or the Federation, it would only alert someone that Cameron gave me information.”

“You’re going to have to tread carefully.”

“I know,” she sighed. “I’m very glad that Commander Walker will be joining my staff.”

“Is that Young’s fiancée?”

“Yes. She’s joining my staff tomorrow, and Harry and Sue will catch her up to speed. Or she’ll catch them up, either way.”

“I assume you’re going back to Earth first?”

Kathryn nodded, “I’ll spend a few weeks there setting up my office and meeting with everyone under the sun before Khurma gives me my marching orders.”

“You already have a schedule?”

“Probably. When I checked my messages last Tuesday, there was a long list of people who wanted a few minutes of my time. I gave Sue access to my messages and put her in charge of my itinerary. I think she’ll help me keep my head on straight and won’t hesitate to protect my time.”

“What will you have Harry do?”

“I want him to attend the meetings with me and be a second pair of eyes and ears. Judy will be in charge of research, and I’m going to have Doyle and Jarvin learn all they can about each planet we visit. I want them to get chummy with their peers.”

“And get the dirt?”

“Exactly.”

“Good call.” Chakotay nodded thoughtfully. “I can’t help but wonder what kind of help those planets needed and weren’t getting.”

“I don’t know, but with Starfleet having limited resources, I worry that some might feel slighted when it’s merely an issue of not enough people to put out the fires.”

He blew out a long sigh as he took all the information in. “We’re not going to be able to talk this freely while I’m here.”

“I know,” she said sadly. “Over the last seven and a half years, I’ve gotten rather used to having you as a sounding board.”

“Kathryn,” he said as he held her arm. “If you need me, at any time, just say the word and I’ll be with you at a moment’s notice. Knowing what’s at stake gives things a new perspective.”

She chose her words carefully so as to not hurt his feelings again. “I appreciate your offer, but as of August, you’ll have commitments, too.”

“I realize that, but teaching tactics is a far cry less significant than what you’ll be doing.”

“In the grand scheme of things, maybe, but in the same way that you didn’t want me to retire, I don’t want you to, either. We’ll have a healthier relationship if we’ve each got our own reason to get up in the morning.”

“That doesn’t make it any easier to go our separate ways at this point. We haven’t worked separately since we met, and I’m uneasy about you going off on your own without me. Especially considering what you’re getting involved in.”

Her lips curved into a sympathetic smile. “I wouldn’t exactly say we’re going our separate ways, Chakotay. I still want to come home to you, and only you know the entire scope of my responsibilities.”

He caressed the back of her hand with his thumb. “Promise me that you’ll keep me in the loop as much as possible? I know there will security issues and things that I don’t have clearance to know, but I want to continue supporting you to the best of my abilities.”

“I’m counting on it,” she assured him. “We’ll resurrect some of our old hand signals, and maybe we can come up with a code word for some of the key players.”

“The dog is barking could be Zife making demands.” Chakotay laughed.

Glad to see that his mood had lifted, she laughed, too. “That’s a good one. Maybe I could refer to Owen and Matt as the pilots who want coordinates.”

He chuckled. “I’m sure they do. And I suppose that the conspiracy theory that we talked about tonight could be ‘the recipe?’”

“Sure. For example, I could tell you that ‘the recipe’ is on target, but needs a bit more flushing out.”

“And more facts could be more ingredients.”

Kathryn set her cup down and looked around at the darkening landscape. “I’m hopeful that the next couple of months will be fruitful. I wouldn’t mind if you did your own digging into past news reports to search for clues.” She hoped that would give him something to focus on besides worrying about her.

“I’ll do that.”

“Chakotay,” she held his hand and looked into his eyes. “Despite our communication problems, I really do want to create a future with you.”

“Communication problems?”

“Our argument earlier this week, and just now, you thought I was keeping information from you.”

He looked embarrassed. “I think I’ve just been over-reacting.”

“Maybe a little,” she smiled sympathetically. “But I’ve got to be more aware of your feelings, and I know that you’re worried about me, which I understand completely. We’re also trying to develop this relationship under unique circumstances.”

“Yes, that’s true. Seven years of friendship under a command structure is hard to grow out of.”

“Exactly. And we don’t have Voyager to connect us anymore. We’re used to working on the same thing, and having the same community around us.”

He stood and tugged on her hand to draw her up to him. Wrapping his arms around her, he said, “We do have one thing going for us, though.”

“What’s that?” She smiled as he pressed his body against hers.

“We’re in love.” He kissed her sensuously, the touch of his lips making her head spin as a warm gush settled in her middle.

Breathless, she responded, “Yes, we are. Let’s try to remember that.”

“I don’t foresee that being a problem,” he said against her lips. “Let’s go to bed.”

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End Part 9