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This fic is part of the MultiFandom Big Bang – an amazing collaboration of art and writing. You can find the other entries here: <https://multifandom-bb.livejournal.com/>

As always, feedback is welcome at seemag1 at yahoo dot com or at my LJ: <https://seemag.livejournal.com/>

I can also be found on tumblr at: <https://seemaunbound.tumblr.com/>

As a note, this story may have triggers – Miscarriage & consent issues. Please consider this accordingly.



Prologue

Stardate 49373.4

Mortimer Harren hunched over his plate, one hand gripping a PADD detailing the previous week's survey of an 'evaporating' planet, the other mindlessly swirling his fork in the yellow mush that Neelix cheerfully called 'lunch.' He was so deep into the equations that explained the dynamic of a planet's surface so heated that not only did it vaporize everything in its orbit, but was in the process of self-immolation, that he didn't notice Michael Ayala and Elgin Tabor until they'd pulled out the chairs opposite him.

"Sorry to bother you but there aren't many open places available," Ayala said apologetically, glancing sideways at Tabor.

Harren lifted his head. How had he missed the Mess Hall filling up? He saw B'Elanna Torres, his superior officer, entering with Harry Kim. The two of them immediately took one of the last two empty spots by the viewports. And was that Jenny – no, Megan – Delaney standing with Tal Celes and Vorik? Kes, in all her blond radiance, had arrived, her arm intertwined affectionately with Neelix's as they made the rounds of the room.

"What's going on?" Harren asked.

"I guess you missed the announcement. It's a party," Ayala said. "To celebrate Tom Paris' breaking the warp ten barrier."

Harren grimaced. "That fool?" He didn't have much use for *Voyager's* chief helmsman. He found the man infuriatingly shallow, always focused on making wisecracks and planning parties. Harren *had* heard a few of the female crew members discussing Paris in glowing terms; he was just an empty-headed pretty boy, in Harren's estimation. How Paris had managed to make it through Starfleet Academy with passing grades mystified Harren, though he speculated Tom's father being a prominent admiral may have eased the way. "Breaking the warp ten barrier isn't a big deal, you know."

"I didn't see you volunteering for the mission," Ayala shot back. "This is a first in the annals of space flight! No one has ever done this before, and we made it happen."

We? What the fuck did Ayala have to do with the breaking of the transwarp barrier? He was a security officer, a former Maquis who'd never been to the Academy.

Harren knew Torres and Kim had worked overtime with Paris to make the flight possible. Over the past few months, he'd seen the three of them in the Mess Hall, discussing plans and theories, and even in Engineering, he'd heard a few people – Susan Nicoletti, for example – excitedly discussing the concept. If the experiment worked, *Voyager* could return to the Alpha Quadrant within weeks. Harren had edged closer to the discussions a few times, once even volunteering a relevant theorem or two, but Torres seemingly hadn't heard him. He'd soon retreated to deck fifteen where he could lick his wounds over these slights, secure in the knowledge he was operating on a much higher plane than the rest of *Voyager's* crew. Without his input, he'd been convinced the transwarp experiment would be a disaster, but here Ayala was saying it was a success.

Commander Chakotay entered the Mess Hall just then, followed a minute later by Paris and Captain Janeway. There was no way for Harren to escape now. He thought longingly of his “office”, the nook he’d claimed in the plasma relay room on deck fifteen. It wasn’t very big, but it was *his*. It was where he worked on his own projects, such as disproving Schlezholt’s Theory of Multiple Big Bangs – much more important than the trifling little duties he performed on *Voyager*. Now he was stuck in the Mess Hall with what seemed to be the ship’s entire crew complement. And to make matters worse, Janeway stopped just a meter away from Harren’s table, making his escape from the social gathering increasingly impossible.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Janeway said, her husky voice filling the room. “Thank you for coming today to recognize Lieutenant Thomas Eugene Paris for successfully crossing the warp ten barrier. As you all know, this has been a theoretical possibility for years, but Lieutenant Paris made it a reality. While we are not able to leverage this accomplishment to get the ship home, I don’t want to minimize what our crew was able to accomplish, and the bravery required of Lieutenant Paris to execute this historic flight.” With that, Janeway turned toward Paris who sat nearby, her hand resting lightly on his shoulder. “For that reason, I’m entering an official commendation into his record. It may be seventy years before anyone in the Alpha Quadrant learns of this achievement but let there be no doubt on this ship: this is exactly the type of dedication and creativity I expect *will* get us home one day.” Paris rose to his feet, and Janeway gripped his hands between hers. “Lieutenant Paris, thank you.”

Paris smiled a bit bashfully and said, “This isn’t my accomplishment alone. This, this belongs to all of us.” The first scattering of applause started, likely instigated by Neelix. “Thank you.” And in a lower voice he turned to Janeway, “And thank *you* for not giving up on me.”

“You’re destined for great things, Lieutenant Paris,” the captain said softly. “This is just the beginning.” She released his hands and then started clapping. The rest of the assembled crew joined in. Biting back a sigh, Harren joined in too. At least it was over, and he could hope that the crowd would start to thin. In the meantime, he remained trapped in his seat, and watched while many crewmembers lined up to talk to Paris.

“Congratulations,” Harry Kim said, clapping his friend heartily on the back. “Well deserved.”

“You helped a lot in this effort, too, Harry.”

Kim shrugged. “Maybe, but you were the one who manned up to actually go through with the mission.”

Torres joined them. “I’m glad you’re feeling better,” she said, her brown eyes filled with warmth. Harren had never known B’Elanna Torres to be anything but curt in manner. That she seemed to display some softness towards Paris was astonishing. Could the legendary Paris charm be working on the half-Klingon Maquis as well? Harren’s lip curled in disgust.

“Congratulations, Paris,” Torres said.

“Thanks,” he said.

“Harry and I have a holodeck reservation tonight,” Torres said. “At 1900 hours. Do you want to join us? We’re going orbital diving with Susan, Pablo and Megan.”

Harren stiffened a little bit. *Susan*? He'd asked Susan a few days ago if she'd wanted to go hiking with him on the holodeck and she'd declined his invitation saying she was already booked. Now he knew what those other plans were.

"Maybe a raincheck," Paris said. "I'm still a little tired." He gave a small laugh. "Hyper evolution and the subsequent de-evolution take a toll on a person."

Torres gave his hand a quick squeeze, a gesture Harren found curiously intimate. "Sure. I'll check in on you tomorrow."

After Torres and Kim exited, Ayala leaned across the table.

"Tabor and I are going to offer our congratulations now," he said. "Want to join us?"

Startled at being addressed, Harren briefly considered. "Not yet. Why don't you go ahead?"

Ayala shrugged. "Suit yourself."

Harren focused his attention back on his PADD, but the words kept slipping off his screen and he found it hard to focus on his analysis. The conversations happening just a meter or so away distracted him and it seemed incredible to him that everyone had such glowing words for Paris. Even the captain seemed to be unable to keep her hands off him. Light touches here and there, on his arm, on his shoulder, and the way she leaned toward him. *As if she was being pulled into his orbit*. Harren blinked as he watched the captain move even closer.

"Tom," she said in a low voice, "if I could see you later?"

Paris frowned. "Is something wrong?"

Janeway placed her hand on the small of Paris' back. "Nothing we can discuss here," she said, glancing over her shoulder. Harren frowned as he watched the two of them standing barely centimeters apart. Weren't there regulations about how close a commanding officer could stand next to a subordinate? Harren made a mental note to investigate as soon as he returned to deck fifteen; he prided himself on a thorough understanding of Starfleet regulations. It was a continual source of irritation that a Starfleet ship – *especially* one whose crew was a third Maquis – wasn't run in strict accordance. Janeway dropped her hand and in a voice loud enough for everyone to hear, said, "Congratulations, Lieutenant." She smiled brightly in Paris' direction and departed.

The Mess Hall rapidly emptied once the captain left. Neelix came by Harren's table to clean up.

"All done?" Neelix asked brightly. "It was really great you were able to stay for the gathering. We have so few happy occasions to celebrate."

"Well, this was a failure, if you ask me," Harren said. "What's the point of celebrating an achievement we can't use? A waste of time and resources."

Neelix paused. "Perhaps, but we learned a lot from the experiment. Maybe there's something we can use to make our next attempt more successful."

"Well, if they had asked *me*, it wouldn't have failed."

Neelix looked at him. "If you had something to volunteer, you should have told Lieutenant Torres."

"I did. She didn't listen."

"If at first you don't succeed...", Neelix said. Really, the man's perpetually cheerful attitude was nothing less than infuriating. "I've always found Lieutenant Torres to be open to new ideas."

Harren lifted his chin haughtily, incredulous over this ridiculous statement. If Lieutenant Torres hadn't listened to him before the flight, let alone understood the value of his ideas, well, he certainly wasn't going to volunteer them *now*. It was so ridiculous that she'd solicit opinions from Paris over Harren's superior intellect.

"No matter," Harren said. He tapped his PADD. "I'm working on something far more important. It will *change* the way we look at the universe."

"I look forward to hearing more," Neelix said cheerfully as he gathered up some of the left-behind plates and cups.

"If you will excuse me, I have work to do." With that Harren got up and went into the corridor. He was on his way to the turbolift when he saw Susan Nicoletti standing off to the side, gesturing animatedly, as she talked to Paris. Harren bit back his sigh of disgust as he passed by and stepped into the turbolift. He was about to ask for deck fifteen when Paris came in with Nicoletti. Neither seemed to notice him.

"Bridge," Paris said with confidence.

"Engineering," Nicoletti said. She looked at Harren. "What about you?"

He felt his cheeks grow warm. "Um, Engineering, I guess."

"Great," Nicoletti said. She patted Paris on the arm lightly. "You sure you don't want to join us on the holodeck tonight? It'll be fun." Nicoletti's gaze seemed to avoid Harren entirely, as if she didn't quite see him standing there.

"No. I still feel queasy from the flight," Paris said. The doors opened to reveal the Bridge. "Have a good time though."

The doors slid shut after Paris' departure and Nicoletti settled against the far curve of the turbolift. Harren waited for her to speak to him, perhaps even invite him to the holodeck since Paris couldn't go, but she said nothing. The doors opened to Engineering and she stepped out without looking back. In that split second, Harren decided.

"Deck fifteen," he said.

Harren ended up working well into Gamma shift, and when his eyelids felt heavy, he finally put his equations away. The answers he was looking were eluding him and perhaps after some rest and food, he would get the brainstorm he was looking for. The turbolift dumped him on Deck Six. Harren was halfway to his quarters when he was aware of some low voices just around the bend. He turned and

stopped short as he saw the captain standing outside of Paris' quarters. Harren frowned; weren't the captain's quarters on Deck Three, along with the other senior officers? He couldn't recall ever seeing Janeway on one of the decks that contained the crews' quarters before. Instinctively, Harren took a step backwards.

"I'm sorry for coming by so late," Janeway said.

"It's not a bother," Paris said. He was out of uniform, dressed in loose blue pants and a grey t-shirt. The Captain was still in uniform. He leaned casually against the door frame. "Clearly you have something on your mind." There was an insouciance in his tone that Harren found surprising.

"I haven't stopped thinking about what happened between us, but I wanted to be clear we don't refer to this event again," Janeway said. "This whole incident is off the record. I won't falsify my logs, but as far as I'm concerned, this never happened." Her scrutiny intensified on the chief pilot's face.

"I agree," Paris said so softly that Harren had to strain to hear him. "And Captain, I'm sorry—"

Janeway placed two fingers on Paris' lips. "There's no need to apologize, Tom." She sighed. "I'm just as responsible as you are."

Harren pressed his back against the wall. There was a curious intimacy to the scene he was witnessing, and he watched as Janeway stepped closer to Paris. Paris bent his head low, and he could see that the two were talking, but he could no longer hear what they were saying. After another minute, Janeway placed her hand flat against Paris' chest, her eyes half-closed, and the faintest of smiles dancing across her lips. Tom placed his fingers under her chin, lifting her face towards his.

"You can trust me," he said softly. And then he brushed his lips against hers, the very faintest and quickest of movements. As if stung, Janeway stepped back. Paris straightened. "Captain—"

She held up her hand. "As I said, this never happened." She glanced down the hallway in both directions. "Good night, Lieutenant." Janeway walked down the hallway in the opposite direction as Harren. Paris stood there, watching her, and then with an audible sigh, he disappeared into his quarters.

Harren stepped into the corridor, mentally filing the scene away. He didn't particularly care about what went on in other people's personal lives; after all, entanglements and relationships were a distraction from the things that *really* mattered. But this interaction between Janeway and Paris, yes, it was interesting. But for now, he was hungry and tired, and he needed to be on his way.



Chapter One

2387 (14 years later)

The runabout swooped in a graceful arc away from the space station, its trajectory smooth as it moved at impulse. Once the pilot had been some distance between himself and the station, the thrusters would engage, setting the runabout on a course for Earth. After adjusting for Mars' orbit, and that of Earth's, the pilot would set the course for home; at warp 9, the runabout – equipped with a newly installed tetryon plasma drive – could cover the distance in just over a day. At the thirty-minute mark, plasma flowed through the manifolds, filling the conduits, and rushing through the warp coils, and igniting the dilithium.

The explosion above Caldik Prime was spectacular, tendrils of smoke billowing out as wreckage somersaulted through spaces.

Owen Paris stood at the side of the biobed, his eyes narrow under thick unruly eyebrows, his brow furrowed. His voice came across the years.

"Thomas, what have you done?"

Tom's limbs felt heavy, his eyes struggling to open. His father's voice cut through his stupor.

"There are no survivors, there are no survivors, there are no survivors..."

Tom Paris gasped. He sat up in bed, his chest and breath rising and falling in quick bursts. He glanced to the side; the empty spot next to him signaled he was alone. He roughly ran his hand over his face, closed his eyes, and willed himself to calm down.

There are no survivors, there are no survivors...

A quick look around and he could see he was in his own bedroom, the one he and B'Elanna had occupied for nearly a decade now. Caldik Prime was twenty years in his past, but Danny Tanaka's recent accident evoked the memory anew.

Tom pressed his hands to his face, rubbing his fingers against the bridge of his nose. Dawn was still hours away, but he knew with the adrenaline coursing through his body there would be no more sleep tonight.

"Thomas, what have you done?"

The question echoed over the years. Intellectually and logically, Tom knew Tanaka's accident wasn't his fault. The investigation, just concluded the previous week, found the ensign's death was due to an adverse reaction between dilithium and plasma, a volatile mixture that shouldn't have occurred, but due to a rushed overhaul of the shuttle's systems.

Why didn't they check whether any dilithium remained in the core when the plasma drive was activated? Why hadn't anyone thought to mention that the turnaround had included a complete propulsion overhaul? Why didn't Danny check the fuel mix sensor logs before launching?

His heart pounding, Tom swung his feet over the side of the bed. He knew the answer. He knew exactly why Ensign Daniel Tanaka, on his very first away mission, hadn't known to check; it was because the fatal interaction between dilithium and tetryon plasma wasn't covered in basic pilot certification; it was a subject that properly belonged in advanced warp dynamics courses, and Tanaka hadn't taken that one,

as it was an engineering track course and not science track. More to the point, it wasn't even included on the certification exam Tanaka had taken and that Tom had evaluated – an exam that had taken place just days before the accident.

It was a dumb mistake, thoughtless in every way, and it should have never happened. And it was clear to Tom that pilots needed to be more informed and know the right questions to ask the engineers before the shuttle took off. In the weeks following the accident, Tom had spent many hours at the Academy, working late to revise the curriculum, to make sure the issue of dilithium-plasma complications were addressed in his syllabus and trying to think of what other gaps might exist. Now Tom's jaw tightened as he made his way down the hall and to the stairs. Just off the kitchen, he saw B'Elanna's home office door was slightly ajar, the light from her desk lamp filtering out. He sucked in his breath as he approached.

"What are you still doing up?" he asked, trying to keep his voice even.

B'Elanna, seated at her desk, lifted her head wearily to look at him. Her long hair was tied back from her face, and the long cardigan she wore nearly enveloped her. "I just have a few things to finish up."

He regarded the stacks of PADDs littering the desk, the large viewscreen on the wall displaying intricate and complicated schematics of the latest nacelle design her team was working on. There *were* always things to finish up; the work of the Starfleet Corps of Engineers was never ending.

"Anything I can help with?" he asked lightly. He ventured towards the viewscreen, touched a section of schematic lightly. Tom knew he wouldn't trade this life he'd built with B'Elanna and their daughter for anything, but there were times when he missed the teamwork and camaraderie, he'd experienced aboard *Voyager*. Now it seemed more times than not, he and B'Elanna retreated to their separate spheres – B'Elanna in her role as an engineering supervisor at Starfleet Corps of Engineers, and he as a flight instructor at the Academy; it was rare that their professional paths crossed. "Perhaps if you curve this section here—"

"Then I'd have to re-align the entire section to compensate and we're already behind schedule," B'Elanna said shortly. Then, she said, in a more conciliatory tone, "Why are you up at this time of night?"

"Couldn't sleep." He shrugged as he turned away from the viewscreen.

"Everything all right?" B'Elanna's look was distant, as if she was asking the question out of courtesy.

"Sure," Tom said. He managed a bit of a smile. "You know how it is."

"You should get some rest. You look tired," B'Elanna said, turning her attention back to what she'd been working on.

Tom considered, but then cleared his throat. "I guess I'll leave you to it then." He went to the replicator, thought about ordering a raktajino, but then decided he needed something stronger. A single malt Scotch, served neat, materialized. He cupped his hand around the glass, and then went on to the patio. The cool air ruffled through his hair as he dropped into a lawn chair. The whiskey went down smooth as he turned his gaze towards the stars, imagining tendrils of smoke across the sky.



Chapter Two

The brilliant morning sun shone through the windows and Kathryn Janeway groaned, burying her face in the pillow. It felt like she'd only fallen into bed a few minutes earlier. It had been an unusually long trip to get to the Great Betazed Desert, one that involved an Intrepid class starship, a class two runabout, and finally a hovercraft that seemed to have outlived its maintenance schedule. Two hours into the jolting and bouncy ride, Janeway had not so subtly hinted to the pilot that perhaps he might want to get the inertial dampeners checked; the suggestion had not been well taken and the pilot had swerved slightly, knocking Janeway back into her seat. All in all, it had taken her a full 48 hours of travel to reach the site of Chakotay's archaeology dig and she'd staggered into his small house in the dead of night, mumbling a hello before slipping into bed next to him.

She stretched languidly beneath the covers and realized Chakotay had already gotten up. She could hear him moving around in the next room. Chakotay's quarters were standard for a dig of this size; three rooms – a combination living/dining area, a kitchen, and a separate bedroom with an attached bathroom. Though not spacious, it was efficiently designed and organized, and characteristic of Chakotay, extremely neat and clean. As Janeway blinked in the bright morning light, she made a mental note to get thicker draperies; the current flimsy white window treatments did nothing to block the light or intense heat of the Betazed sun.

She was in the midst of stretching as she heard Chakotay's footsteps coming her way. He appeared in the doorway, dressed casually in tan pants and a cream-colored shirt. Janeway noted that his salt-and-pepper hair had picked up more 'salt' in the month or so since she'd last seen him. Chakotay held a large white mug with steam curling off the top in his left hand and a PADD in his right.

"You're awake." He covered the distance between them in about four paces and handed her the mug. "Careful. It's hot."

"Ah, thank you," she said, sitting up to receive it. She inhaled the aroma gratefully. "This is perfection."

"Made the old-fashioned way on the stove," Chakotay said with the dimpled grin never failed to send a curl of delight through her. "The replicator has been acting up lately and it's going to be another couple of weeks before we can get parts, so I improvised." It had been more than thirteen years since Betazed fell to the Dominion during the war, eleven since its return to the Federation sphere, and the recovery continued to be arduous. In less than two years, the Dominion had laid waste to the beautiful planet, destroying civilian population centers and technological institutions alike, as well as local ecosystems in many areas. Given the sheer scale of rebuilding infrastructure and internal manufacturing capacity, shortages were not unheard of, especially in a place as remote as the Great Betazed Desert. Even pre-war, it had taken a week or so for supplies to arrive from the nearest city. "I'm glad you're satisfied with the outcome."

“More than satisfied.” Janeway took another sip, a larger one this time. “Maybe technological advancement is overrated,” she said.

Chakotay sat on the edge of the bed. “I need to visit the site to evaluate the new square Kaplan and Soula marked off yesterday,” he said. “And I need to stop by the infirmary for some test results that came in.”

His tone sounded light, but Janeway arched her eyebrow. “Something to worry about?”

“Just a cough that’s been bothering me. Nothing serious.” Chakotay stood up. “By the way, an urgent message came through for you on subspace. I took the liberty of downloading it for you.” He put the PADD on the small table edging the bed. Janeway sighed.

She’d left clear instructions to her aides that she was not to be disturbed for during her six day leave unless it was an emergency. And not just any type of emergency, but one so incredibly urgent that it could not be dealt with by anyone else. Her last leave had been punctuated with frequent communiques from Starfleet, ranging from the mundane to the slightly more than mundane. Chakotay had borne it all with patience and good humor, but it had cast a pall on her visit. In general, they had so few days to spend together and Janeway was determined not to waste those precious hours sorting through petty disagreements such as who exactly was responsible for procuring self-sealing stem bolts for the *Allegovia* reconstruction project.

“Thanks,” she said, “I think.” She had half a mind to ignore the message but decided to read it on the off chance it was important. She offered Chakotay an apologetic look. “Sorry.”

He dismissed the comment with a smile. “Comes with the territory. I knew what I was signing up for when I decided you were worth the risk.” He paused and said, “More coffee?”

“I’d love another cup, thanks.” She handed him her empty mug. Chakotay left the room and she quickly keyed in her security clearance ID. The messages – four in total – appeared. She scanned them quickly, finishing just a second or two after Chakotay reappeared with another cup of coffee. She took it with a grateful smile.

“So, do you need to run off and save the Federation?” he asked lightly. “Is there a diplomatic breakdown that needs to be resolved?”

She took a deep breath, not quite meeting his gaze. “No, nothing of that magnitude. Just a status report on *Allegovia*. Apparently the Ferengi are challenging some of the trade agreements we made so we could build the station at the edge of their territory. Clause four in section three violates the 199th Rule of Acquisition.”

Chakotay furrowed his brow. “Isn’t that the one about fish and water?”

“No, it’s about location, and six years into the project isn’t the time to start thinking the space station has been placed in the wrong spot,” Janeway said. The Ferengi were eternally confounding and irritating. She made a mental note to have a very pointed conversation with Admiral Setin – who had proposed the project – the next time she was at Starfleet HQ. Which, according to one of the messages she’d received, would happen sooner than anticipated. Clearly the powers that be back in San Francisco were pointing their collective fingers in her direction. The *Allegovia* project was one of the largest post-Dominion War

reconstruction projects. Janeway knew as difficult as the Ferengi were, the success or failure of the project entirely depended on her. "Perhaps it's time to remind the Ferengi of the 16th rule." She saw Chakotay's sudden smile. "What?"

"Doesn't matter what the situation is, does it?" he asked. "You always have the perfect response." He put his mug down, leaned towards her, his warm hands cupping her face; Janeway reveled in the sweetness of the kiss that followed. "And per that rule, does Starfleet have a better deal to offer the Ferengi?"

"Only that if we pull out, there is no deal," Janeway said, her expression completely innocent. "And given how much gold-pressed latinum we've sunk into this project, maybe withdrawing *is* the better option. Why throw good money after bad?" She sighed and then seeing Chakotay's expression, she held up her hand. "Right. I'll deal with this when I'm back on Earth."

"You said it was nothing serious. So, what else have you got?"

Janeway bit her lip. Chakotay was prying, and she didn't quite blame him. No one knew her better than he did, and she knew she wasn't fooling him.

"The Security Council declassified some of *Voyager's* logs and they're now available in the archives," she said with a shrug. "Including yours and Tuvok's and mine. Stardates 48315.6 through 49301.2." It took her a moment to place the timeline. "The first year or so of our journey in the Delta Quadrant. I guess we can anticipate some more requests for interviews in the coming days." This was well-traveled ground for Janeway and to a lesser extent, Chakotay. At first, she had accepted many requests for interviews but with *Voyager's* journey far behind her now, Janeway preferred to keep her focus on the future. "I don't intend to accept any of them, if they do come."

"It's been nearly twenty years; most of what happened back then is a blur today, though I won't ever forget your request for me to serve as your first officer," Chakotay said as he took a final sip of his coffee. Redacted versions of *Voyager's* official ship logs had been released shortly after their arrival in the Alpha Quadrant, and any logs regarding temporal incursions, Borg technology, the *Equinox* incident and possible violations of the Prime Directive would remain sealed indefinitely.

She smiled at him with affection. "Best decision I ever made." Janeway inhaled the last of her coffee. There was nothing quite so satisfying as a perfect brew and over the years, Chakotay had managed to accomplish the impossible. "I wouldn't mind rereading those logs myself, take a walk down memory lane."

"Maybe I'll join you," Chakotay said fondly. "There were times when it seemed impossible, but we managed to join two crews of disparate values and experience and made it home in a tenth of the time initially thought." Chakotay once again leaned forward and placed a lingering kiss on her lips. "I've got to go, but I'll be back." He took a few steps back and his smile grew even bigger. "Did I mention how nice it is to have you here?"

Janeway put the PADD aside and gave him a suggestive smile in return. "You better hurry back," she said, "because I'd like to show you just *how* much I like being here."



Chapter Three

Mortimer Harren scooped up the last bit of dirt and then let the shovel clatter to the ground. It was only ten o'clock in the morning, but already the west Texas sun blazed hot above him. The arid air, together with the brown landscape that was punctuated only by the giant white blooms of the dagger yucca, was testimony to the fact the last rain had occurred more than two months ago. Harren dragged his arm across his forehead to wipe away the sweat.

The hole he'd dug was the beginning of his latest project: building a high-resolution telescope for his private use. With its advent, he would no longer be stymied by long waiting lists at academic institutions – and perhaps, *finally*, making progress on his lifetime goal of disproving Schlezholt's Theory of Multiple Big Bangs theory. It was impossible to sufficiently measure the progress he was making at disproving the theorem, but now, he was a little bit closer to pouring the concrete foundation for the telescope. If he was being honest with himself, after twenty years of working on that proof, digging that foundation was more satisfying and had a marginally larger chance of success.

He was about to use a mag-lift for some of the reinforced steel for the bottom of the hole when he heard a hovercraft. He frowned. His place was just outside of Alpine, well off the beaten track. Few people made their way here and the isolation – which had long been the preferred way of life for Harren – was one of the most attractive attributes of the property he'd purchased. The six-room house kept the elements at bay, but more importantly provided him with seclusion – safe from any interruptions that would distract him from his all-important work. But every now and then, he felt the silence grow louder, and he'd second-guess his decision to live out here in the middle of nowhere. Thankfully, those moments came few and far between, and he could often ease the longing for company by making a quick trip to San Francisco (where the very sight of Starfleet uniforms made him glad that he'd long since given his up) or some other large city. Two or three days pushing through a crowd of humanity would make Harren very glad to return to his ranch.

Still, while he watched the hovercraft come in for a landing, he wasn't entirely unhappy to see a woman with long flowing blond locks emerge and walk toward him. He cleared his throat.

"Hey, Morty, do you remember me?" she asked in a sing-song voice.

"Yes," he said, his voice scratchy from disuse. He clutched the handle of the shovel, his knuckles whitening. "You were at El Chisme last week." He'd made a quick trip to El Paso the previous week to pick up some supplies for the telescope, and on his way home, he'd stopped into his favorite dive bar, El Chisme. He had vague memories of regaling the other patrons with stories of his exploits aboard *Voyager*, including the time he had joined Captain Janeway, Commander Tuvok and Lieutenant Torres in infiltrating a Borg cube to spread a virus. The tequila and vodka had flowed with abandon, and it had taken the better part of the next morning to recover from that night. He had a vague memory of talking to the woman, of hearing her laugh mixed with the heady rush of alcohol. In the morning he'd regretted not getting her name.

Her lips parted into a wide smile that revealed perfectly white teeth as she'd crossed the distance between them. Her stride was quick but determined. The woman wore a midi-length white sundress that showed off her toned arms. Simple brown sandals -- her toenails painted a bright red -- and a small leather bag completed the look. "I was afraid you wouldn't remember me."

"You're hard to forget," Harren said, and heat immediately rose in his face. "How did you track me down?"

"I have my sources," she said in a voice so low that he had to strain to hear her. "And thank goodness for that. You're not an easy man to find."

Harren steadied himself against the handle of his shovel. "That's not an accident."

"That much is clear," she said with a little laugh. "We talked a little bit about your work on disproving Wang's Second Postulate. Do you remember that?"

"You *know* about Wang?" Harren asked, impressed. He brought up Wang regularly, but few people outside of fellow Astrometrics scientists knew anything about the subject. He certainly hadn't expected anyone at El Chisme to understand what he was talking about. That she seemed to take an interest in it, maybe even *understand* what so many others couldn't, stirred a flicker of excitement inside him.

Her bright red lips turned up at the corners, with just a slight part to show off perfect white teeth. "And Schlezholt too."

"We talked about *Schlezholt*?" Harren asked in shock. How the hell had he forgotten about all of this?

"In detail. It's rare I've run into someone with your intellect. I found it refreshing," she said, taking a long look around, taking in the squat brown house with its black-trimmed windows and red-clay tiled roof. "I hear you can see heaven from here," she said. "I suppose that's why you live in the middle of nowhere, isn't it? So, you can get the answers you've been looking for all of these years?"

Harren realized his jaw was hanging slightly ajar and closed it with a snap. He slowly nodded. "The skies are very clear."

"I'm looking for answers myself," she said. She took a step closer to him. He caught a whiff of her perfume.

"You know my name," he said. He swallowed hard. He hated not knowing something, but he had to ask. "What's yours?"

"Ksenia Williams." Her face was now inches away from his. "I know it's wrong to just drop in, but it's a hot day and I could really use a drink of water right about now." She stepped closer to him. "Do you mind?"

The words were caught in Harren's throat; he could only nod and point towards his front door.

"I'm so glad to hear it," she said, her voice low and husky. "I'd love to hear more about your theories -- and your time on board *Voyager*."



Chapter Four

B'Elanna Torres scrutinized the round metal object, its glowing and rounded top illuminating the darkened room. She picked it up, turned it over, carefully looking at its dimensions, before nodding at Michael Ayala, who was standing on the other side of the table from her.

"If this does what you say it does," B'Elanna said, "it could be a gamechanger."

Ayala's facial expression, as usual, didn't reveal very much. "Its acoustic attenuation is better than any other device available today," he said. "Which means better clarity for your rear sensor array." He smiled slightly. "I remember you complaining that the sensor array on the rear nacelles on *Voyager* weren't quite as sharp as the other arrays due to the distortion caused by the plasma vents." He jabbed his finger towards the device. "Different ship, same problem, but this fix solves it. *Guaranteed.*"

B'Elanna straightened up, putting her hand on her hip as she eyed her old friend. "Does this mean you're branching out to offer services to Starfleet?"

"If Starfleet is open to it, so am I," Ayala said easily. He glanced around B'Elanna's office, a hopeful expression crossing his face. "What do you think?"

B'Elanna considered. Ayala had always been a good friend and colleague, and she genuinely wanted to support his new business venture into concierge security and technology services. But there were protocols she had to follow.

"Obviously, I would have to test it and compare the visual acuity to our existing solution," she said. She pointed at the sensor. "Can you leave that with me?"

"Sure," Ayala said.

"I'm only a contractor," B'Elanna said, tucking her hair behind her ear. "But I think I have *some* sway around here when it comes to selecting what technology to incorporate into the next generation nacelle."

"You're working on a great project," Ayala said sincerely. "How many people can say they are part of the design team responsible for Starfleet's next class of starship?"

B'Elanna smiled. "About several thousand."

Ayala gave a rare laugh. "Maybe so, but you're actually *leading* a major component group." He pressed the tips of his fingers together. "Remember when we used to sit around the campfire during the Maquis days? Did you ever imagine *this* is how we'd end up?"

"No. And to be honest, I never thought in those days we'd even survive." B'Elanna gestured to one of the two grey chairs placed in front of her desk. "Do you want another cup of coffee?"

"That sounds good, thank you," Ayala said. He watched as she went to the replicator and brought back two steaming cups. "You've clearly done more than survive, B'Elanna."

B'Elanna settled into the chair opposite him, instead of behind her desk. For the moment, she wanted to relax with an old friend.

"I've been lucky," B'Elanna said, and she knew in many ways, she was. She'd chosen to resign her Starfleet field commission shortly after returning to the Alpha Quadrant, deciding she no longer shared Starfleet's mission of exploration now that she had a newborn at home. But six months after her resignation, B'Elanna had talked to her father-in-law about the possibility of returning to Starfleet in a limited capacity. Admiral Paris had put her in touch with the head of the Starfleet Corps of Engineers, and they offered B'Elanna part-time employment as an engineer in the nacelle system development group. Once Miral started kindergarten, B'Elanna had accepted a promotion to become supervisor of the group. "I keep my skills up to date, but I have the flexibility to pick Miral up from school, and then after she goes to bed, I can finish up any remaining work at home." She sipped her coffee, reveling in the aroma.

"And now that Tom isn't traveling anymore, it must be a lot easier to juggle things."

B'Elanna bit her lip. Upon their return, Tom had initially remained in Starfleet, earned a promotion to Lieutenant Commander. He first accepted an assignment at Utopia Planitia on a test pilot rotation that lasted two weeks at a time, and then he'd be back with B'Elanna and Miral for two weeks. B'Elanna had desperately missed Tom while he was away and the reunion was always sweet, if not a bit jarring. B'Elanna had set a good schedule for herself and Miral, and Tom's reappearance on the scene always seemed to disrupt the routine. Just when they'd gotten used to him being home again, he'd leave.

They had discussed whether a move from San Francisco to Mars would be a good idea, but Tom's parents had pointed out that they were able to help with Miral, and B'Elanna was actively trying to repair her relationship with her father while also working at her job at Starfleet's Engineering Corps.

When a position as an instructor at Miramar – where Starfleet trained its top pilots – became available five years ago, B'Elanna had encouraged Tom to apply. It would mean giving up his chance to fly Starfleet's latest and greatest spacecraft, but it was essentially a 9 to 5 position and it meant no more travel. Tom had seemed to enjoy his time at Miramar until B'Elanna's first miscarriage. When she got pregnant again, he told her he was leaving Miramar to take a job at the Academy instead. B'Elanna knew teaching basic flight skills to cadets was a step down from Miramar. In addition, Tom's father, the renowned Admiral Owen Paris, had been vehemently opposed to the decision, but Tom had insisted.

"You're only a transporter away," B'Elanna had said at the time. She didn't want Tom to think she couldn't take care of herself, that she was suddenly fragile. "You could be back in San Francisco in minutes."

"Provided the transporter chief is *available* and the system is operational," Tom had said, his jaw set in a way that B'Elanna knew his decision was made. In that moment, there was something about her husband that reminded her of her father-in-law. "I don't want to take the chance."

She'd cupped his face with her hands. "*Nothing* is going to happen to the baby," she'd told him. "Everything is going to be fine." Unfortunately, just a few weeks later, she'd lost that pregnancy as well.

Now, B'Elanna cleared her throat. "It's good to have Tom home," she said carefully. "But he's very involved at the Academy. He's getting close to being eligible for tenure and he says that's something he wants."

Ayala frowned. "I'm surprised Tom would choose a career that didn't involve flying on a regular basis."

"I know," B'Elanna said. "But he made that decision..."

"You don't sound happy about it."

B'Elanna started. She didn't mean to give Ayala that impression. "I mean, I am. Of course, I am. It's just that..." *just what?* She couldn't think of the right words. Her fingers clenched around the coffee mug more tightly. "His decision essentially closed the door on any future promotions or a return to a starship. So obviously I was concerned at the time as to whether that was really what he wanted; you know Tom-flying is an extension of himself. His father was certainly *not* happy about the decision; I think he envisioned Tom eventually becoming a first officer, maybe even captain, even if that was *never* in Tom's plan." She pressed her lips into a thin line remembering the angry exchange of words between father and son. "But Tom's really thrown himself into teaching and I'm, I'm proud of him."

Ayala raised his eyebrow slightly as he put his empty cup down on the desk. "Well, I'm glad to hear it. By the way, when I told Mary I was coming by to show you the sensor today, she mentioned she hasn't heard from you since we saw you at the picnic."

B'Elanna furrowed her brow. The picnic Ayala referred to had occurred about eight months previously at Pismo Beach. Admiral Janeway and Chakotay had attended, along with a few other colleagues from *Voyager*, including the Ayalas, and Harry Kim and his girlfriend, Jyoti Malhotra. The picnic had been a relatively relaxed affair, and Miral had fun playing in the sand with Susan Nicoletti's daughter. Samantha Wildman had attended as well, but Naomi had been unable to make it; she was defending her dissertation in Advanced Astrometric Phenomena. Having known Mary Ayala since the Maquis days, B'Elanna had been pleased to renew that acquaintance when *Voyager* returned, and Michael had been reunited with his wife. Ayala had dropped hints over the years that the readjustment for both him and Mary had been difficult, but that day at the picnic, they had seemed very happy and in love, just as they had been during the Maquis days.

"It was fun, wasn't it?" B'Elanna said finally. "I'm sorry. I keep meaning to call Mary, but one thing or another happens, and I lose track of time and suddenly, it's six months later." She gave a self-conscious laugh. "I'm sure you know how it is."

"She understands what it's like to juggle parenting and a full-time job."

For seven years, Mary Ayala had parented two sons – alone -- with a war raging around her. The heat of embarrassment flushed B'Elanna's cheeks. "I'm sorry. Tell Mary I'll call her soon."

Ayala brushed off the apology. Twenty years after she'd first met him, B'Elanna was still impressed by Michael Ayala's seemingly unflappability. Mary was the same way – a calm and collected presence.

"She understands, but when life calms down for you and Tom, we need to plan another outing. It *was* fun to see everyone in a non-Starfleet setting and we don't get to see old friends that often anymore."

"I promise. I'll make time," B'Elanna said, even though she was mentally running through all of the things she still had to do. Tom had forced her to go to the picnic, and even though she'd had a good time while she was there, there had always been that inkling of a thought that there was *something* else she needed to be doing. Tom, on the other hand, had managed to settle down on a lawn chair, his legs sprawled out, and a cooler of beers parked between his chair and Harry's. It was as if he hadn't a care in the world, and B'Elanna wished she could be like that too. "You're right. It was good to see everyone again. Who knows when Harry will return to Earth?"

"Tom must miss him."

"He does, but you know Tom. A stranger is just a friend he hasn't met yet," B'Elanna said. Her personal comm device started to buzz and B'Elanna frowned. "I'm sorry about that. It's just a reminder that my father's coming to dinner tonight."

"I'm glad to hear that. It's been a while since you've seen him, hasn't it?" Ayala said.

"It's another case of schedules not coinciding. He lives in New Mexico, and he's busy with his import and export business. It's hard to find a time when he's free and so are we," B'Elanna said. "But I am glad he's coming tonight. We spend plenty of time with Tom's family because they are here in San Francisco, even if they do go off-planet a lot."

"I only met the admiral at the Welcome Home reception for *Voyager*," Ayala said, "but I hope he's doing well."

"Tom's parents are both fine," B'Elanna said shortly. She dreaded the bi-monthly Sunday brunches at Owen and Julia Paris' home. Tom's sisters usually came as well with their families, and the meal was normally a tense affair. B'Elanna tended to keep her thoughts to herself, letting Tom and his sisters lead the conversation. Owen usually surveyed his family with a paternalistic eye, never quite shedding his command demeanor. "It's nice for Miral to have so much family around."

"Speaking of family, I need to get going. Mary and I were planning to attend Joachim's soccer game tonight. He's gotten quite good, you know, and he's considered a top pick to play for the Terran team in the Intergalactic Cup." Ayala rose slowly from his seat and B'Elanna followed suit. She accepted his hug gratefully. "Let me know if you want tickets."

"Miral would love to see Joachim play. She really enjoyed the lessons he gave her at the beach," B'Elanna said as she walked with Ayala to the door.

"Tell Tom I said hello," Ayala said. He gestured towards the sensor still lying on the desk. "I'm looking forward to hearing if this technology will make a difference for you."

"I'll test it as soon as possible," B'Elanna told him. "In fact, I'll take it to the lab right now and enter it into the queue."

"I appreciate it," Ayala said. "If there's anything I can do for you, please don't hesitate to ask." He paused at the door. "And B'Elanna, don't be a stranger."



Chapter Five

"This was delicious, thank you," John Torres said, pushing his plate away. "It's so rare that I get a home cooked meal."

"I'm glad you liked it," B'Elanna said, a bit stiffly. After much internal debate, she'd settled on fried chicken, mashed potatoes and green beans for dinner. It was a meal she knew Miral would like, and she thought her father would be fine – if not overjoyed – by it. In fact, it dismayed B'Elanna a little bit that ten years after returning from the Delta Quadrant, that she still wasn't quite sure what her father would like. He tended to be low-key in his requests, and it always caused a bit of anxiety for B'Elanna. As overbearing as she sometimes found Owen Paris, at least she knew *exactly* where she stood with the admiral. With her father, she still found herself tiptoeing around him.

"I'm sorry Tom wasn't able to join us tonight," John said, looking towards the empty seat next to B'Elanna. "He seems to be putting in a lot of extra hours lately."

"Yes," B'Elanna said. She tossed a wary glance in Miral's direction. "There was a tragic incident with one of his students in January and he's been preoccupied ever since."

"I'm sorry. I remember the story," John said.

B'Elanna stood and started to clear the dishes in an attempt to shift the subject. "Should we go to the living room? It will be more comfortable there."

"Let me help," John said.

B'Elanna nodded and the two of them made quick work of cleaning the kitchen while Miral wiped the table and pushed the chairs in. After that, John and Miral retired to the living room while B'Elanna quickly checked on things at work. She glanced at her personal comm device, but there was no message from Tom. She picked up the small silver device, running its smooth curves against her palm. She had reminded him multiple times about dinner with her father but Tom's response had been relatively muted and she knew that his attention was diverted. She sighed and tossed the device on the table; it skittered and fell to the ground.

"What was that noise?" Miral piped up from the other room.

"I just dropped something," B'Elanna answered. She retrieved the device and went to check on her father and Miral. Miral was showing John something on a PADD. "What are you doing?"

"Homework," Miral said with some seriousness. "It's all about Federation history. *Abuelo* is helping me. I didn't forget the president is in Paris, though. That's an easy one to remember!"

"That's great," B'Elanna said, sitting on the arm of the sofa, her weight precarious balanced as she surveyed the scene in front of her. "That was *not* my favorite subject in school. I didn't care for memorizing all of the political institutions or all the dates."

"Yes, I remember," John said with a slight smile.

B'Elanna frowned. "How would you know? You were *gone* by then."

John stiffened. "B'Elanna..."

B'Elanna closed her eyes, held her palms outward in apology. "I'm sorry, Dad. I didn't mean—"

"It's ok."

Miral's gazes swept furtively between the two adults, as she tensed into a corner of the sofa. B'Elanna let out her breath.

"I'll let you get back to it," B'Elanna said. She returned to her office and remained there until John came to stand at her door.

"I guess I'll be going," he said awkwardly. "Miral's homework... it's done."

B'Elanna rose from her desk. "Thanks."

"I guess I'll see you later. Tell Tom I said hello."

"I will." B'Elanna hesitated for a moment. "Thanks for coming tonight, Dad. I know Miral enjoyed having you here."

"And I enjoyed spending time with her." John's dark eyes were expressive. "B'Elanna, I know I can't make up for the past—"

She waved off the comment. "I know. I'm sorry. I've just been on edge lately and," her voice cracked, "it's been hard. You know?"

"Yes." John tucked his fingers gently under her chin, lifting it so that their gazes met. "If you need anything, you just have to ask. I know that Owen and Julia are closer to you, but don't hesitate to ask me." His lips turned into a crooked smile. "Whatever I can do to make things easier for you..."

B'Elanna nodded, biting her lip. "Thanks."

After John was gone, B'Elanna ushered Miral upstairs to the bathroom to brush her teeth.

"I want to wait for Daddy," Miral said petulantly.

"He's working late tonight," B'Elanna said.

Miral reluctantly dragged herself up the stairs and into the bathroom to brush her teeth. B'Elanna leaned against the door frame, her arms crossed against her chest as she watched her daughter. It still seemed incredible to her that Miral was *hers*. At ten years, Miral had shoulder length curly brown hair,

dark eyes, and she was tall for age. Other than the forehead ridges and coloring though, it was clear Miral resembled her father in every way. In temperament though, she was more reserved and contemplative, with a creative streak that B'Elanna very much appreciated, even if she didn't quite understand it.

"*Abuelo* isn't very comfortable around us, is he?"

B'Elanna's hearts clenched at Miral's perceptiveness. "He loves you," she said finally, and with a definitive hint, pulled back the covers on Miral's bed.

"I know," Miral said wistfully as she kicked off her slippers and climbed into bed. "I just wish we saw him more, like Grandpa and Grandma Paris."

B'Elanna bit back a sardonic comment. Ever since they'd been back, Owen Paris had managed to insert himself into every aspect of their life – from Tom's career to the school Miral attended. In her more charitable moments, B'Elanna appreciated Owen's interest, but there were times when B'Elanna wondered about the impact of Owen's counsel on her husband.

"It's easier for them because they are here in San Francisco and we see them often," B'Elanna said. "But don't forget, *Abuelo* did come to pick you up from school in December." B'Elanna paused, collecting her thoughts, desperate to keep her voice even. The devastating realization she was losing yet another pregnancy, the Paris family off-planet, having to reach out to her father for help with Miral when school let out. "That was nice, wasn't it?"

"Yeah," Miral said, snuggling down beneath the covers, her hands folded beneath her head. Her dark eyes were serious as she gazed at her mother. "It was fun. Was it like that when you were my age?"

B'Elanna hesitated. She was about Miral's age when John Torres had left for the second and final time. She didn't want to lie to her daughter, but at the same time. "Your grandfather and I, we had some good times together."

Miral scrunched the coverlet in her fists. "But he went away."

B'Elanna cleared her throat. "Yes." She hadn't been quite open with Miral about the extent to which her father had been missing from her life. "But the important thing is that he is here now."

"Do you know why he left?"

B'Elanna shrugged. "I've never asked. I- I guess he was unhappy with his life and he thought he could find what he needed, wanted, somewhere else."

Miral's eyes closed slightly, but then she opened them wide to fix a penetrating but knowing look in her mother's direction. "You and Daddy, you're still sad about the baby."

At this, B'Elanna inhaled sharply. "Yes. That's going to take some time." She leaned over and pulled the covers securely over Miral. "You're asking a lot of questions tonight." She managed the smallest of smiles before kissing her daughter's cheek. "It's time to sleep now." She let her fingers run lightly over Miral's forehead ridges. "Good night."



Chapter Six

Tom Paris stumbled into the dark house, dropping his briefcase just inside the door with a loud thump. It was just after 11 pm, and he knew his wife and daughter had long gone to sleep. He hadn't meant to be late, but he'd still been in his office, working late, when some of the visiting pilots from Miramar had suggested going out for drinks. He'd already accepted the invitation when he remembered John Torres was supposed to come for dinner and B'Elanna had hinted it would be nice if they all ate together.

Just one beer, he'd told himself, and then he'd head home in time for dinner with his father-in-law. But one beer had turned into eight as the pilots had competed to tell stories of their exploits and time seemed to hang, as if caught in a warp bubble. Of course, none of the pilots could top some of Tom's adventures aboard *Voyager*, and he basked in their awe as they hung on his every word. It felt good to relieve some of his exploits, but the journey down memory lane also reminded him that he was just an instructor now. It had been a long time since he'd flown anything more exciting than the level three training crafts at Utopia Planitia; hell, he hadn't been further than Mars in two years.

There had been some comments about Danny Tanaka's death, but Tom managed to maintain his composure.

"It was an accident," he kept saying, his gaze unwavering, his shoulders stiffening. But just the mention of Tanaka's name caused that curl of anxiety in his stomach, that idea that he *should* have done something to prevent the catastrophic loss of innocent life. So, he ordered the second beer to calm his nerves.

"It could have happened to anyone," his friends said soothingly. "A new pilot, overlooked something basic, it could happen..."

"Yeah," Tom had said with a heavy sigh. *But it had happened to Danny, his student.*

"There is a new aircraft design and test facility near Qo'noS," one of the pilots had mentioned just before Tom had tucked into his third beer. "It's civilian, not Starfleet, and they're looking for staff. You should consider it, especially since your wife is a Klingon. You'd be a good fit."

Tom had brushed off the idea. There was no way B'Elanna would want to live anywhere near the Klingon homeworld. Besides, he was perfectly happy teaching at the Academy. *Wasn't he?* The last thing he needed to do was uproot his settled family from San Francisco and move them halfway across the galaxy, no matter how tempting the job sounded.

"You should think about contacting them. I know the owner of the place and can put you in touch," the pilot had told him. "While you still can."

The words stuck in Tom's head. *While you still can*. He knew he was getting older, and opportunities to test and fly state of the art spacecraft – such as those his wife worked on – were getting few and far between. But as he'd cupped his hand around his glass, the coolness seeping into his skin, all he could remember was the promise he'd made to B'Elanna many years before. He'd once again demurred, changed the subject to something else, and ordered another beer.

Now Tom took off his boots, left them lying where they fell, and made his way through the house, his footsteps heavy on the wooden floors. The small light in the kitchen window was the only illumination on the first floor. He checked, but B'Elanna hadn't left any dinner in the stasis unit for him. He replicated himself a slice of cheese pizza and ate it while standing up. He dropped the dirty plate into the sink and then shrugged out of his jacket, letting the leather garment remain where it fell.

The stairs creaked as he made his way up to the second floor. The hallway light between the guest room and the empty room designated for the nursery was on. Miral's room was at the end of the hall, her door ajar. Tom peeked in and smiled to himself as he saw his daughter snuggled in the covers, buried in a pile of stuffed animals – many of them gifts from her Paris grandparents who seemed to believe affection for their only granddaughter could only be demonstrated in material objects. How there was room for Miral in that bed with so many toys remained a constant mystery to her father.

The room he shared with B'Elanna was on the opposite end of the hall from Miral's. Tom crept inside, trying not to make any noise. B'Elanna was curled into a ball, the covers obscuring all but the very top of her head. Tom quickly changed into pajamas and brushed his teeth before slipping into bed next to her. She shifted only slightly as he leaned in to plant a light kiss on her cheek.

"Sorry I missed dinner with your father," he said, his words slightly slurred and a little too loud.

B'Elanna stirred only slightly. "He said to tell you hello," she mumbled. "Where were you?"

Tom flopped back onto the pillow, dragging the back of his hand across his forehead. His head felt like it was stuffed with cotton balls. "Sorry. I ended up going out with the pilots after work and it went longer than expected."

B'Elanna remained facing away from him. "It sounds like you had a good time." There was no heat in her tone and Tom wasn't quite sure what to make of it all. He reached out tentatively, put his hand on her hip.

"So, you had a good time with your dad?" he asked. "Everything go all right?"

"Fine." B'Elanna still didn't look at him. "We had dinner together and he helped Miral with her homework while I finished a few things up in the office. I turned in early when she went to bed."

He stroked her skin lightly with the tips of his fingers. He wanted her to roll toward him, to cup his face in her hands like she once did. Come to think of it, he couldn't remember the last time she'd touched him in a way that indicated she might still have passion for him. It had been a few weeks since they'd last had sex, and it had been perfunctory in every way. Now he let his fingers drift up to her breasts, tracing a circle around her nipples.

"I'm really tired, Tom," she said into her pillow.

Tom withdrew his hand. "Okay," he said softly. He pressed a soft kiss against her cheek, and she flinched. "Sorry." He contemplated his wife for a long moment, and then with a deep sigh, he rolled onto his side to stare at the wall. In his dreams, he was flying again.



Chapter Seven

Chakotay would have preferred to take Kathryn to the oasis for dinner on her first night in the desert, but it was an hour away by flitter and Kathryn had flatly stated she wasn't going to set foot in any vehicle again for a while. So, the mess tent at the south end of the dig site would have to do. They walked side by side, their hands lightly touching, as they covered the distance between Chakotay's cottage and the tent. The sun was low in the sky, but the heavy heat still lingered. Kathryn seemed to take the temperature in stride; her hair was gathered into a casual ponytail at the nape of her neck, and she wore a sleeveless cotton blouse and a pair of linen shorts that came down past her knees, leaving several inches of bare skin above her sandaled feet. A faint sheen of sweat glistened across her forehead. As if reading his thoughts, she turned to look at him, not breaking her stride.

"Yes, it's hot, but I know what I signed up for," she said. "It's not like it's any different from one visit to the next."

He smiled. "I know. I'm just glad you keep coming back."

Janeway paused for a moment. "We may have to meet at a halfway point when I take on this new assignment."

The tent -- with its blessed environmental controls -- lay just a few meters in front of them, but Chakotay stopped anyway.

"New mission?" he asked. "You didn't say anything about this earlier."

"It was one of the messages I received from HQ this morning, but I wanted to review my orders a bit more thoroughly before I brought it up," Kathryn said, tucking her hands into the pockets of her shorts. "After much deliberation, the Dosi finally submitted their application to join the Federation. Which means that the ball is now back in our court, and the Diplomatic Corps needs to send an 'observer.'"

"You."

“Me.” She gave him a crooked smile. “On the bright side, I don’t have to worry about the Ferengi and their Rules of Acquisition anymore,” she said.

“Aren’t the Dosi in the Gamma Quadrant?” Chakotay asked. He remembered reading about a major archaeological find – the last evidence of the once thriving Kalerian civilization -- near Dosi IV that had been obliterated during the Dominion War. A few artifacts had been preserved as they’d fortuitously been taken off-planet previously for study, but the loss had spurred some recent conversations about how to safeguard historical sites in times of war.

“Yes,” Kathryn said, biting her lip. “They’ve been discussing membership since the end of the war. Forty-eight hours ago, their parliament passed a resolution to begin negotiations with the Federation for admittance. The Dosi are not the easiest species to get along with and their negotiation tactics are like the Ferengi. No doubt they will try to gain every single advantage possible and give away little to nothing of value in return. So, I’m assuming it will take at least six months just to draw up the basic framework.” She sighed. “I’m sorry. I really didn’t want to discuss this tonight, but this is going to drastically affect my schedule, not to mention my location, for the foreseeable future.”

Chakotay swallowed hard. “It’s all right,” he said. “It comes with the territory.” He slipped his arm around her and nodded toward the tent. “Let’s get some dinner and you can tell me more about this new assignment.”

The chef had provided his usual hearty meal options – usually a mix of Terran, Betazed, and Klingon cuisine, with the occasional foray to satisfy Vulcan and Bajoran tastes – and Kathryn seemed happy with her selection of *hasperaat* and *raktajino*.

“After all of these years, I still can’t bring myself to try *gagh*,” Kathryn said as they chose a table close to the perimeter of the tent, away from the other diners. “But Chef Kendrick does it make it look somewhat appetizing.”

“Based on some overheard comments, it’s very fresh and young and still wriggling,” Chakotay said with a twinkle in his eyes. “Which is no small feat to accomplish out here.” He pushed his mashed potatoes around his plate with his fork. “When do you leave for the Dosi homeworld?”

“Not for another month or so. I first need to hand over the *Allegovia* project to my successor, a Commander Tatsuki. Tatsuki is on Earth, so I’m planning to meet with him about the transition when I’m back in San Francisco. And of course, I have to go to Paris to discuss the Dosi petition for membership with the President and determine whether they meet the Federation’s preliminary standards for acceptance.” Janeway closed her eyes as she took a sip of her coffee, her enjoyment evident. Her blue-eyed gaze met Chakotay’s. “We have inspectors on Dosi now. So, their findings should be available for review within a few weeks.”

Chakotay did the math in his head. A few weeks for the preliminary findings, six weeks for review, and then after entering the wormhole to the Gamma Quadrant, it was probably another two to three-week journey to the Dosi homeworld, followed by at least six months of negotiations. “It could be close to a year before we see each other again.”

There was a pause and then Kathryn nodded. “Yes.”

Chakotay considered. Normally, he and Kathryn saw each other every six weeks, as most of her assignments were in the Alpha Quadrant and she had to make frequent trips to Earth for in-person briefings. This new assignment would change all that, and they would have to endure a lengthy separation. He had no doubt they could make it work with frequent communication, but it wouldn't be the same as having her physically present. He reached across the table, covering her hand with his.

"Well, if anyone can turn this into a success story, it's you," Chakotay said. "I have no doubt that's why they chose you to negotiate."

Kathryn looked relieved. "I was afraid you'd be upset with me for accepting, especially without discussing it with you first."

"As I said before, I know what I signed up for when we changed the nature of our relationship." He smiled and gave her hand a reassuring squeeze. "It won't be easy, but I've waited for you before, Kathryn, and I can tell you, it was well worth it. I'll be here when you return."



Chapter Eight

Tom Paris shut his briefcase with a resounding thump and turned to grab his jacket from the hook just behind his desk. His office in the faculty building near Starfleet Academy was tiny – just big enough for the desk, his chair, and a bookshelf mounted on the wall. There was one very uncomfortable chair in front of his desk, for students when they came for office hours. Other instructors usually had their academic credentials and other honors and awards displayed prominently on their walls, but Tom just hadn't gotten around to it yet ("Why do today what you can put off until tomorrow?" he'd reasoned). He did, however, have a small holovid of B'Elanna and Miral on his desk. They were sitting on a bench at the Presidio and B'Elanna was smiling as she started into the holo-cam, her hair whipping about her face, her arm curled around a then seven-year-old Miral. He made a mental note to update the holovid.

Hearing a knock at the door, Tom bit back an irritated sigh. His office hours had ended about an hour ago and since then he'd been trying to finish the student flight evaluations that were still required for graduation credit as well as some other necessary paperwork he'd been putting off for too long. He glanced at the holovid with a twinge of guilt. He had a special incentive to be on time this evening, as he'd promised Miral he'd help her with her *Voyager* project for school. Preparatory to his leaving the house this morning, B'Elanna had warned him in a low voice that he shouldn't make promises to his daughter he didn't intend to keep.

"That's not fair," he'd told her, as he'd put on his jacket. It infuriated him that B'Elanna would bring this up just as he was leaving and with Miral standing only a few meters away, well within earshot.

"You missed dinner with her yesterday," B'Elanna reminded him before turning and walking away. "She remembers these things."

"I'll be there," he'd said to B'Elanna's back.

Remembering that moment, Tom sighed. He'd developed a reputation as being accessible, always open and willing to help students on both course work and personal issues. It was what made him one of the more popular instructors on campus. Plus, he liked being around budding pilots; he appreciated their enthusiasm, an echo of what he himself had once felt. To be honest, that kind of energy was both infectious and irresistible.

"Come in," he said, hoping this visit would be quick, but also knowing that he would spend as much time as necessary with the student.

The door slid open, revealing a young woman dressed in civilian clothes – a sweatshirt, jeans, and a black leather backpack slung over her shoulder. Her blonde hair was pulled back into a ponytail, a few tendrils of which lay loosely on her broad forehead.

"Can I help you?" Tom said cautiously. He didn't recognize her, but it wasn't unusual for non-Academy students to audit his classes on their way to earning a commercial pilot license.

"Are you Commander Tom Paris?"

He arched an eyebrow. "That's what the nameplate on the door says. And you are?"

"I'm Ksenia Williams." She walked in, her shiny black boots – definitely *not* Starfleet Academy standard-issue, Tom noted – echoing on the concrete floor. "I hope this isn't a bad time."

He looked at her warily. "I was actually on my way home." He didn't mean to sound snappish, but added, "I can give you five minutes."

Ksenia reached into her purse and pulled out a PADD. She put it on the desk in front of him and he immediately recognized his own course syllabus.

"You're signed up for my Advanced Warp Dynamics class?" he said. "I'm sorry, I don't recognize you." There were close to 250 students in that class but this close to the end of the semester, he knew most of his students, at least by appearance, if not by name. "What can I do for you?"

"I noticed a gap in your syllabus," she said, tapping the PADD gently with a well-manicured red fingernail. Tom inwardly swallowed a groan; he'd followed this syllabus for the last three years and this wouldn't be the first time someone had called something on it – usually related to the grading rubric – into question.

"We only have a couple of weeks left in the class," Tom said evenly. "If you had any issues, you should have brought them up earlier. As you know, it's too late to make any changes to the grades, especially as evaluations are nearly completed."

Ksenia's blue eyes were round and innocent. "It's not so much as an issue, as an *omission*."

“Did you miss an assignment?” Tom asked, sitting back down and accessing the class list and list of assignments on his computer console. He looked back at the holovid of B’Elanna and Miral, and then back to the young woman standing in front of him. “If so, there’s not much I can do about it now.” He checked the roster again. “Williams, you said? I’m sorry, you’re not registered as a student in this class. Are you auditing the class?”

“I’m not one of your students,” she said cloyingly. “But I do have some questions about the course. For example, I was wondering when you were planning on covering breaking the warp ten threshold.” She lifted her chin to meet his stare. “It’s odd that you wouldn’t share such a ground-breaking experience with your students.” She placed her hands flat on his desk, leaning forward to close the gap between them. Tom involuntarily stepped back. “You *did* break the warp ten barrier, didn’t you? When you were on *Voyager*? Didn’t you earn a commendation for it?”

Tom swallowed hard. “Who are you? How did you hear about this?”

“Is it true?” she persisted.

Tom said in the most neutral tone he could manage, “Yes, it’s true, but any related information is classified.”

“Not anymore,” Ksenia said. “It’s been ten years. The relevant *Voyager* logs were recently declassified.” She pulled a small card out of her purse, identifying herself as a reporter with the Starfleet News Service. “And if you don’t mind, I have some questions for you.”



Chapter Nine

B’Elanna Torres felt flustered. Every horizontal surface was cluttered with *stuff* – specifically, Miral’s artwork. She groaned as she shifted through pile after pile looking for Miral’s permission slip for the next day’s field trip to the Gaudi House Museum in Barcelona. She could find her way ably through the bowels of a starship’s engines, but when it came to such *simple* things as tracking her daughter’s schoolwork, B’Elanna found herself hopelessly behind and confused. *I need to get organized*, she thought for the millionth time as she shuffled through a collection of PADDs, tossing most of them aside.

She was still looking for the PADD when she heard the front door slam. She didn’t bother to hide her surprise when Tom appeared. Despite her warning, she hadn’t really expected him to keep his promise to be home in time to help Miral with her project.

“You’re here,” she said, not bothering to hide her astonishment.

“I said I would be,” Tom said somewhat grumpily as he dropped his briefcase on the floor. He surveyed the mess which seemed to have grown since this morning. “What are you doing?”

"Miral reminded me she has a field trip tomorrow and I didn't sign her permission form." B'Elanna shook her head exasperatedly. "I remember seeing it earlier, but I can't find it now." To her dismay, she accidentally knocked one of the piles to the floor. She stared at the scattered items and then decided to ask Tom, even though she already knew what his answer would be. "You didn't by chance move it, did you?"

"No," Tom replied as she knew he would. He started to pull off his shoes, sitting down on the high-backed chair his parents had given them when they'd first moved into the house. The flatness in his voice irritated B'Elanna. She couldn't help but think he'd feel a greater sense of urgency if this was one of his students, and that thought added to her annoyance.

"Can you help me *look*?" she asked finally.

"Would you give me a moment? I just got home."

"So did I!" B'Elanna pressed her hand against her forehead as she turned away and started shifting through the piles again. She tried to remember exactly when the form had come home and where she might have put it. She knew she could likely download another copy from the class's file library, but it irritated her that something like this could go missing. *Just another thing I've lost control over.*

"B'Elanna."

She waved off his comment. "Never mind, I'll find it."

With an audible sigh, Tom rose from his chair, not even bothering to put his shoes away. B'Elanna tensed slightly but said nothing as she continued her quest. At one point, she glanced and saw Tom standing at the dining room table, shifting through some of the drawings Miral had left there. He held one in his hands, gazing at it for a minute. B'Elanna frowned.

"What are you looking at?"

"Miral drew this?" he asked, holding up a pencil drawing of *Voyager*. The note of awe in his voice caught B'Elanna's attention. Had he not noticed just how good Miral was getting at drawing?

"Yes. This is what she wanted your help with. Her class went to the Starfleet Museum yesterday--or was it Monday? -- and walked through the *Voyager* replica. Anyway, she's not happy with any of her drafts," B'Elanna said. She pointed towards the pile of discards littering the coffee table. "It's put her in a bad mood, just so you're aware." She sighed. "Your daughter is growing into quite the perfectionist, Tom, and I'm a little worried."

"I might be biased, but this looks perfect to me," Tom said airily. He dropped the drawings back onto the table.

"Tom..." B'Elanna said through gritted teeth.

"I'll talk to her."

"Thank you." Miral always seemed to respond better to Tom than to her, possibly because Tom seemed to be gone so often that spending time with her father was always a special treat. The way Miral lit up

whenever Tom was around always struck B'Elanna in that tiny space between her hearts, a throwback to her own childhood. "That would be nice."

Tom seemed a bit quiet as he took off his jacket and flung it on the back of the sofa. B'Elanna bit back her snarky comment about the hall closet being *just over there*.

"Where's Miral now?" he asked.

"In her room doing homework. I just checked on her a few minutes ago."

"I'll go up in a couple of minutes." Tom ran a hand through his hair and B'Elanna noticed the bags beneath his cerulean eyes, the crinkle of worry lines starting to take residence on his forehead. He really needed to take better care of himself. "I need a beer. Care to join me?"

B'Elanna agreed to a beer and followed her husband onto the back patio. The setting sun cast ribbons of pink and gold across the pale blue sky, and there was just a hint of a breeze in the spring air. Tom sat gloomily in a red-cushioned lawn chair, staring at the fence that ran around the perimeter of the small backyard. Most of the plants had died due to neglect; B'Elanna kept meaning to hire someone to come and resurrect the garden, but that was a task constantly moved to the bottom of what seemed to be a never-ending list of things to do.

"How was your day?" Tom asked as he popped open the can.

B'Elanna shrugged. "The same. You?"

They sat in silence and B'Elanna grew increasingly annoyed at the sight of the dead plants. How hard could it be to keep a simple thing alive? Didn't Tom see and feel the same way as she did? She got up in frustration and kicked at one of the dead bushes with the tip of her boot. Some of the leaves and branches crumpled on impact, falling to the walkway in a brown mess. Great. Now she'd have to sweep that up. She turned to go back into the house when Tom spoke.

"A reporter stopped by my office as I was getting ready to walk out this evening," Tom said. "She had questions about the time I broke the warp ten barrier."

B'Elanna raised an eyebrow. "Really?" She clasped her hands together as she turned around slowly to face Tom. "It was obviously a great achievement, but it barely merited mention when we first came home. Why now?"

Tom took a long gulp of his beer. "Some of the official logs dealing with that flight were just declassified. I guess she read them." His lips turned up slightly into a wry smile. "Why anyone would be interested in more than a decade-old logs *now...*" his voice trailed off on a perplexed note.

"What did she want to know?"

"Not much. A statement about the experience, I guess."

B'Elanna picked up her beer again. It felt cool going down her throat and she felt a small rush to her head. She settled back into her chair and then turned to look at Tom. "Did you give her one?"

"Just confirmed I was the one who made the flight and Janeway gave me a commendation." Tom's expression clouded over. "There will be a story about it tomorrow on the Starfleet News Service."

"You don't sound happy about it," B'Elanna said.

"I didn't like the questions she was asking. Something doesn't seem right."

"Questions like what?"

"About my relationship with the captain, with you." His expression softened as he looked at her. For a moment, he was looking at her as he did when they first started dating. "I told her I didn't comment on my personal life and she told me she understood, but it made me wonder what her angle was." Tom looked pensive. "She wasn't in my office for more than five minutes, but it was five minutes too long."

Impulsively, B'Elanna reached over to cover Tom's hand with hers. "You're the first person to ever break the transwarp barrier and no one has done it since. It's something to be proud of." She set her empty beer can down, then sighed as she remembered what she'd been doing when Tom came home. "Can you get dinner together while I look for Miral's permission form?"

"Sure."

As B'Elanna looked for the permission form, she could hear Tom chatting with Miral in the kitchen. She paused in her searching to watch them. Tom was slicing vegetables at the kitchen counter and Miral was perched on a bar stool opposite him, her face cradled in her palms as Tom retold the story of three imposters in the Delta Quadrant and how he and the EMH had come up with a plan to capture them.

"And then I came out of the bio-tubes, the Doctor and I overpowered Dala." Tom spread his hands in a gesture of victory. "And just like that, I knew I hadn't lost my edge after all. But more importantly, we were able to bring the scam artists to justice *and* restore our reputation in the sector."

"What happened to them, Daddy?"

B'Elanna didn't hear the answer, as she went back to her office, still trying to find the infernal permission slip. She had enjoyed watching Tom interacting with Miral like that, really talking to his daughter. It seemed lately that he spent all his time with his students, leaving her and Miral as after-thoughts. She couldn't help but wonder if it was her fault.

Finally, B'Elanna located the missing permission slip – buried under last week's grocery shopping list - and signed it with a sigh of relief before tucking it into Miral's backpack. *Crisis averted*. She made her way to the kitchen and saw Tom throwing back his head in laughter at something Miral had just said. In that moment, she recognized the man she'd fallen in love with so many years ago. Unbidden, the thought went through her mind: *Where the fuck have you been?*

After dinner, Tom sat on the bed in Miral's bedroom, watching his daughter as she sat at her desk, drawing with long sure strokes. Tom glanced over her shoulder.

"Voyager," he said.

"I'm having a hard time getting the saucer section just right," Miral said, not looking up.

Tom squinted. "It looks pretty close to me," he said. Cracking a smile, he added, "It's shaped just like a toilet seat."

Miral ignored his joke and pursed her lips together. "'Close' isn't good enough," she said.

Tom laughed. "You're certainly your mother's daughter," he said. He rested his hand on her shoulder lightly. "Come on, kiddo, it's late, and you have to go to school tomorrow. Why don't you get some rest and you can strive for perfection another day?"

Miral put down her pencil and turned reluctantly to face Tom. "What if I never get it right, Dad?" she asked in a troubled voice.

Tom wrapped his arm around her, holding her close. "I guess you keep trying until you're satisfied or until you decide to move on to something else." He traced his fingers lightly over the curve of *Voyager's* saucer section. God, he missed flying that ship. It was unlikely he'd ever pilot a starship again. Not that he could accept even if asked; he had responsibilities here in San Francisco. "But the important thing is that you give it your best shot, and no one can ask more of you. Remember, perfect is the enemy of good." He held his hand out to Miral and her smaller warm hand curled into his. "This means a lot to you, doesn't it?"

Miral nodded. "It's where I was born. You and Mom consider it home." She pressed her lips into a thin line, her brow furrowing beneath the gentle ridges on her forehead. "It has to be perfect."

"I get it," Tom said softly. "But you know this is our home now. *Voyager* is part of who we are, but it doesn't define us as a family."

Miral arched her left eyebrow. "Are you going to say something corny now? Like 'home is where the heart is' or something like that?"

"I was actually going with 'home is not a place, but the people who love you.'"

"I like that one." She sighed. "You miss *Voyager*, don't you?"

Tom considered before letting his breath out in a heavy sigh. "Yeah. But that was catching lightning in a bottle, Miral."

His daughter frowned again. "Are you going to be sappy on me again?"

Tom smiled. "No, but if you don't get ready for bed, I just might." He turned down the corner of the fluffy pink and white covers on Miral's bed. Miral took the hint and scampered into the bathroom to brush her teeth and change into her nightgown. She came back, smelling like mint toothpaste.

"Daddy?"

"What is it?"

“Mommy seemed upset yesterday when *abuelo* was here.” Miral fiddled with the fringe on the edge of the duvet cover. “She seemed happy when he first came, but then she just seemed kind of irritated.”

Tom shifted his weight on the bed. “Mommy was just tired, honey. You know she works really hard.”

“That’s what Mommy said.” Miral sighed. “I was looking forward to seeing him. It’s been so long. I wish you could have been here, too.”

Tom wove his fingers through Miral’s. Shortly after their return from the Delta Quadrant, it seemed like there was a chance for B’Elanna to repair her relationship with her father. But John Torres had often seemed tentative around his daughter, and her efforts never seemed fully reciprocated. Over time, John’s visits had dwindled to the point where they were few and far between, whether by circumstance or choice. But Miral was still very fond of him.

“I’ll be here the next time,” Tom said with a confidence he didn’t feel. “Get some rest,” he said softly, dropping a kiss on her forehead. “I love you.”

“I love you too, Daddy.”

Tom descended to the first floor, deep in thought. The visit from the reporter still weighed heavily on his mind. He hadn’t thought about that transwarp flight in years, and now that Ksenia had brought it up, he felt curiously unsettled. The official logs had just marked the achievement, putting the commendation in his service record. Tom had recorded only a few words on the subject himself, and he’d assumed Janeway’s logs on the subject were pretty cut and dry, so it bothered him just how many details the reporter, Ksenia Williams, seemed to know about what happened during that flight. As far as he knew, only five people – himself, Janeway, Tuvok, Chakotay, and the Doctor – were aware of what had transpired after he’d broken the transwarp barrier. Was it possible one of them had added more details to the logs years later? Ksenia hadn’t mentioned anything about hyper-evolution, keeping her comments strictly to the flight, but he’d wondered at the mischievous glint in her eye, the undercurrent of humor in her voice when she asked what exactly *were* the deleterious health effects that had prevented *Voyager* from attempting the flight again. He couldn’t anticipate what angle her story would have, but he had the sudden sinking feeling he had to tell B’Elanna exactly what had happened after he’d collapsed in Sickbay all those years ago.

He went to find B’Elanna but saw her office door was closed, a thin strip of light beneath it edge. He raised his hand to knock, but for some reason he couldn’t explain, instead went to the stasis unit, pulled out another beer and went out on the patio. The cool night air ruffled his hair as he settled back into his chair, leaning his head back and raised the can to his lips.



Chapter Ten

The next morning, B’Elanna walked with Miral to school and then took a shuttle to the main Engineering complex at Starfleet Headquarters.

In retrospect, this workday unfolded like so many before it, with several small to mid-range crises popping up unexpectedly. B'Elanna felt like she was running to extinguish fire after fire; nothing seemed to be going right, and she didn't even have time to grab a bite to eat. She'd skipped breakfast in the frenetic activity that characterized mornings at the Paris-Torres household, and as the chronometer neared fifteen hours, B'Elanna's stomachs lurched. She'd considered going to a yoga class the Doctor had recommended some months previously, but the tension gripping her forehead combined with her hunger (as well as her distaste for yoga as a whole) led her to ditch that plan. Wearily, she packed up her bag, and made the long trek across the Starfleet HQ campus to the shuttle, passing by the exact spot where Tom had triumphantly landed *Voyager* a decade earlier.

The *USS Voyager* had long since returned to active duty under a new captain who'd earned her promotion after her heroic performance during the Second Battle of Chin'toka during the Dominion War. Ten years later, a replica of the *Intrepid*-class ship was on permanent display at the Starfleet Museum of History. The museum model featured the Bridge, the captain's Ready Room, as well as Engineering and the Mess Hall. There was even a reproduction of the captain's quarters. The museum holodeck included among its offerings a Captain Proton adventure, which was very popular and usually booked months in advance.

B'Elanna always appreciated the peaceful walk across the expansive grounds and when she reached her stop, she only had to wait a few minutes for the shuttle to arrive. It wasn't until she sat down that she realized just how much her feet hurt. Her contractor uniform came equipped with the standard Starfleet-issued high heeled boots she'd hated so much during her time on *Voyager*. Not for the first time, she thought about how ironic it was that Starfleet could engineer starships that could travel at many times the speed of light but still seemed utterly incapable of designing comfortable boots.

She descended at her stop, stopping only for a moment to heave her briefcase strap onto her shoulder. The bag banged uncomfortably against her leg as she made her way up the steep incline to their townhouse. Even though she made this climb daily, her double set of lungs still protested at the activity. As she neared the house, she paused, noting a group of people standing just outside of the wrought iron fence that marked the edge of their property. She furrowed her brow when she realized that, among other things, they were also carrying holovid equipment.

What the hell, she thought. She slowed her step and as she got closer, she saw her perspective wasn't skewed at all; a group of reporters had set up their equipment outside her front garden gate. She frowned, wondering why they were there. There didn't seem to be anything out of the ordinary happening on their sleepy residential street. She pushed through the crowd, and had her hand on the gate, ready to put her fingerprint in for entry, when a hand landed heavily on her shoulder.

"Don't touch me!" she snarled at the smooth-faced human who stuck a microphone in her face. With all the cameras aimed at her, this wouldn't be a good time to lose her temper, B'Elanna knew. Still it was hard to resist the temptation to plant her fist directly on his nose.

"Ms. Torres! What do you have to say about the revelation about your husband and Captain Janeway?" one reporter yelled.

B'Elanna blinked. "What?"

"I just wanted a comment from you about the story Ksenia Williams just broke on the Starfleet News Network about your husband."

B'Elanna tightened her grip on her bag, her hand resting on the gate. "Excuse me?"

The reporter looked shocked. "About the children he had with then-Captain Janeway?"

B'Elanna felt faint. *What the fuck was he talking about?* It took every bit of her Klingon strength to mutter, "I have no comment."

She then brushed by him, not overly concerned that a glancing blow from her shoulder sent him stumbling. The gate clicked shut behind her and she was glad that no one had tried to follow her onto her private property. Once inside the house, B'Elanna dropped her bag on the floor and went into the kitchen. She got a cup of tea, and stood at the counter, staring out the back-patio doors into the dead garden. *The children he had with then-Captain Janeway.* Miral and Naomi Wildman, were the only children born on Voyager, and there was absolutely no question of their parentage. The media were clearly hallucinating or had reached a new low of absurdity. When Tom came home this evening, they'd share a good laugh over this.

She went into her home office and sat down at her personal console to check her messages. The status reports on her project looked good, for which she was thankful. It would give her more time to pay attention to schematics and engineering drawings. Construction on the new starship was slated to begin in the next eighteen months and B'Elanna wanted to ensure her team caused no delays. She was scrolling through the messages when her personal comm device rang, with Michael Ayala identified as the caller. No doubt Ayala was calling for an update on the sensor and she didn't really feel like telling him that it would probably be another two to three weeks before the test lab would get to it.

She took a deep breath and accepted the call. "Hi, Mike," she said.

"Do you have the news on?" Ayala asked, his expression impassive as usual. "The Starfleet News Service channel, specifically?"

"No." B'Elanna felt a sense of dread twisting her stomachs.

"You need to turn it on." The firmness in Ayala's voice caught B'Elanna off-guard.

After she hung up with Ayala, B'Elanna turned on the viewscreen mounted on the wall opposite her desk and finally found the program her friend was referring to. B'Elanna immediately recognized the news anchor as Henry Calder, who had been the lead reporter covering *Voyager's* return; in the past decade, he'd risen in prominence and now helmed the Starfleet News Network's most watched newscast. The blond woman sitting next to him was unfamiliar; the ticker running along the bottom of the screen identified her as Ksenia Williams. *Was this the same reporter who visited Tom the other evening?* Ksenia wore a sleeveless purple dress, showing off perfectly toned arms, and her long golden hair curled in gentle waves over her shoulders, her red lips plumped into the perfect pout. Staring at the viewscreen, B'Elanna Torres hated the woman immediately.

"It's been ten years since *Voyager* returned to the Alpha Quadrant and we thought we knew everything there was to know about that ship and its captain and crew. But Ksenia Williams, investigative reporter for Starfleet News Service out of our El Paso station, is here to tell us about the latest bombshells revealed when some more of *Voyager's* logs were declassified last week," Calder said primly. "Ksenia, let's be clear – this is something that no one on *Voyager* ever mentioned or even hinted at. We all know that the chief helm officer, then Lieutenant Thomas Eugene Paris broke the transwarp barrier, but for

the first time we reveal that because of the transwarp, Paris underwent a transformation, a de-evolution if you will. While in that state – alternately described as either amphibian or lizard-like - kidnapped the captain.” The breathless quality of Calder’s voice irritated B’Elanna. “This story sounds like something out of old twentieth century pulp fiction, but Ksenia, you’re here to tell us that it’s all true?”

In the news studio, Ksenia Williams nodded sagely. “I’ve gone through the official logs thoroughly, including those of the Doctor’s and yes, it all adds up to a real-life scenario that seems incredible, and we haven’t even *gotten* to the most astounding parts of this story, Henry. First, let’s not overlook the accomplishment in of itself – the breaking of the transwarp barrier. *Warp Ten*. It speaks to the ingenuity and resourcefulness of the *Voyager*’s crew, including B’Elanna Torres—”

“The wife of Tom Paris—”

“Yes,” Ksenia said, nodding. “She was instrumental in engineering the technology that made this happen and in fact, was by Tom Paris’ side during his medical emergency. Some former crew I’ve talked to mentioned this was possibly one of the first signs of a deepening relationship between Paris and Torres, but if that’s the case, why would Tom Paris choose to abduct the ship’s *captain*?”

B’Elanna knew the answer to that question: Tom had escaped from Engineering when they were trying to reverse the effects of the transwarp flight and had run into the captain in the turbolift. In other words, Janeway had simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time, and the result was she too had experienced the same hyper-evolution as Tom.

“So, let’s return to this allegation you have made,” Henry Calder said, his smarmy smile spreading across his carefully sculpted and tanned face. “You say that after Tom Paris abducted the captain, they landed on a planet, mated and produced offspring.”

What the hell? That couldn’t be true, it had to be an outright fabrication.

“Correct.” Ksenia turned her face to the camera, her gaze accusatory and penetrating as she seemed to stare directly at B’Elanna, as if she *knew* B’Elanna was watching. “The existence of those three offspring were a closely guarded secret aboard *Voyager*. Only Commander Chakotay, Lieutenant Tuvok, and the EMH were aware of what happened, and after Captain Janeway and Lieutenant Paris were reverted to their human forms, the EMH informed them as to what had occurred, and they all agreed to never to speak of the situation again. As required, Commander Chakotay did sparingly allude to the incident in his official logs, and these were the logs that were recently declassified.”

“What exactly did these logs say?”

“Commander Chakotay made a vague notation after a second transwarp attempt failed, that the Captain and Lieutenant Paris were located in a type of colony with several similar creatures. Janeway and Paris were retrieved and restored to human form.” Ksenia straightened her shoulders as she smiled disarmingly into the camera. “You should know that I reached out to Tom Paris for comment, he only acknowledged the transwarp flight and wouldn’t comment on anything else I asked. For someone who resigned from Starfleet five years ago for ‘personal reasons’, he still has a lot of Starfleet in him.” Ksenia chuckled as she flipped her hair over her shoulder. “That being said, I have plenty more leads on what really transpired and I’m planning on bringing *everything* I learn to you, our faithful viewers.”

“That’s quite the promise, Ksenia, considering what you have already revealed on this broadcast. We look forward to learning more about a starship and crew that we thought we already knew so much about,” the anchor said. “But after our break, we discuss an ethical dilemma that arises directly from our bombshell revelation.” He paused for dramatic effect. “What about the Janeway and Paris *children*? Where are they now?”

B’Elanna snapped the viewscreen off and balled her hands into fists. Her throat felt as it was narrowing. After a moment, with a scream, with a wild and long sweep of her arm, she knocked everything off her desk. The PADDs, along with everything else, clattered to the floor with in a completely unsatisfying cacophony. B’Elanna pressed her palms on the desk, leaned forward, as she tried to catch her breath.



Chapter Eleven

Stardate 49385.38

“Torres, you have the Bridge.”

B’Elanna, at her Engineering station, jerked at the unexpected command from Chakotay. She had yet to take the required exam to be a bridge officer; it was always something she intended to do, but never quite got around to. If she was being honest with herself, command had never been something that appealed to her: too much sitting, not enough doing.

True to form, Tuvok said, “But Starfleet regulations—”

Chakotay held up his hand as he passed by B’Elanna’s station, forestalling further protest. “With Janeway and Paris missing in action, and we need Harry in the transporter room, you’re the next most logical person to leave in command.”

Tuvok looked like he was about to object again, but then closed his mouth as he fell into step next to Chakotay. The look he threw B’Elanna though made her blood boil; she knew the chief security officer didn’t have the same trust in her that Chakotay had. The doors closed behind Chakotay and Tuvok, leaving B’Elanna alone on the bridge with Ayala and Kristine Fernandez at helm. With a bit of trepidation, B’Elanna eyed the captain’s chair, and then decided she could monitor the ship’s status from her current station. But Ayala grinned at her, jerked his finger toward the chair, and B’Elanna gave in.

Once seated, she kept looking at the back of Fernandez’s head, feeling like the young woman was a foreigner, an interloper. B’Elanna knew Fernandez was a perfectly competent pilot but lacking the spark of humor and casualness Tom Paris brought to the role.

The viewscreen showed the planet Voyager was currently orbiting; a great swampy mess of a place, with marshlands and shallows seats, and a climate similar to Qo'noS. Harry's scans had picked up traces of human DNA somewhere on the northern continent, close to the equator. 'Traces' could mean anything, B'Elanna knew, and given the fact the battered shuttlecraft – sign of a rough landing -- had been found a few kilometers away, there was a possibility that Janeway and Paris were both dead.

Resolutely, she brushed the thought away, but as the minutes turned into hours, she wondered at the silence. Finally, the comm cackled to life.

"Chakotay to Torres. We've got them," Chakotay said, but there was something in his tone that caught B'Elanna's attention. She sat up straight.

"Are they all right?" she asked.

"Harry will beam us directly to Sickbay."

B'Elanna swallowed hard. "But they are alive?"

Fernandez whirled around to face B'Elanna, her eyes wide at the question posted.

"Yes," Chakotay said finally. Behind her, Ayala let out a long exhale. A slow smile crept across B'Elanna's face.

"We'll see you soon," B'Elanna said. She could feel the muscles in her body relaxing, the tension of the last few days easing. Her eyelids were heavy too; she'd gotten by on minimal sleep, deciding instead to devote her energies to finding Tom and the captain. Rest could come later. An hour after his initial hail, Chakotay and Tuvok returned to the bridge. B'Elanna gladly gave up the chair to him.

"Sickbay is off limits for the time being," Chakotay said.

B'Elanna frowned. "What if—"

"Quarantine," Chakotay said shortly. "You understand."

"What happened to them?" B'Elanna asked. She remembered seeing Tom evolving before her eyes, the way his eyes had grown rapidly larger, his face rounding out, his tongue protruding from his mouth, and all hair disappearing from his rapidly mottling skin.

"It is apparent transwarp travel has severe side effects," Tuvok said from his station. "It will take some time for the Doctor to reverse the genetic transformation that has occurred."

"The captain, too?" B'Elanna couldn't help asking.

Chakotay and Tuvok exchanged a look before Chakotay nodded.

The captain and Paris were released to their quarters about twenty-hours after their rescue from the planet, and Chakotay made it clear neither were to be disturbed. B'Elanna ate her meals with Harry, as usual, but for the first time, she was very aware of something – no, someone – missing. So it was quite a relief when Harry made a passing comment that Tom was feeling much better.

"I think he's got a bit of cabin fever," Harry said. "He's trying to convince the Doctor to certify him fit for duty."

"The captain is supposed to return tomorrow for Alpha Shift," B'Elanna said, twisting her fork in some stringy green vegetable noodles. "That's what Chakotay said."

"Well, maybe Tom will come back too." Harry bent his head conspiratorially. "You do notice the difference when Hernandez or Baytart take the helm, don't you? The ride is a little bit more... choppy."

B'Elanna smiled to herself. It was clear Harry missed his friend just as much as she did. After their meal, the two went their separate ways and B'Elanna found herself in front of Tom's quarters. She stared at the door, walked away a few steps, paused, and then came back. She twisted her lips into a frown. This was ridiculous, this was Tom. It would be so easy to walk away but she knew she wanted to know how he was doing. So, after another pause, she signaled for entry. A minute passed and she decided perhaps it had been a bad idea after all to come. She was about to turn away when the door slid open.

"Hi," Tom said hoarsely.

"I came to check on you."

"I'm doing great," Tom said. He was wearing a grey t-shirt, and baggy loose pants. His hair was unruly, and his face was drawn, with prominent bags under his eyes; she wondered if he was getting enough sleep. "Thanks."

"You're welcome." B'Elanna shifted her weight from one foot to another. "I guess, um, I guess I should be going then."

Tom held her gaze for a moment and said, "Are you busy right now? I could use the company."

His quarters were unkempt, as one would expect after a seventy-two-hour confinement. The bed was unmade, and there was half of a pizza sitting on the table. At least a dozen water glasses were spread on a variety of surfaces. Tom apologetically shifted some clothes and PADDs off the sofa, dumping them unceremoniously on the floor.

"It's a mess," Tom said. "I just haven't had the energy—"

"Don't apologize. You've been through a lot."

"You can say that again," Tom said. He sat heavily on the sofa. "I'm glad you came by. It was getting lonely in here. Actually, when you rang, I thought you were Harry."

"Sorry to disappoint you."

"No, no. I'm, I'm glad it's you."

B'Elanna felt a small curl of warmth in her stomach. She sat at the table, wrinkling her nose at the pepperoni pizza. "That must have been an incredible experience, huh?"

"You can say that again," Tom said. His gaze shifted away from her. "I don't remember a lot of it, to be honest. But what I do remember," he paused, "is you taking care of me."

B'Elanna shifted in her seat. "That's what friends do."

"Yeah." Tom cleared his throat. "So... what are people saying? You know about what happened."

"Everyone's glad you're back safely."

"That's all?"

"And that you had the guts to do what no one else would," B'Elanna said. "I think Baytart might even be a little bit jealous; I heard him telling Freddy Bristow that he wished he'd had a shot at crossing the warp ten barrier."

A moment passed and then Tom said, "Anything else?"

B'Elanna furrowed her brow. "No..."

"About... what happened—" he gestured towards his face and B'Elanna knew immediately what he meant.

"No, of course not," she said reassuringly. "We know the progress of science isn't necessarily without side-effects—"

"Some side effects!" Tom said with a scoff. "I turned into a lizard—"

"Amphibian."

Tom allowed himself a small smile. "Amphibian, then." He shifted in his seat. "And then kidnapping the captain—"

"That wasn't you."

Tom looked down at his hands. "Yeah," he said with a heavy sigh.

B'Elanna resisted the urge to touch him. Tom always came across as if he owned every room he walked into, that he always had the exact punchline to every situation. Now she sensed a vulnerability from him that was both concerning and sweet.

"So nothing else?" he asked, this time urgency underlying his tone. He leaned forward. "I mean, since we were rescued? Any gossip I should be aware of?"

B'Elanna frowned. "It's a small ship; there's always gossip—"

"But not about me? About what might have happened?"

B'Elanna raised an eyebrow. What exactly was he getting at? "Nothing other than speculation as to when you're coming off sick-leave."

The relief in Tom's posture was palpable. He slowly nodded. "I always wanted to do something to put the Tom Paris of Caldik Prime behind me. This was an opportunity like no other, a chance to transform how people saw me, and I guess I scored on that count."

"People aren't talking about that at all," B'Elanna said firmly. "What they are talking about is how you were willing to take on a risky endeavor. If it had paid off, it would have been our ticket back to the Alpha Quadrant. It was a gamble someone had to take."

"And so it's another Tom Paris failure."

"No one is saying that." B'Elanna took the chance and reached for his hand. His skin was cool against hers. "And I for one respect you for what you did."

Tom raised his gaze to meet hers. "It means a lot to me, to hear you say that."

"People have a lot of respect for what you did, Tom."

They sat there, the silence between them awkward in a way that it hadn't been before.

"I hope you return to duty soon," B'Elanna said in a rushed attempt to fill the silence. "I have a stack of helm reports piling up in my station and the ride is not quite as smooth when Fernandez or Baytart is at the helm."

Tom laughed, but it sounded forced. "Are you implying my department needs some additional training? Are you sure the bumpiness you feel isn't an Engineering issue?"

B'Elanna lifted her chin defiantly, feeling as if she was on safe ground again. "I can assure you, all systems are working as specified."

"A very Starfleet answer," Tom said, but there was warmth underlying his words. "I look forward to reviewing the reports with you when the Doctor returns me to duty."

B'Elanna said, "Sounds good." She wrinkled her nose. The pizza smell was overpowering. "You should throw that out."

"You sure you don't want some?"

"I've never liked pizza."

"Really? I didn't know that." Tom leaned forward, resting his forearms on his thighs. "Tell you what, let's meet for dinner when I'm out of here. You pick something you like, my treat."

B'Elanna stiffened. There was something in that request that seemed off. Tom sounded friendly enough, but there was just a hint of something else in his voice that caught her attention.

"I wouldn't want to impose," she said quickly. "I know how valuable rations are."

"Consider it a thank you. For what you did for me." The intensity in his eyes unnerved her. It was as if he could see through her, as if he knew.

"I don't know. I'm really busy."

Tom raised his eyebrows. "You've got to eat sometime."

"We'll see." She got up so quickly that she nearly knocked over the chair. "Uh, I have to get going. I'm, I'm glad you're feeling better."

She fled into the corridor, her pace rapid towards the turbolift. Her hearts seemed to be beating faster than ever. She didn't want to think about what it meant.



Chapter Twelve

Tom let himself in the back-patio door to avoid the reporters who were camped out in front of the house. He'd gotten wind that the news of his amphibian spawn had hit the newstreams at lunchtime and that the press had set up camp in front of his home. After hearing the news, he'd cancelled his afternoon office hours so he could get home hopefully before Miral and B'Elanna returned. He'd already called B'Elanna at her office, and her assistant had informed him that Ms. Torres had already gone home for the day.

"B'Elanna!" he called as he came in through the patio doors. He saw her office door was slightly ajar, but she wasn't there. He frowned as he noted she wasn't in the kitchen or living room either. He heard a floorboard creak above him and then B'Elanna came down the stairs. She stopped when she saw him standing in the kitchen doorway.

She clenched her fist. "Is it true?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Is what true?" Tom thought about closing the distance between them but then decided to remain where he was. He still hadn't figured out how this conversation would play out.

"That you and Janeway mated after your second transwarp flight? That you had children?"

Tom inhaled sharply. And then slowly he nodded. "Offspring, not *children*. They aren't *human*."

"If you hadn't noticed, neither am I. Or your daughter."

At the mention of Miral, Tom stopped short. "Where is she?" he asked, looking around a bit wildly. "She is back from school, right?" The thought of Miral having to run the gauntlet of reporters at their front gate made him furious. Surely, B'Elanna would have brought her in through the back of the house.

"She's with my father," B'Elanna said, spitting out the words in a sharp rhythmic cadence that showed her displeasure at having to ask *anything* of John Torres. Her bottom lip trembled just slightly as she

went on, "I asked him to pick her up from school since your parents are at Jupiter Station until tomorrow and I didn't want her to deal with the circus out front." B'Elanna paused, then said sharply, "Why didn't you *tell* me?"

He took a deep breath. "I was going to tell you last night," he said slowly. "But you were busy working and I didn't want to bother you."

"*Last* night? This wasn't something you thought to mention in the thirteen years we've been together?" B'Elanna said incredulously. "You didn't think it wasn't important to tell me what happened during those three days after you abducted the captain, before we brought you back to *Voyager*? Even when I came to visit you when you were on medical leave?"

"Right, just how did you expect me to bring that up? 'By the way, B'Elanna, is anyone talking about the captain and me, and what may or may not happened on that planet'?" Tom's face flushed red.

"You could have *mentioned* it—"

"You *know* I was still processing what happened! I didn't *remember* any of it and after I found out, I just wanted to *forget* about it."

"And just forget about your *children*?"

"I told you they weren't--"

"After *all* we've been through, how can you even *say* that?" B'Elanna's footsteps were heavy in restrained rage as she brushed past him into the living room and she stood in front of the desk, shifting through a pile of Miral's artwork. Her actions were quick, furious. Finally, she dropped onto the sofa, her shoulders slumping.

Tom gnawed on his lower lip as he contemplated the coffee table between him and his wife. He debated whether to circumvent the barrier to sit next to her but then decided against it. When B'Elanna was feeling prickly, it was best to give her a little space to rage. Over the years, he'd learned B'Elanna's temper boiled up hot and furious but generally cooled off quickly. But he looked at her expectantly, and her expression was impassive. *Oh shit.*

"Everything about that experience..." he sighed heavily, running his hand through what was left of his hair. "I haven't thought about it in years." And then he thought, *the hell with it*, and dropped onto the seat next to her. "Everything I knew was based on what Commander Chakotay and Tuvok told us after we were rescued from the planet and frankly, it was *weird*." He laughed lightly, but his description elicited no reaction from B'Elanna. "And we decided that what happened when Janeway and I had de-evolved, well, it was best to keep that between us."

B'Elanna bit her lip. "And that included me."

There were so many ways to answer that question and every single one would get him further in trouble. Tom held out his hands wide in a gesture of supplication. He really had no excuses. At the time, he'd been embarrassed by the revelation, had been appreciative of the command team's discretion, and had decided to leave the entire experience where it belonged: in the past. He hadn't really spent much time thinking about the 'babies' he and Janeway had left behind. But he knew all of this was cold

comfort to B'Elanna now. It might have been fifteen years ago for him, but it was a brand-new revelation for B'Elanna.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm sorry, I should have told you. This wasn't the way for you to find out." He said again, "I'm sorry."

B'Elanna's face looked pale, drawn. "That's why you were so concerned yesterday when that reporter came to your office. You were afraid this would come to light."

He figured there was no point in white lies now. "Yes."

"And now I know." Her voice trembled. "And so does everyone else in the quadrant." Her lower lip quivered.

Tom sat back heavily in his seat, pressing his hands to his face. He hadn't quite thought about it in that vein. *Everyone knows*. And he knew there was the possibility of even more damaging revelations to come. He swallowed hard as he looked at his wife who suddenly looked a shadow of herself, unsure of whether to say anything more. He quickly decided against it; there was still the hope that maybe, just maybe, the past would stay buried. But he knew it was unlikely that a dogged reporter who had managed to uncover the inside story of the transwarp flight would be content to stop there. *Shit*.



Chapter Thirteen

Miral Paris perched at the edge of the stool, twirling from side to side as she licked at her strawberry ice cream cone. The ice cream shop was just a few blocks away from school and stopping here for a treat was the cherry on top of the surprise of her grandpa Torres, her *abuelo*, picking her up from school. Most of the time, her mother picked her up, and occasionally, her grandmother Paris. The last time, *abuelo* had picked her up at school, he told Miral it was because her mother had been called to an emergency meeting that had lasted well into the night. That day, she and Abuelo had gone to the Embarcadero to look at the sea lions, and then they'd gone to the famous Ghirardelli chocolate store before going to John's home in Dora, New Mexico, where she'd stayed overnight.

"Are we going to your house?" Miral asked. Her *abuelo*'s house was not far from Eagle Nest Lake, and they'd spent a part of the morning on his boat. Miral had loved feeling the wind in her hair as John Torres had expertly steered the boat across the blue waters. After the boat ride, John had tried to teach Miral how to fish from the pier, but she'd come up empty-handed. Still, she'd enjoyed the rare one on one time with her grandfather, and she was sorely disappointed when her father had shown up to take her home later that afternoon. She'd returned home to find her mother fast asleep and her father seemed exhausted, unable to focus as he continually asked Miral to repeat something she'd just said and then he'd made her banana pancakes for dinner. A couple of days later, her father had said that something had happened, and the new baby had died.

"No, we don't have time to go to my house today," John said. "But maybe in a few weeks. I'll talk to your mother about you visiting for a few days. Maybe during your summer vacation. Would you like that?"

Miral nodded. "I like being outside," she said. "It feels nice to be out of the city." She shrugged. "Sometimes it feels too crowded here."

"I know what you mean," John said. He glanced at his personal comm device and seemed somewhat disappointed that it remained quiet. "San Francisco has a lot of people, doesn't it?"

"Yeah," Miral said. She considered. "But not a lot of Klingons like me. Why is that?"

"Klingons prefer the homeworld. Your grandmother certainly did. How's the ice-cream?" John asked anxiously.

"Delicious." Miral took another lick and then attempted what she hoped was a giant smile of satisfaction as she looked at her grandfather. He looked nervous as he sat next to her, constantly fiddling with the napkin he held, his bowl of vanilla ice cream half consumed, the spoon lying on the pistachio-colored counter. Grandfather Paris always filled a room with his personality and loud voice, crowding out nearly everyone else in his presence; Abuelo, on the other hand, was quick to fade into the shadows. "Is something wrong with Mommy?"

"Your mother is fine. Just busy with work this afternoon."

"That's what you said last time," Miral said reproachfully. The ice cream was starting to drip down her hand. At ten years old, Miral was wise to adult behavior patterns: when treats were forthcoming, something was wrong. The revelation struck her. "You're not telling a lie, are you?"

"No, everything is fine. You'll be home for dinner."

Miral narrowed her eyes. She didn't know her grandfather well enough to know if he was telling the truth. "Are you eating with us?"

Abuelo's gaze wavered. "No, not tonight."

"Why not?"

Abuelo bit his lip. "It gets late and I have an early morning meeting tomorrow in Lima."

"Transporters don't take that long." The public transporter station was about a kilometer away from the Paris-Torres home, and it was easy enough to transport to Roswell, the nearest transporter station to Dora. From there, Abuelo's home was a 15-minute shuttle ride away. "You should stay for dinner."

"Not tonight. I'm sorry."

Miral sighed. "I wish you didn't travel so much."

Abuelo's mouth tightened. "You sound just like your grandmother."

The comment meant nothing to Miral. Her Klingon grandmother had died several years before *Voyager's* return and other than knowing she was named after her, Miral knew next to nothing of her

mother's mother. Miral swallowed more ice cream, this time getting a chunk of the cone in her bite, and then she decided. "What was she like, my *sosni*?"

Abuelo pressed a napkin against his lips, and then carefully picked up his spoon and then took another bite of ice cream. "Your grandmother was the most vibrant, energetic woman I'd ever met, fiercely devoted to those she loved," he said after a moment. "Your mother is a lot like her."

Miral considered. She didn't know if she'd considered 'vibrant' or 'energetic' as words to describe her mother lately. Her mom often seemed distracted, irritable, though she always seemed to try hard to not take out whatever was bothering her on Miral. For a while, it seemed like her father would get the brunt of her mother's anger, and he appeared to bear it with placid equanimity, but lately, he'd been keeping his distance, and there didn't seem to be much conversation at all. Miral realized the silence was louder than the arguments and it made her uncomfortable.

"You should visit more," Miral said impulsively. She finished off her cone and wiped her hands on her jeans. "I think my mom would like that. She misses you."

"We will see each other again soon."

"You promise?"

"Yes." Abuelo got up from his seat and nodded his thanks to the person behind the counter. "Come on, let's get out of here."

Out on the street, Abuelo stuck his hands in his pockets, as Miral skipped next to him. Pretty soon, she realized she'd bounded a few meters away from him and she stopped to look at him.

"Did you take my mom for ice cream when she was my age?" she asked when Abuelo finally reached her.

Abuelo shook his head. "No. My work required me to travel too often to do things like this." He shrugged. "But we did other things. Like camping."

Miral thought about that. She knew her grandfather had left when her mother was around her age, but she wasn't quite sure of the details. Sometimes she wondered at the tension she sensed between her grandfather and mother. She had so many questions, but instead she decided to settle on safer ground. "I'd like to go camping."

"We can certainly do that the next time you visit. There are nice spots by the lake."

"Will we sleep in a tent? I've never done that before."

Abuelo smiled for the first time since he'd picked her up. "Then you're in for a treat." He paused, scuffing at some imaginary spot on the pavement. "Your mother and I, we got along best when we were in the woods. Only nature is big enough to handle that Klingon temperament."

At this, Miral got very still. "Is that why you and Mommy aren't close like Daddy and me are? Because she's Klingon?"

Abuelo heaved a deep breath that rippled through his body. He pressed his lips into a thin line and stared off into the distance. Finally, he said, "Relationships between parents and their children are complex. It's hard to explain what happens between people, but at the end of the day, I'm still her father, she's my daughter. I always loved her, and always will."

Miral slipped her hand into her grandfather's larger one. "I love you, *abuelo*," she said earnestly. "And I really want to take a ride on your boat again."

This time, when he looked down at her, his face softened with affection. "I'd really like that too." He glanced at his chronometer. The bright sun of the day was giving way to the faded hues of dusk. "Let's get you home." He squeezed her hand. "I liked spending this afternoon with you."

Impulsively, Miral wrapped her arms around her grandfather's waist and reveled in the gentle caress of his fingers in her hair.



Chapter Fourteen

Tom slumped across the sofa; Miral and B'Elanna had gone up to bed much earlier. A couple of empty beer cans sat on the coffee table and he was debating whether to get up and get another one, but his muscles felt heavy and sluggish. The Starfleet logo blinked on Tom's personal device. He rubbed his hand across his weary face and then answered it. Harry Kim's smiling face showed on the screen. Dressed in command red with two gold and one black pip on his collar, and with the barest hint of gray in his hair, Harry Kim was a far cry from the wide-eyed ensign Tom had rescued in that Ferengi bar on Deep Space Nine nearly two decades previously. Now he was a lieutenant commander, and no doubt there was a first officer role for him in the very near future.

"You look like shit," Harry said by way of greeting.

"Good to see you too," Tom said sleepily. "It's been a while." Ever since Harry had received his most recent promotion and taken the chief operations officer role aboard the *Aries*, it seemed as if the increasing demands on his time meant his oldest and closest friend had to take a backseat to his success. Tom was genuinely happy for Harry, who was finally enjoying the success in both his career and personal life that he'd always wanted, even if it did make him feel a little left out. "How's the *Aries*?"

"Charted six systems in eight weeks," Harry said proudly.

"You're slacking off, Harry. Remember we once mapped fifteen planets in *two* weeks?"

Harry grimaced. "I said 'systems', Tom, not planets."

"How many of those systems had more than one class M planet?" Tom couldn't help asking.

Harry rolled his eyes but said nothing.

"And how is Jyoti?" Tom queried, referring to Harry's fiancée, Lieutenant Jyoti Malhotra, who worked in Engineering aboard the *Aries*.

A hint of color stained Harry's cheeks. "She's doing well, though it's possible she'll be transferred to another ship when the new rotations are announced next month." Harry bit his lip. "So, we're thinking about moving up the wedding 'just in case.'"

"I highly recommend a small wedding with only the captain presiding and a couple of close friends as witnesses," Tom said. He thought back to his own wedding, completed in only a few minutes; other than Janeway, the only other witnesses present were Chakotay and Harry. After the ceremony was complete, he and B'Elanna had been able to slip out with minimal fuss to pack for their honeymoon, but that had given Harry enough time to enlist Ayala and Nicoletti to help decorate the *Delta Flyer*.

"You get no argument from me," Harry said. "You and B'Elanna handled it perfectly." He paused, looking thoughtful. "There are plenty of couples in Starfleet who are able to withstand the separations. It's part of the job, isn't it? After all, Admiral Janeway and Chakotay seem to make it work, don't they?"

Tom's lip curled. "Possibly because they aren't together long enough to get irritated with each other. They only see each other when the Admiral has leave. They get to go their separate ways before things have a chance to get tough." He cleared his throat. "Relationships aren't easy, Harry, even when you are in the same place."

"You want to tell me about it?" Harry's expression was concerned, but there was an edge to his voice.

"Tell you about *what*?"

"I'm in the middle of the Casperian system, Tom, and the gossip about you and the Admiral has made it all the way out of here."

Tom rubbed his eyes. He was so tired. "I don't want to talk about it."

Harry sighed. "I'm worried about you, Tom."

"Nothing I can't handle."

At that, Harry scoffed. "Yeah, you're handling it okay." He leaned forward. "What about B'Elanna and Miral? How are they taking the news?"

"Miral doesn't know, and as far as I'm concerned, she's going to stay that way. As for B'Elanna..." Tom sighed heavily. "That's a different story."

After B'Elanna had confronted him about the hyper-evolved offspring he and Janeway had produced, she'd retreated behind the closed door of her office, saying she needed to finish up something for work. Obviously, he would have preferred a different response, even a flying object hurled in his direction. At least then, Tom would know she still cared.

And then just before dinner, John Torres had shown up at the back door with Miral. John had left quickly, indicating the reporters in the front yard, but not before extending an invitation to all of them to come visit him in Dora. Tom had thanked his father-in-law for the offer, but B'Elanna remained distant, focusing most of her attention on her daughter. During dinner, Tom and B'Elanna had barely exchanged more than a handful of perfunctory and extremely polite words, all of it directed toward their daughter, who seemed to be unaware of the tension, chatting endlessly about *Abuelo's* boat.

After Miral was tucked into bed, B'Elanna announced she was also going to sleep and there was no invitation in her voice. So, Tom had retired to the living room, flipping through the various channels available on the viewscreen, every now and then landing on the Starfleet News Service. Every beer he inhaled made the incessant talking heads discussing his spawn – he *refused* to think of them as children – easier to handle.

"B'Elanna's pretty upset." Tom said now as he knitted his fingers together. "You know, it's been difficult lately, with the miscarriage in December, Danny Tanaka's accident in January, and now this news..." he let out a long exhale. "So yeah. She's upset."

"I'm not surprised." Harry shook his head. "This story about you and Janeway having children together is a lot to take in." Harry paused. "You could have told *me*, you know."

Tom gave a bitter laugh. "Take a number." He shook his head, his lips flattening out into a scowl. "I can't apologize for something I can't remember, Harry."

Harry's expression turned sympathetic. "I wish I could be there with you, Tom, because this sounds like a real shitshow, and you could probably use a friend."

"No kidding. It feels like the Starfleet News Service has set up permanent residence in my front yard. I had to block unauthorized calls to my comm. We have to sneak in through the back to get inside the house. Luckily, our sympathetic neighbor doesn't mind us traipsing through their backyard." Tom ran a hand through his hair. "Michael Ayala has offered to provide security if we want it, and his company has a private transporter system which we can use if necessary."

Harry shook his head. "That sounds awful, Tom." He paused. "Are you sure Miral hasn't heard anything?"

"She's oblivious to what's going on. B'Elanna's dad picked her up this afternoon from school and she seemed thrilled to see him. Plus, ice cream cures all sorts of ills." He sighed. "This feels a lot like the media circus we experienced when returned from the DQ, but at least back then, I felt like we were all in it together. You know? Now I can't even get my wife to look at me in the eye, and you're all the way across the quadrant." His shoulders slumped.

"This will blow over, Tom," said Harry encouragingly. "B'Elanna will forgive you once she calms down and has a chance to think about all this rationally. It was a long time ago, and as you said, it's been an emotional time for the two of you. It'll just take her some time, that's all."

Tom looked away, his foot tapping nervously.

"Tom?" Harry asked, his tone ripe with suspicion. "Is there something else you want to tell me?"

Tom considered and then he shook his head. “What, you think I’m holding out on you? Isn’t this enough??”

“I don’t know what’s going on, Tom, but whatever it is you’re not telling me... don’t let B’Elanna learn about it on the news.”

“When did *you* become an expert on women?”

“Trust me on this, Tom. Don’t wait. Tell her.” Harry waited a beat. “I’m only a comm signal away.”

Tom acknowledged his friend’s offer with the slightest tip of his head. “Thanks, Harry. I appreciate it.”

“And Tom? Put the booze away. Hangovers are hell at your age, and your students – not to mention your family - are counting on you.” A quick smile flashed across Harry’s face. “Good night, Tom.”

“Good night.” The comm went black and Tom stared at it for a moment. He knew he should go to bed, but the thought of climbing those stairs and then slipping into bed next to a silent and judgmental wife was not appealing. He knew they needed to talk, but he wasn’t quite sure how to broach the subject, let alone say what needed to be said. He sighed. Maybe another beer wouldn’t be such a bad idea after all.



Chapter Fifteen

Miral gripped her mother’s hand as they neared the school. They’d covered the distance between their house and the school in relative silence. Lately it seemed like her mother had become just a silent shadow moving in and out of her life. She still made dinner, provided clean clothes, dropped her off at school and picked her up and told her when to go to bed, but something was missing. Miral knew her mother tended toward serious; her father was the one who was quick with the jokes and easy with the physical affection. Now her parents didn’t even seem to like each other that much anymore.

Miral wished her father had been the one to bring her to school this morning, but he hadn’t been awake this morning when it was time to leave. Her mother said her father had the stomach flu and a bad headache. But Miral knew – could *feel* – when her mother was lying to her.

But now her mom looked down at Miral, her step slowing. “Are you okay?”

Miral cleared her throat. “I’m worried about Daddy.”

“He’ll be fine. An analgesic or two, some anti-nausea medication. Don’t worry; we’ll call the Doctor if we need to,” her mother said, squeezing Miral’s hand comfortingly.

“Is he sick because of all of those people in front of our house? Why are they there, anyway? You didn’t really explain.”

Her mother's jaw tightened at the comment. "Don't worry about them," she said tensely. "They'll go away soon enough."

Miral instinctively moved closer to her mother as they arrived at the classroom. Tension seemed to radiate through every muscle in her mother's body. The other mothers seemed to be friendlier, more easy-going, constantly chatting with each other during school drop off and pick up times. Her mother was polite enough, but she kept her conversation to the expected pleasantries. Her father, on the other hand, always made small talk easily.

"I'll pick you up this afternoon," Mom said as she helped Miral put her backpack and lunch away. The activity aggravated Miral. She was old enough to take care of these little housekeeping chores herself – the other parents just left, instead of hovering. Miral was impatient to get ready for her first and favorite class of the day – art. Yet her mother continued to stand there, as if she would never leave. There were a few other students there already and they all nodded and waved at Miral. "So, wait for me, okay?"

"Okay," Miral said, feeling a twinge of disappointment that *Abuelo* wouldn't be coming when school ended. The feeling faded when she saw her friends entering the classroom.

Mom gave her a quick peck on the cheek and a squeeze that could be considered a hug and then she was gone. Miral made her way towards her two best friends in the class – Shreya and Camila. Both of their parents were in Starfleet with postings in San Francisco for their current tours of duty. It wouldn't be long before they were reassigned elsewhere and Miral would be forced to make new friends again. That was the downside of going to a school where most students belonged to Starfleet families. With so many comings and goings, the class at the end of the year bore little to no resemblance to the group of students there in September.

"Hi Miral," Shreya said. She indicated the easel in front of her. "What do you think?"

Miral regarded the streaks of yellow and green with a critical eye. "Is that the Capiscum Nebula?"

Shreya beamed. "Good. I was afraid no one would be able to tell what it was."

"I really like it."

"Are you going to draw *Voyager* again?"

Miral nodded. "I still can't get it right."

Camila spoke up then, "My parents were talking about *Voyager* yesterday."

"Really?"

"Yeah, it's all over the news right now."

Miral thought about all the reporters who were currently camped out in front of their house. Her father had explained the media was just interested in an old story and that it wasn't important. Still, it was an awful lot of people. Normally, her parents were very free with information about their years aboard *Voyager*, so it seemed odd they didn't have much to say about what was going on now.

"Yeah, I know," she said, hoping her confident tone would cover her ignorance of what was happening. "No big deal."

"Really?" Camila said, her brown eyes widening beneath her neatly trimmed bangs. "I guess that means you already know that your dad has a whole 'nother family."

Miral was unable to hide her surprise. "What?"

"Yeah, in the Delta Quadrant. Him and Captain Janeway."

"That's not true," Miral said. "My mom and dad are friends with Admiral Janeway." She'd last seen the admiral at the picnic held at Pismo Beach a few months earlier; the admiral was a small but energetic presence with a laugh that sounded like water running over rocks. Her parents had seemed happy to see the admiral, but she hadn't noticed her father treating the admiral any differently than he'd always treated her. In fact, the admiral spent most of her time talking to Chakotay, her hand resting on his leg and nearly always maintaining eye contact, no matter who else was around, while her dad hung out with Uncle Harry.

Shreya looked at Miral sympathetically. "I heard the same story," she said, "but my parents said the whole thing sounded crazy to them." She frowned. "So, you didn't know?"

Miral decided to confess. "No," she said. "They didn't tell me." Suddenly she didn't feel like setting up her easel anymore.

"I guess you're not an only child after all," Camila said.

Miral considered this. "If my dad had another family, then *where* are they? He would have to visit them, wouldn't he? So, I would know about it." Miral was pleased with her logic.

"He left them in the Delta Quadrant," Camila said, her dark curls bobbing with the excitement of announcing something Miral clearly didn't know. "They weren't human, so they left them behind."

Miral didn't quite understand this. "My dad wouldn't do that," she said. She thought about how her father would talk to her about *Voyager* and its crew with such affection and longing and she knew how hard her parents had worked to maintain relationships with the people they served with. It seemed impossible that her father would leave anyone he cared about behind.

"It's true," Camila said. Her face brightened. "Let me get my PADD," she said. She glanced over her shoulder. Students were still coming in and the teacher was clearly in discussion with another parent. "I think we have a few minutes before class starts."

"You're Klingon," Shreya said. "Aren't you worried your dad would leave you too?"

Before Miral could respond, Camila returned with the PADD. She turned it on and quickly turned it to the Starfleet News Service. She showed the article to Miral. Miral gasped as she read the story.

"Do you know this Harren person?" Camila asked curiously.

Miral shook her head. “No.” She had met most, if not all, of *Voyager*’s crew over the years, but she knew only a few of them well, like Uncle Harry, and Admiral Janeway and Chakotay. A few others like Michael Ayala or Susan Nicoletti came by occasionally to see her parents. But she had absolutely no recollection of meeting Mortimer Harren. She felt sick to her stomach. She pushed the PADD away. “I need to get my easel set up for class.” She didn’t look at her friends as she went to her easel. With shaking fingers, she tried to sketch one of *Voyager*’s nacelles, but she found it hard to concentrate. *Her father had had another family.* Three children who weren’t human. And he left them behind. Somewhere in the Delta Quadrant, she had three siblings her father no longer wanted.



Chapter Sixteen

The penthouse suite of the Continental Hotel included a full kitchen, a large living area, a marbled master bathroom with a jacuzzi, and two bedrooms to go along with the spectacular view of San Francisco. Mortimer Harren opened the patio doors and stared out into the night, watching the lights twinkle and dim in front of him. It was a gorgeous night, and he could see the Starfleet Academy campus just across the bay, and then to the east, Starfleet Headquarters. It felt good to look down on San Francisco.

It had been just seventy-two hours since Ksenia had visited him in West Texas, forty-eight hours since she’d left his bed citing an urgent meeting in San Francisco, and just twelve hours since her invitation to join her in the city.

“I’d love to see you again,” Ksenia had said. “I’m sorry I had to leave you on such short notice, but you know, as a reporter, I have to go where the SNS sends me.”

“I understand,” Harren had responded. Of course, he’d been disappointed when Ksenia had broken the news that she was needed in San Francisco ASAP. As he’d watched her depart, Harren had wondered if the heady 14 hours and twenty-minutes of sex, science, and of course, lots of talk of *Voyager*, had meant anything to her at all. And then when he’d heard the news story about Paris’ transwarp adventure, it had been a punch to his gut and he’d proceeded to channel his energies into working on his telescope, expecting never to hear from Ksenia again. So when his comm device beeped, he’d been both startled and excited. “It was the same when I was on *Voyager*. Even if I knew better, I had to listen to my commanding officers. It was annoying.”

“I’m so glad you understand,” Ksenia said, delight infusing her voice. “I’m so excited, Morty. It feels like everything I’ve worked all my life for is finally coming together. This *Voyager* story has legs.” She paused, her bright red lips plumping into a seductive smile. “And of course, *you*. I couldn’t have done it without you. I can’t wait to introduce you to my friends here at the network. They are *dying* to meet the man responsible for the biggest story to hit our network in *years*. When do you think you can get here?”

Warmth filled Harren’s body as he sucked in his breath. “I can be there this evening.”

"I can't wait to see you."

Now, Harren inhaled the fresh air before heading back inside. The Starfleet News Service had spared no expense in arranging these accommodations for him. He'd spent his first thirty minutes in the suite examining all the little details – from the cut crystal vases filled with roses in a dozen hues of pink and yellow and white to the beautifully framed art on the walls. The wood floors were covered with area rugs in a thick weave that was soft against his bare feet.

"You'll have plenty of room to entertain," Ksenia said as she'd given him the keys to the suite.

"Celebrate your moment." And then, with a sparkle in her eyes, she'd squeezed his hand, and told him she'd see him later.

Harren settled into the overstuffed recliner in the corner of the living room, stretching out, as he focused on the elaborate chandelier above him. *Celebrate your moment*. He didn't even know what that meant. And even if he did, what difference did it make? He hadn't kept in touch with any of his Academy classmates – most of them hadn't recognized his genius – and except for an occasional communication with Billy Tefler or Tal Celes (who sweetly remembered his birthday every year), he didn't maintain contact with anyone from *Voyager*.

The last crew reunion had been five years ago, and he'd stuck to the periphery of the room, drink in hand, and picking at every tray of hors d'oeuvres that passed by him. He had a dim memory of Janeway in her dress uniform, her arm tucked nearly in the crook of Chakotay's elbow, of B'Elanna Torres in a maroon velvet gown, her hair piled high on her head as she swirled across the dance floor in Tom Paris' arms. Michael Ayala had brought his wife, Mary, and even Harry Kim had a girlfriend, a lovely lieutenant whose name now escaped Harren's memory. After an hour or so, he slinked out the back door and found a hole in the wall bar just a block or so from the Academy campus. After a few hours, he'd returned to the hotel to find the ballroom empty. Some of his former colleagues were at the bar – Chapman, Bristow, Baytart – but they didn't call him over when he walked by. He'd convinced himself their indifference didn't matter, that they didn't have anything to say that would interest him. Instead, he'd retreated to his hotel room, and fallen into a deep sleep.

Sitting now in his luxurious room at the Continental, Mortimer Harren had never felt so lonely. What the fuck was the point of celebrating if he didn't have anyone to share it with? He cleared his throat and reached for the small comm device Ksenia had left with him in case he wanted to get in touch with her.

"Mortimer," she said, and he could hear the smile in the silky drawl of her voice. "Are you settled in? Is everything to your liking?"

"Yes, the accommodations are superb," Harren responded. He paused, collecting his thoughts. Ksenia's voice alone elicited excitement in him.

"I'm sorry I couldn't be there to greet you. The story has blown up and it's so much work, Morty. I hope you're not too disappointed. Maybe you could meet up with some of your friends from *Voyager* now that you are in the city."

Harren swallowed. He didn't want Ksenia to know the truth, that he really didn't have any friends. And that for the first time in his life, it really bothered him.

"I remembered something else," he said. "About *Voyager*, that is. Something I saw."

There was a pause and then Ksenia said, "I'll be right there."

Harren let the comm device fall to the fluffy rug as he got to his feet. He wanted to look his best when Ksenia arrived.



Chapter Seventeen

The aromas of garlic, onion and curry wafted through the living room as Kathryn Janeway stretched and put her PADD to the side. Despite her resolve to *not* work during her leave, it was impossible given her transition to the new assignment in the Gamma Quadrant. In addition, there were a few messages from colleagues back on Earth inquiring about the veracity of the aftermath of Janeway's transwarp adventure.

"Smells delicious," Janeway said as she leaned against the wall, arms folded against her chest. Chakotay smiled as he dipped a wooden spoon into the pot and then held it out for her to taste. Janeway leaned forward and sampled. "Mmm. It tastes as good as it smells," she said. "What is it?"

"Butternut-cauliflower coconut curry," Chakotay said. "I came across this recipe a few months ago but I decided to wait and try it out when you were here."

Janeway smiled. "You're spoiling me. It will be difficult to go back to replicators when I'm back on a starship."

"Well, hopefully you'll get some time away from the negotiations to sample the local Dosi cuisine," Chakotay said. He stirred the concoction in the pot one last time, and then turned down the heat. In a second pot, the rice was simmering. "Dinner will be ready in about ten minutes," he said. He pulled two wine glasses from an overhead cabinet. "I've got a nice Merlot. Or would you prefer a Malbec?"

"Malbec sounds nice."

"It seems like HQ sent a lot of work in their communiques," Chakotay said as he handed her the glass.

"Just a lot of details to work out on my transition from the *Allegovia* project to the Dosi negotiations." She added, with feigned casualness, "The story about the transwarp flight has gotten a lot of traction in the media." She sighed. "I'm a bit surprised, considering this incident happened many years ago, though it *is* nice to see the scientific aspect garnering interest."

Chakotay gave her a level glance. "Are you sure that's the main focus of the story?"

"What else could it be?" Janeway said immediately. "The full details of that flight – and the side effects – were never made public." She smiled ruefully. "Though if they were, well, that would be another thing entirely, and would certainly explain the sudden interest."

Chakotay turned stove's burners to simmer, and down on the sofa. Janeway settled next to him, and he settled his arm around her shoulders, leaning his head against hers. Janeway sighed contentedly. Fifteen years – five of those romantic -- of having this man at her side but the heady feeling she got from the touch of his skin against hers had yet to dissipate.

"I agree," Chakotay said, breaking into her thoughts. "If people want to talk about things that happened while we were in the Delta Quadrant, there are much more interesting incidents, all of which have already been thoroughly investigated after our return." He shook his head amusedly. "Clearly, it's a slow news day on Earth. I can't help but think that the Starfleet News Service is getting more sensationalist by the day, and I wonder why they're making such a big deal about *this* incident."

Janeway nodded. "To be honest, I haven't thought about our experimentation with transwarp in years." She placed her hand over Chakotay's. "And I don't remember *any* details of the actual flight – or the side effects." She sighed. "All Tom and I had to go on were what you and Tuvok told us after our recovery." She offered Chakotay a wry smile. "I'm certainly glad the Doctor chose to exercise some restraint and *not* take a holo-vid of the incident. Can you imagine what all of these news types would say if they had any corroborating visual evidence?"

"It's not the first time the news media has blown something out of proportion," Chakotay said. "Remember when we first came back? All of the reports about our 'unrequited love story' that came out around the time I had just started dating Seven of Nine?" He sighed. "I never told you, but those stories did bother Seven. There was enough truth in them for her to doubt what we had, and I would say those reports combined with the divergence of our interests and ambitions were just as responsible for the end of our relationship."

Janeway nodded. At the time, the news had cast her as 'the other woman', but Chakotay and Seven never managed to find a balance in their relationship, and their differing interests and priorities had been impossible to overcome. Five years after the split, Seven had met a scientist at CERN and a year later, they married. Currently, Seven and her husband were on a deep space mission, sponsored by the Vulcan Science Academy, to study the harmonic resonance of imploding neutron stars. She sent Janeway and Chakotay occasional notes, but the vast distances made communication difficult, and Janeway sensed Seven was perfectly content with the course her life had taken both professionally and personally. If anything, Seven seemed relieved to be far away from Earth, where interest in her had been less about her intellect and skills and more about her physical appearance and history as a Borg.

Janeway picked up the PADD she'd tossed on the coffee table, but couldn't keep from dwelling on the aftermath of the transwarp flight – and the offspring she and Tom had produced. Acknowledging them as her children didn't seem right; those were the children of another being whose DNA no longer existed; it certainly wasn't Kathryn Janeway. She settled back into the comfortable crook of Chakotay's arm. "Let's just hope that the sensationalist tale of my abduction and subsequent procreation with Mr. Paris never gets out."

Chakotay took the PADD from her. "It was imperative to get you and Tom back and reverse the effects of the transwarp journey on your DNA." He shrugged. "And I'm not going to apologize for doing what was best for the crew; we needed our captain, and chief pilot, and all other considerations were secondary."

Janeway nodded. "You don't have to explain yourself to me, Chakotay. It *was* the right decision."

"And given our tight resources, I didn't know what kind of habitat we could create for them to sustain their lives if we were unable to convert their DNA to human. I knew they could survive where they were," Chakotay said, a bit defensively. "I made the best decision I could at that moment, Kathryn." He got up from the sofa to check on the food still simmering on the stove. He stirred the curry, checked the rice, and then turned off both burners. "Maybe we should have stayed in orbit for a few days, tried to see if it was possible to revert their DNA to human DNA, but experimenting on living beings with no clear idea of what the outcome might be didn't seem to be an ethical path to follow either. As possibly sentient beings - we'd have to consider the issue of consent when it came to medical treatment, but we didn't actually have a way of communicating with them."

Chakotay indicated the chair opposite him at the table, and Janeway took her seat. She leaned over and inhaled the appetizing aroma as Chakotay ladled some curry on top of the rice and handed her a plate. He then served himself.

"I agree." Janeway sighed. "We had to justify so many of our actions in the Delta Quadrant ten years ago when we returned, and now it feels like we're right back there again. I did my best to follow the Prime Directive and heavens knows you called me on my violations more than once, but it does get exasperating to have to keep reliving the same history whenever someone finds a new angle to pursue."

"Until Starfleet can spare the resources to further explore the Delta Quadrant, we're going to have to assume *Voyager's* experiences will continue to be of interest. And if anything else does arise because someone is enterprising enough to review our logs in details, then we'll deal with it then" Chakotay answered firmly. "He nodded towards Janeway's empty plate. "More?"

"Yes, please." Janeway took a sip of wine. "I'm not going to lie, Chakotay. I do regret some of my decisions in the Delta Quadrant but breaking the warp ten barrier isn't one of them." She eyed Chakotay carefully. "Scientific breakthroughs always create new issues, but given that we were in pure survival mode, never knowing where we'd meet a friendly face or have a chance to resupply, worrying about hyper-evolved beings wasn't exactly our top priority."

"Of course, you don't regret the scientific advancement," Chakotay said. "The question is, what about the events that happened as a result of that flight - namely, your hyper-evolvment, and procreation. Any regrets there?"

Janeway ran her finger along the top of her wine glass. "Now that you mention it, I *do* regret not knowing what happened to the offspring. Depending on their lifespan, I imagine they are adults now, possibly having procreated themselves." She smiled thinking of a planet populated with hyper-evolved beings. "Now there's a question I'm not sure the Prime Directive has answers for." Janeway took a sip of her wine; the flavor was rich and fruity, and the liquid slid easily down her throat. "This is really a wonderful wine, Chakotay." She glanced sideways at him. "I'm going to miss this."

"I can send a few bottles with you," he said lightly, and she knew he was sidestepping the real issue.

"That will do in a pinch," she said. "I've been catching up on dossier and it's almost enough to make me reconsider the Dosi assignment." She shook her head. Declining the actual negotiation was possibly career suicide, and she knew she'd likely be relegated to bureaucracy in San Francisco if she *did* turn it down. "This may be one of my toughest assignments to date. I know I said it might take up to a year but everything I've read seems to imply the Dosi are extremely slow decision makers. That it only took them

eight years to pass the resolution to consider Federation membership is apparently of great significance.”

Chakotay put his spoon down. “How long do *you* think you’ll be in the Gamma Quadrant then?”

“It’s impossible to tell right now, but I wouldn’t be surprised if it takes longer than currently predicted.” She took a deep breath, reached across the table to cover Chakotay’s hand with hers. “I want to be perfectly honest with you about the timeline and give you the chance to object to my plans.”

Chakotay said neutrally, “You know I wouldn’t stand in the way of something you wanted, Kathryn.”

“I know that, but this is different. Since our return home, I’ve made decisions about my career without consulting you and you’ve done the same. Until now, we’ve always made it work. But a long-term separation won’t be easy.” She shook her head. “Think about all of the relationships with the ones we left behind that didn’t survive our time in the Delta Quadrant.”

“There’s a big difference,” he objected. “For the first four years, our loved ones didn’t even know we were alive. And then when we did make contact, we were still looking at decades until we could return. This isn’t the same thing at all, Kathryn.”

“You know, we’ve been together for more than five years now, and yet we’ve never really talked about the future,” she said, her tone purposefully casual. “We’ve always just taken it one day at a time but we’ve never made any long-term plans.”

“I guess it’s natural for it to come up now,” he said. “So, you’re concerned about how being apart for so long will affect our relationship?”

She tilted her head with a slight smile. “At least we don’t have to worry about the impact of a long-term separation on our children.”

“Is that something you want?” Chakotay asked carefully. “Children?”

“That’s not a commitment I could make at this point in my life,” Janeway said. She and Chakotay had never talked explicitly about having a family and she’d always assumed they were on the same page about this. She wondered what it would mean if they weren’t, but there was only one way to find out. Steeling herself for the answer, she asked quietly, “What about you?”

“No,” he agreed. He pushed his plate away and rose from his seat. She accepted his extended hand and accompanied him to the sofa. “But you’re right. This assignment *does* entail significant change for us—” he was cut off by the sound of an incoming message from the comm console.

Janeway grabbed the device, quickly scanned the contents and then shook her head in dismay. “It’s from my mother. A reporter called her this evening, asking for a comment. First of all, yes, word of the offspring has gotten out. But there’s something else.” She inhaled sharply. “They know about Tom and me.”



Chapter Eighteen

B'Elanna wrapped her robe tightly around herself as she hurried into the kitchen. Sunrise was still thirty minutes away, but she liked having some quiet time to enjoy a cup of coffee and collect her thoughts before getting Miral ready for school, and then preparing for her own day. She'd stayed up well past midnight reviewing engineering specs for her latest project, noting changes she wanted to make, and had gone up to bed long after Tom had fallen asleep.

She poured freshly brewed coffee into her mug and was about to settle herself at the counter when the comm beeped. It was the EMH. Hadn't Tom said the EMH was one of the only people who had known about the hyper-evolved offspring? Just thinking about another person whom she'd felt close to keeping a major secret from her made her furious. B'Elanna debated just ignoring it, but then sighed and hit the 'accept call' button just below the video screen. The EMH's face appeared.

"Good morning," he sang out. B'Elanna bit back a groan. She would forever regret not adding a subroutine to the EMH's program to require a sleep/quiescent cycle like that of most humanoids. "I am sorry it took me so long to call, but I've been under constant bombardment from reporters asking about the effects of transwarp flight on human physiology. I've been thinking about writing a paper on the effects in case Starfleet ever decides to fund research into it again. I am, as you know, the foremost expert on the subject, after all." The note of pride in his voice was unmistakable, and irritated B'Elanna even more.

"Well, I'm glad *you're* appreciating all the attention," B'Elanna said.

"I've been asked to appear on 'Straight Talk' this evening," the EMH said as if B'Elanna had said nothing. "The reporter, Ksenia Williams, contacted me yesterday asking for my opinion on hyper-evolution." He sighed happily. "I've been reviewing all of my notes, especially on reversal of hyper-evolved DNA. Of course, we don't have any data on the feasibility of the process for the next generation--"

The revelation made B'Elanna's head hurt. "Will you shut up for a second and listen to me? Do you honestly think it's a good idea to go on that show and blather on about my husband's non-human progeny?"

The EMH looked surprised. "Why not? The story is a matter of public record—"

"I didn't know about the progeny," B'Elanna interrupted. "Until now."

The EMH paused, his brow knitted in confusion. "Tom never told you about the offspring?"

"No. Apparently it was something he just didn't feel comfortable bringing up, so he just carried on as if it had never happened." B'Elanna bit her lip. "I'm learning all the details for the first time, along with the

rest of the quadrant and it's... humiliating." It's the first time she'd put how she felt into words. She swiped her hand across her eyes, willing herself not to cry in front of the Doctor.

A range of conflicting emotions played across the EMH's face. "I'm sorry. I never dreamed--" He stopped. "How are you doing, B'Elanna?"

"I'm fine."

"That's clearly not true," the Doctor said, his concern plain to see. "Would you like to talk about it?"

"No," she snapped. "I just want this story to go away."

"Unfortunately, that's not going to happen."

"And if you don't mind, talking about it is the last thing I want to do, especially first thing in the morning!"

"Even if we stop talking about it doesn't it mean it didn't happen," the Doctor pointed out.

"I know," she muttered. "It's just, I have so many questions. There's so much I don't know about this whole episode. Even if I wanted to ask, it's difficult to know where to start."

"Why not start with Tom?"

She immediately felt herself tensing up even more than she was already at the mere thought of asking Tom for details. "No," she said quickly, then amended it to, "It just feels impossible right now." She glared at him. "If you want to help, at the very least you could decline to appear on that show and not give that woman any more grist for her gossip mill! You think she's only interested in the scientific aspects of hyper-evolution?"

"I hadn't thought of that," the Doctor said blankly. "Very well, I will decline the invitation to appear on the show on the condition you talk to Tom. About this and about the other matter we discussed a few weeks ago." At her confused expression, he added, "The new fertility treatment developed by the Klingon specialist?"

"I know, I *know*," B'Elanna said with a wave of her hand. "I—I haven't made a decision yet." The truth was, she'd looked over the literature he'd given her quickly, and tossed it to the side in her office, overwhelmed, and with every intention to review it when she had more time to think through the information. "I don't know if I can handle another failure."

"I don't want to push you, but Dr. Zehlar will be returning to Qo'noS in a few weeks." He paused. "Of course, if you need more time to think about it and decide, you could always visit him on the homeworld."

B'Elanna pressed her fingers against her forehead as she contemplated the EMH's words. She hadn't been on Qo'noS since graduating from the monastery high school her mother had placed her in after they'd left Kessik and she had no plans of changing that now. Miral Torres had died while B'Elanna was still in the Delta Quadrant and B'Elanna had no desire to renew acquaintance with the maternal side of the family who'd always treated her like a pariah – half-blood with minimal ability to appreciate the

language, food and culture of her ancestors. But given how tight knit Klingon society was, she knew a trip to Qo'noS would necessitate a visit to those relatives, and she really did not want to subject Tom – and especially her mother's namesake – to the same scorn she'd endured.

"B'Elanna?" the EMH's voice held a tone of compassion.

"Okay," she said in resignation. "I'll find the time to talk to Tom. Soon."

"And B'Elanna," the EMH said, "There's a chance this will work, but remember that there's no guarantee this treatment will be any more successful than what we've previously tried." His brown eyes were warm with empathy. "Modern medicine has made many advances in interspecies fertility issues, but it's still not perfect and there is some risk. But I think this is your best chance if you still want to expand your family." He added, "The longer you put things off, the more likely the decision will be made for you. And the B'Elanna Torres I know would never let circumstances dictate what happens to her."

She heard footsteps on the stairs. "I've got to go. I'll talk to Tom, I promise." She turned off the comm and took her first sip of her now cooling coffee just as Tom appeared at the edge of the kitchen.

"How late did you stay up working last night?" he asked. His hair was still mussed from sleep, his skin puffy and blotched. "I went to bed at midnight and you were still in your office." He leaned forward. "You know you're not running an engine room on a starship anymore. You don't have to pull double shifts."

"I know," she said, brushing by him. "But I had things to take care of." She circled to the other side of the table, placing her palms flat on the surface. The Doctor was right, and she couldn't keep avoiding telling Tom how she really felt. She took a deep breath. *Here goes.* "If you haven't noticed, we have responsibilities to each other, as well as to our daughter."

Tom stared at her. "Are you implying that I don't know that?"

She opened her mouth to respond when the comm beeped again. She clenched her fists. She was really going to have to talk to the EMH about more appropriate times to call. Tom had already turned to answer the call. He paused and then turned to look at B'Elanna, his expression changing from one of bewilderment to concern.

"It's Admiral Janeway."



Chapter Nineteen

Stardate 49229.61

Lying on the floor in Sandrine's, Tom's face above hers, Kathryn Janeway closed her eyes as his hands moved expertly across her body. In this moment, the memories of Caylem dying on the floor of that

moldy and rank prison were pushed away. Her anger at the Mokra, for the pain they inflicted on an innocent man, faded under Tom's touch. For a moment she could forget it all.

She arched her back, rising to meet him. His breath was warm on her cheek, and she caught the heavy scent of wine. How much had they drunk? She would pay for it in the morning, she knew, but in this moment, she didn't care, even felt grateful for the heady rush. She pressed her lips to his, her nails raking his back, her legs wrapped around him. Later she would wonder how they had gotten to this moment, had landed her here flat on her back, her uniform jacket discarded, and her gray t-shirt pushed up, her bra off. She hadn't protested when Tom removed her pants and pushed her legs apart. He'd bent his head down, and his tongue caressed her in all the right places. She'd forgotten all her objections, all the reasons why they shouldn't be doing this. There would be time enough to analyze later, but for now, she was a woman, he was a man, and they were moving together in a rhythm that felt natural.

That was the first time she let Tom in, and she told herself that night that it had been a mistake, that never again. She was the captain, for fuck's sake, and yet, when in a moment of weakness, his gaze met hers, she knew she wouldn't hold back if the opportunity rose again. And so it was, for the next few weeks; a desire she couldn't quite tamp down. There was something about Tom, the way he could make her forget her responsibilities. For a brief time, she didn't feel the weight of the ship and all its crew pressing down on her.

Sometimes the encounter was so quick, they didn't even finish undressing. When he pressed her up against the wall in her quarters, unzipping her jacket, tugging at her pants...it was nothing more than need, primal and real, and she loved feeling him inside her. The way he always seemed to know what she needed, when she needed it. How she loved straddling him, feeling his hands on her breasts as she leaned forward to kiss him. Moments that had been about release and nothing more than that. A dozen moments over a fast and furious three-week time span that she thought belonged to them, only them.

The day Chakotay asked her about forming an alliance with the Kazon, Janeway had felt like a hypocrite, delivering an impassioned speech about Starfleet values. After that meeting in the briefing room, she steeled herself for what she needed to do and made her way to Tom's quarters. There was no one in the corridor, but just in case, she was holding a PADD with the official 'Helm Status Report' logo. Normally B'Elanna would have delivered this report at the start of Alpha Shift, but the harried chief engineer – going on a double-shift to handle all the repairs after multiple run-ins with the Kazon -- hadn't given it a second thought when Janeway had made the offer.

"What can I do for you, Captain?" Tom asked genially. He was off duty, as she'd known he'd be, wearing loose sweatpants and a t-shirt that seemed to reflect the color of his eyes.

"I think you know," she said.

When the doors closed behind them, she put the PADD down, and circled the table, putting a physical barrier between them.

"This has to stop," she said, "this thing between us," she gestured to indicate the two of them. "What we're doing isn't exactly regulation."

"No, but it's a hell of a good time."

She allowed herself a smile. "Is that all you think it is?"

He shrugged. "Yeah. Isn't this what you wanted? Just to relax, let your hair down, and have some fun?"

He had a point, and so she'd let him take her to bed one last time. Later, as she stood in his bathroom pulling her hair back into its usual severe bun and smoothing out her uniform, he stood there watching her.

"This can't happen again," she said. The words felt hollow, but she needed to hear them out-loud to keep her resolve. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. Maybe one day we'll each find what we're really looking for," he said. He offered her a sad smile. "Right now, all anyone on this ship wants is something that feels like home."



Chapter Twenty

With practice developed over the years they'd been together, Chakotay massaged Janeway's shoulders. His skillful fingers always managed to find the knots of tension in her upper back and she was grateful for his efforts to knead them out.

"It's like our return home all over again," Janeway said wearily. "The questions, I mean." She twisted her head to look at Chakotay. He slipped onto the sofa next to her and placed a lingering kiss on her lips. She slipped comfortably into his embrace. "So much happened while we were in the Delta Quadrant – a lot of triumphs as well as losses, but I don't want to constantly have to explain or excuse our complicated history for the rest of my life. *Our* lives." She sighed. "And *especially* what happened between Tom and me." She gave a little self-conscious laugh. "It's not something I particularly understand myself."

Chakotay's expression turned serious. "What happened between you and Tom occurred nearly fifteen years ago. It should be of no consequence or interest to anyone."

"Apparently not, if this is any indication of the storm that's breaking," Janeway said, tossing the PADD down angrily. "The bigger question is, who told the reporter?" Janeway said. "This Ksenia Williams seems to know an awful lot about our first two years in the DQ." She twisted in her chair to look at Chakotay, feeling a curl of uneasiness in her stomach. "She couldn't have found out about the affair from the logs. Someone has been talking to her." She paused. "But who? I *thought* you were the only one who knew about Tom and me."

Chakotay held up his hand. "It wasn't me. I promise."

"I never said it was. Someone else must know; that's the only explanation." Janeway shook her head, knowing it was unlikely that Tom Paris would have opened his mouth about their affair. "I thought we were discreet." She fell silent.

“Kathryn.” Chakotay touched her arm reassuringly. “You and Tom *were* discreet. If you hadn’t told me about it during our time on New Earth, I would have never guessed.” His tone was casual enough now, but Janeway still remembered his shock when she’d made her confession one night over dinner.

Voyager was gone forever, she’d thought, and as the day turned to night, it had become increasingly clear her relationship with Chakotay was evolving into something more than captain and first officer, more than friendship. Knowing honesty was required as the basis of any relationship, she’d chosen to tell him about her affair with Tom.

Now Janeway stared at the PADD. “Well, *someone* did.” It had been easy enough to shrug off the reports regarding the spawn she and Tom had conceived as a side-effect of the transwarp flight. This additional story, on the other hand, could have serious ramifications and not just for the two of them.

He patted her knee lightly. “It’s late, come to bed.”

Janeway nodded. “You go ahead. I’ll be there shortly.” She watched Chakotay disappear into the bedroom and then picked up the PADD and reread the opening lines.

According to a member of Voyager’s crew, the affair between Kathryn Janeway and Tom Paris began well before the young pilot broke the warp ten barrier. Commander Chakotay had once called Tom Paris the captain’s ‘personal reclamation’ project, but crew members speculated the captain’s interest in Paris went far beyond mentoring and rehabilitation. The two spent time together on the holodeck, enjoying a program created by Paris – a detail-perfect recreation of a French bistro. Descriptions of the program use the words ‘smoky’, ‘dim’ and one source described it as ‘the perfect place forget the Delta Quadrant for a while’- not to mention indulge in a romantic tryst. According to sources, Janeway and Paris were frequently spotted in the program playing pool for hours or sharing a bottle of wine. Witnesses claimed that during these late nights, Janeway shelved her responsibility to the 150 crew members she’d promised to get home, focusing instead on her personal needs. On these occasions, it was just her and her man, a decade her junior.

Janeway pinched the bridge of her nose to stave off the headache she could feel coming. So many of the details contained in the paragraph were true, but she deeply resented the implications made. She’d spent so much time toeing the line, trying to stay close to the epitome of what she imagined a Starfleet captain ought to be, holding strong to her morals. In fact, numerous times she’d argued heavily with Chakotay about adhering to the Starfleet versus the Maquis way, especially when it came to the possibility of an alliance with Kazon. Faced with the need to double down on her Starfleet values, Janeway had come to the regretful conclusion that she had to end things with Tom.

The day after they’d agreed to end the affair, Tom had thrown himself into the transwarp project, spending most of his free time with Harry and B’Elanna. He and Janeway had no further contact that could be interpreted in any way as improper. Whether on the bridge or when they passed each other in the corridor, it was easy to behave as if the affair had never happened.

And yet, Janeway hadn’t been surprised when Tom, in the throes of his mutation only a month after the end of their affair, had overpowered her and carried her off with him. At that point, she was probably the one person on board that he felt the closest to. Or maybe he’d acted on a vestigial memory of the two of them together, which led him to mate with her again. She doubted, however, that the sex they’d had while in hyper-evolved state was as good as that they’d indulged in as humans. Not that she could really remember much about that time; the being she had become was so far removed from Kathryn

Janeway that she couldn't identify, let alone recall, feelings or distinct thoughts. However, after the Doctor was able to restore their DNA, and after the stunning revelation they'd actually procreated, she and Tom had had a brief awkward conversation about the experience in Sickbay and then never referred to either their secret affair or the transwarp flight and its aftermath again.

Now she checked her chronometer and realized it was early morning in San Francisco. Perhaps a call to the Paris-Torres household would not be out of line. She glanced towards the bedroom; light streamed through the open doorway and she could hear Chakotay moving around as he prepared to go to sleep. She sighed and then went to the comm unit. After a moment or two, Tom Paris' face filled the screen. Janeway bit back her surprise at just how exhausted her former helm officer looked.

"Good morning, Admiral," Tom said, "or is it good evening?"

Janeway managed a small smile. "It is close to 2200 hours here at Chakotay's dig site on Betazed, Tom, but it must be close to breakfast in San Francisco. How are you?"

He shook his head sardonically. "I've been better, actually." He glanced over his shoulder. "B'Elanna was just here, but I think she went back upstairs."

"That's all right. It's you I need to talk to," Janeway said. "Have you seen the news?"

"About our 'lizard babies'?" he said scornfully. "That story broke more than 24 hours ago. It's old news by now."

"No, I'm referring to something more recent."

Tom frowned, running his hand through his thinning hair. "What?" he asked with an obvious edge to his voice.

"Apparently a reporter from the Starfleet News Service has published a story detailing our affair aboard *Voyager*."

Tom glanced quickly over his shoulder and then back to the viewscreen. He rubbed his hands over his face and then said in a lower voice, "Shit."

"My reaction exactly," Janeway said grimly.

"Starfleet News Service..." Tom said faintly. "A reporter called Ksenia Williams?"

"Yes. You've heard of her?"

"She came by the Academy a few days ago to ask me about the transwarp flight. She had questions about you and B'Elanna too, but I gave her a brief statement about the flight itself. *Nothing else*." He paused. "God, what a mess. I'm sorry."

She dismissed his apology with a wave of her hand. "I haven't been approached by the media yet, most probably because I'm not on Earth. If I *am* asked, I intend to say I have no comment. About anything." She met his gaze directly. "I suggest you don't contribute anything further as well."

"Understood."

Janeway sighed and then attempted a smile. "This story, like all the others, will run its course. It will be uncomfortable, but it will pass. How is B'Elanna taking the news?"

She saw a shadow pass across Tom's face. "What is it?"

"I never told B'Elanna about us. Does Chakotay know?"

"Yes." Janeway glanced towards the bedroom where she could hear Chakotay moving around. "I told him about our relationship a long time ago. Why in God's name didn't you ever say anything?"

"Because it happened so long before B'Elanna and I started dating and it was only a few weeks, it didn't seem like it would matter. I didn't think it would *ever* come out." He twisted his lips into a grimace. "And to be honest, I'd nearly forgotten."

Janeway attempted to soften her tone, but it still came out more sharply than she'd have liked. "*Now* would be a good time to tell her *everything*, Tom."

He passed his hands over his eyes again and then nodded. "Yeah," he said heavily, "yeah." He glanced over his shoulder. "I have to go. I hear Miral. Good night, Admiral."

The formality in his voice caught her by surprise and she nodded in response. Tom's face blinked out and Janeway stared at the black screen for a moment, her pensive mood only broken by the sound of Chakotay clearing his throat behind her.

"Well?" he asked.

"It's going to be a rough morning in that household." Janeway got up and covered the distance between them. "There's something to be said about openness, hmm?" She gratefully leaned into Chakotay's warm embrace, relaxing against his chest. "We've all been through the wringer before. This story will die out, given time. I'm sure of it. Until then..." her voice trailed off. "I just wish I knew who was giving the reporter this stuff. And more importantly, why *now*?"

Chakotay placed his fingers under her chin, his lips gentle against hers. "The good thing about being in the middle of the desert is that you're unavailable for comment. We should keep it that way."

"I can't stay out here forever," Janeway said with a hint of a smile.

"Well, it's not for another few days, and who knows, maybe the whole story will have died down by then."

Janeway nodded, wishing she could share Chakotay's optimism. She had no doubt her fellow admirals were reading the story and felt a stab of worry about how this would affect her career. The Gamma Quadrant wouldn't be far enough away if Starfleet wanted to a full accounting. She pushed the thought far away, tucked her hand in Chakotay's and let him lead her into the bedroom.



Chapter Twenty-One

Tom swallowed hard as he sat at the kitchen table scrolling glumly through headlines. In addition to headlines about breaking the warp ten barrier, there was also a whole slew of stories about his troubled past, including Caldik Prime and the three friends who had died as a result of his reckless piloting. There were a few words about his extremely brief stint in the Maquis, and his prison sentence in New Zealand—including the fact it was Janeway who'd gotten him released and assigned to her ship as an 'observer.' There were also a few acquaintances and former colleagues and classmates who had crawled out of the woodwork to tell detailed stories about Tom's drinking, his womanizing, and his flagrant disregard of Starfleet protocol. Reading further, Tom was stunned to discover who the main source for his relationship with Janeway was – Mortimer Harren

Harren? How the fuck would that that little shit know anything? Harren had spent most of the seven years aboard *Voyager* buried in the plasma relay room on deck 15. Tom could probably count on one hand the number of times he'd seen Harren, and he could only really remember two encounters – neither pleasant – with the man. How in the galaxy were people taking him seriously as a source of information?

He cradled his head in his hands and was still sitting that way when B'Elanna returned to the kitchen. He raised his head wearily and gave her a bleary-eyed stare.

"What did the admiral want?" B'Elanna asked in that snappish voice that, over the last day, was becoming all too common.

He swallowed hard. "There's a new story in the news this morning." Tom pulled his stool closer to the one she'd taken. He contemplated taking her hands in his as a matter of self-preservation in case his wife decided to take a swing at him, but then decided to take his chances. "It's about the admiral and me, and our..."

"Children?"

He hated that she kept referring to the spawn as 'children'. As if they were real. As if they were a part of him. "No. It's about a relationship we had... before then. An *intimate* relationship."

B'Elanna blinked, her lip curling in surprise. "What? When?"

"Maybe a year or so into our journey in the Delta Quadrant. It started after the encounter with the Mokra, and it ended around the time we were trying to ally with the Kazon and the Trabe." Tom furrowed his brow. "It didn't last long; it was over in a matter of weeks." He took a deep breath, his eyes squinting as if to blot out the excess light. "That's why the admiral called. A reporter called her mother and she—she wanted to give me – us – a head's up." He paused, waiting for the inevitable rush of B'Elanna's anger, but she was silent. "Aren't you going to say something?"

"None of this makes sense." B'Elanna pressed her lips into a thin line, but at least she didn't pull away from him. "Janeway had a fiancé at that time. You're telling me she *cheated* on him? With you?" her voice rose in volume. "What were you *thinking*? Or let me guess, you weren't thinking at all."

"It was something that just *happened*," Tom said desperately.

It was then when Miral came down the stairs with her hair mussed and her brush and comb in hand. Tom wondered what his daughter had overheard; she'd made a passing comment the other night that her school mates had been asking about all of the news stories, but both Tom and B'Elanna had assured that there was nothing to worry about. Now he wondered if minimizing the initial story had been a good idea. They had always been honest with Miral before, but something about this story had both parents on the defensive.

"Mom?" She looked from one parent to the other. "Why are you yelling at Daddy?"

With an effort, B'Elanna got up from her seat. "I'm not yelling, honey. Here, let me do your hair. If we don't hurry, you're going to be late for school." B'Elanna moved around the kitchen in that quick and efficient way that nonetheless revealed the tension she tried to hide. Miral sat at the counter, picking at her breakfast. B'Elanna spoke a few words here and there, mostly admonishments to hurry, and Tom was too distracted to give his daughter his full attention. "You need to finish getting dressed for school," B'Elanna said in a sharp tone to Miral, who pouted but obeyed, heading up the stairs to get into her uniform.

Once her sound of her footsteps on the stairs receded, Tom rose from his chair and approached B'Elanna.

"What do you want?" she asked, still irritable.

"I'm sorry about all of this," he said contritely.

"You knew," she said flatly. "You knew exactly *what* that reporter was after when she came to your office and you said *nothing*."

Tom spread his hands in a gesture of apology. "I guessed she was interested in something other than my transwarp flight, but I didn't *know*," he said defensively. "And I didn't think it mattered after all of these years." His glance turned pleading. "That affair...it didn't mean anything, B'Elanna. It wasn't *real*."

"All of these years, and you couldn't tell me these two things. That within the span of two months, you fucked Janeway and then had children with her?" B'Elanna asked, her voice tense with restrained fury. "I thought you kidnapped Janeway because she was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Not because you had feelings for her!"

"I didn't have feelings for her, B'Elanna," Tom said.

"Right! So, you just abducted her, ran away to another planet, and then had children with her—"

"Not *children*, B'Elanna—"

"What do you want me to call them then?"

“‘Spawn’, ‘progeny’, ‘mutants’... it doesn’t matter.”

“Yeah, it does, because you know what this makes me? The wife who didn’t know her husband spawned with another woman!” She faced Tom, her hands on her hips. “And now you’re telling me that this reporter of yours has written about it so now the entire galaxy knows?” Her lower lip trembled. “What the fuck do you want me to say, Tom?”

Tom caught her by the arm. “I didn’t tell you, B’Elanna, because it was over well before you and I started dating and it didn’t matter. Hell, maybe I stopped with her because I was starting to feel something for *you*.” B’Elanna yanked her arm free of him and disappeared into her office. Tom clenched his fists. “There you go! Running away like always!” he yelled at her retreating form. Her only response was the slam of the door. He let out a deep sigh.

“Daddy?”

Tom turned to see his daughter standing there, her face pale as she clutched at her backpack strap.

“Hey,” he said.

“Why is Mom so mad at you? What’s wrong?” the little girl held tightly to the stair railing, her fingers whitening at the knuckles. “All of those people are still outside our house and I thought they’d be gone already. Why are they still here?” Miral paused as if gathering her thoughts, and then asked in a tremulous voice, “Is it about the other family?”

Tom stiffened. “Other *family*?”

“When you were on *Voyager*. My friends were talking about it at school yesterday,” Miral said earnestly. She glanced back towards the door. “They said it was on the news.” She took a deep breath. “Is it true?”

Tom closed the distance between the two of them. “There are some things that happened when we were in the Delta Quadrant, but people who weren’t there, they don’t know the whole story,” he said softly.

“But is it true?” Miral repeated, giving him a puzzled look.

Tom exhaled forcefully. “I hate to break it to you, kid, but your dad isn’t perfect.”

Miral’s expression was perfectly serious. “I already knew *that*.”

“Good,” Tom said. “We’ll talk about this later.” He put his hands on her shoulders. “You ready for school?”

“Yeah.” She glanced towards B’Elanna’s closed door. “Who’s going to take me?”

“I will,” Tom said. He thought about making an excuse for B’Elanna but one look at Miral’s face and he knew he couldn’t lie to his daughter. “Don’t worry about your mom and me. We have some things to discuss, but we’ll work it out.” He quirked as much of a smile as he could manage. “We always do.” He squeezed her shoulder lightly. As much as for himself as it was for her, he added, “It’s going to be all right.”



Chapter Twenty-Two

Mortimer Harren stood just offstage. His new suit felt stiff, and the tie at his neck felt like it was choking him. The producer standing at his elbow offered him a glass of water, which he declined. He instead focused his attention towards the crescent-shaped desk that filled most of the studio's stage and the two individuals who sat there: Ksenia Williams and Henry Calder. Harren had only exchanged a few words with Calder, whose friendly demeanor seemed fake, but Ksenia had assured him Calder was a professional.

"Just tell your story," Ksenia had told him in her silky voice, her hands cupping his face as she brushed his lips lightly with hers, a tantalizing hint of what might follow the interview when they were back in his suite. "Don't worry about Henry. I'll be there. It'll be fine."

In the thirty minutes since Ksenia had provided that reassurance, Harren wondered why it had even been necessary to say anything about Henry Calder. He brushed his sweaty palms against the thick wool of his trousers. The producer cast a concerned look in his direction.

"You sure you don't want something before you go on?" she asked.

He desperately wanted a shot of tequila, but instead said, "No, I'm fine." He watched as the director counted down and immediately, Ksenia and Calder straightened their postures, and turned to face the cameras. Ksenia's smile was blinding, a wing of golden hair just skimming her cheek. Harren sucked in his breath as he watched her.

"Until a few days ago, it had been a long time since *Voyager* was in the news," Calder said. "This past week we learned some interesting details about the transwarp flight undertaken by the crew of *Voyager* – the first, and as far as we know, the *only* successful attempt of its kind. And now, Ksenia, you have a bombshell revelation for us. That around the time of this transwarp flight, then-Lieutenant Tom Paris and Captain Kathryn Janeway were involved in an illicit relationship. In fact, there's speculation that the genesis of this relationship was much earlier, perhaps even as early as the days leading up to *Voyager*'s mission to capture the Maquis leader, Chakotay—which was the excuse Janeway used to have Paris accompany her to the Badlands."

Ksenia nodded authoritatively. "It is a matter of public record Captain Janeway used her influence and her past relationship – which some sources assure me was purely platonic, but others seem to suggest otherwise – with Admiral Owen Paris to negotiate Thomas Paris' release from prison in New Zealand."

"To fill in some background for our viewers, the Paris family has been prominent in Starfleet for *generations*. Admiral Owen Paris is third generation, so this is a family that has quite the pedigree within Starfleet. And here you have a Paris family member in prison. Can you even imagine? Thomas Paris was serving a sentence in New Zealand after being captured on a botched Maquis raid. Prior to his failed stint in the Maquis, he had been dishonorably discharged from Starfleet for lying about the incident at Caldik Prime which killed three of his fellow officers. Testimony from the time attribute the accident to

Paris' risky behavior." Calder leaned slightly forward. "And some sources tell us that a student of Tom Paris was killed in January in a shuttle crash, *after* Commander Paris certified him to fly that craft." Calder tsked tsked. "It seems like this is a man who exercises *considerable* poor judgement, doesn't it, Ksenia?"

"So, you have to wonder, don't you? Why on earth would Kathryn Janeway *want* someone like Tom Paris on her crew? Based on the very brief amount of time he was in the Maquis before being captured, he wasn't even a good terrorist, excuse me 'freedom fighter.'"

"That's right, Ksenia, the Maquis are a defunct terrorist group, who waged war on the Cardassians and the Federation alike. There are few alive today who were part of that organization, and the ones who survived were rightfully in prison for the crimes they committed," Calder said, his lip curling in disgust. "However, the Maquis who were aboard *Voyager* received a full pardon for their treason, including the son of a very distinguished Starfleet admiral. Isn't that right?"

"Yes." Ksenia leaned forward slightly. "One might wonder also whether these Maquis were given special treatment because of Admiral Paris. He has considerable influence in Starfleet and possibly could advocated for his protegee, Kathryn Janeway. It is well known that Kathryn Janeway lobbied hard for a full pardon for her Maquis crew members, including the very renegade leader she'd gone to the Badlands to capture!"

Calder made a show of thinking hard for a moment. "This renegade Maquis leader is the same Chakotay that Janeway is currently involved with, correct?"

Harren knew speculation about the relationship between the captain and her first officer had run rampant through *Voyager* for almost the entirety of their seven years in the Delta Quadrant. Ksenia had asked about the possibility of a relationship between Janeway and Chakotay, but Harren had told the truth: he had never seen any evidence of a relationship between the two, but he'd heard plenty of gossip especially after they had been rescued from New Earth.

Ksenia flipped her hair over her shoulder. "According to the logs, a few months after the transwarp flight, Captain Janeway and Commander Chakotay contracted an illness which necessitated leaving them on a planet they named New Earth. They were alone there for nearly *four* months including time spent in stasis, the only man and woman on a planet said to rival paradise."

Aside from the plasma storms and the near-fatal illness carried by the native insect-life, Harren couldn't help thinking.

"Based on some log entries and some old crew interviews," Ksenia continued, "I believe the captain and her first officer may have engaged in a relationship during their time on New Earth."

"Did that effectively end the relationship between Janeway and Paris?" Calder asked primly. "Or did it continue for a while as well?"

"I actually believe their relationship may have ended before the transwarp flight, or perhaps shortly after that flight occurred. We *do* know that shortly after that, Paris expressed an interest in B'Elanna Torres and I'm pretty sure she would have disemboweled him with her bat'leth if there was any hint of any hanky panky with Captain Janeway. So no, we don't know exactly when Janeway ended her relationship with Tom Paris, but we have some clues." Ksenia's gaze was wide-eyed. "But more to the

point, Henry, I did find someone who was willing to comment publicly on the relationship between Kathryn Janeway and Tom Paris.”

“This is a major scoop and only we have the inside story.” Henry leaned forward. “Tell us about this witness.”

Ksenia nodded. “Of course. He served on *Voyager* as a member of the Engineering crew, reporting directly to B’Elanna Torres.” Ksenia sat back in her chair with a satisfied smile crossing her face. “And as you know, she had *quite* the temper, so he’ll offer some first-hand perspective on what it was like to work in *Voyager*’s engine room.”

“We will meet this gentleman a little later in the program, correct?” the anchor asked.

Ksenia nodded. “Yes. He’s in the studio now and will be telling his story for the first time ever tonight.” At this, she seemed to directly stare at Harren with an intensity that unnerved him. *Don’t mess this up for me*, she seemed to be telegraphing to him. He glanced over his shoulder, wondering if he could find his way to the exit. He took a step backwards, nearly tripping but the ever-present producer grabbed his elbow.

“Are you *okay*?” she asked urgently.

Harren shook his head. “I’ll, uh, I’ll take that water.”

The producer eyed him suspiciously but then nodded. “Give me a minute. Don’t go anywhere.” The edge in her voice was unmistakable. Harren returned his attention to Ksenia, who was talking animatedly with her hands. It wasn’t lost on him that Calder had inched closer to Ksenia, his body moving closer to hers.

“Some of these details are found in the *Voyager* logs that were recently declassified,” Ksenia said. “But you know as well as I do, Henry, that nothing is better than an actual witness to the events in question. How *lucky* your viewers are to meet the man who served with Kathryn Janeway and Tom Paris and had a *front seat* to the events we’re discussing.” Her plump lips parted to reveal very white and even teeth.

“Here.” The producer thrust a glass of ice-cold water at Harren. He gulped it down and handed back the empty cup. “You’re on in a few minutes. They’re about to throw it to a break.”

Harren thought he would throw up. More than anything, he wanted to be back on his ranch, postulating on the origins of the cosmos. But he was doing this for Ksenia and faltering now wouldn’t help her. He took a deep breath, and then another, and then didn’t protest when he felt the producer’s palm on the small of his back, pushing him out onto the stage. A stagehand quickly moved another stool to the desk, and another one put a small microphone on Harren’s lapel.

“You look sick,” Ksenia said, her lip curling as she watched Harren try to get comfortable on the stool. One of the producers placed another glass of water in front of him.

Harren blinked in the bright studio lights as he stared out at the audience, who seemed to be nothing more than shapeless shadows. He licked his lip. The suit he wore reminded him of the Starfleet uniform he’d been so glad to shed years ago.

"It's so hot," he said. "And could you maybe turn the lights down a bit? I know the audience is going to want to hear what I have to say, but the lights are giving me a headache."

"I don't think that's going to be possible," Ksenia said.

"Is he going to be ok?" Calder asked, leaning very close to Ksenia. Harren hated the way Calder talked past him, as if he wasn't sitting right *there*.

"Of course, he is," Ksenia said sharply. "Aren't you, Mortimer?" Ksenia eyed Harren as if she was undressing him; the scrutiny made him nervous with anticipation, and suddenly aware of the perspiration pooling under his armpits. He prayed it wouldn't show. Her lips turned up very slightly. "You're the star tonight." Her fingers skimmed the top of his hand lightly before she pulled back, folding her hands demurely on her lap. "Don't forget, everyone is going to be watching you, hanging on your every word."

This didn't make Harren feel better, but at that moment, the countdown to airtime began. Within seconds, both Ksenia and Calder had composed themselves and turned to face the audience, their faces not betraying any of the concern they might have been feeling.

"Welcome back, ladies and gentlemen. As you can see, tonight we have a very special guest. Crewman Mortimer Harren served on *Voyager* under Captain Janeway and as such, has special insight into the relationship between the captain and her chief helmsman, Tom Paris. Mr. Harren, how are you tonight?" Calder said.

"Fine," Harren said. It seemed to take all his effort just to get the single syllable out, and it irritated him to see Calder exchange a look with Ksenia. Ksenia put her hand reassuringly on Harren's forearm.

"Mortimer," Ksenia said. "It's such an *honor* to have you here tonight." She smiled brightly. "Now, you were aboard *Voyager* on its maiden voyage into the Badlands and survived the perilous journey into the Delta Quadrant. How very *traumatic* for you. You had a *brilliant* future in front of you, and then this *tragedy* occurred. It must have been so very difficult for you." Her focus on him was unwavering. The audience seemed to fall away in that moment. "Can you tell us about that?"

Harren considered. After the initial shock of learning they were in the Delta Quadrant, he'd been intrigued by the possibilities. Perhaps the answers he'd been searching for could be found in this new uncharted section of the galaxy. Always a loner, he'd had no friends or family back in the AQ who would have missed him or that he would have missed.

"I *wasn't* traumatized," Harren said. "But the others on board, they didn't have *my* strength, so of course, you can use that word to characterize their *experience*." He lifted his chin with a bit of defiance. "I welcomed the opportunity to refine my skills, to conduct experiments to validate my life's work."

"You were assigned to Engineering," Ksenia said. "Your superior officer was B'Elanna Torres, correct? The wife of Tom Paris?"

Harren wanted to point out that at the time Torres and Paris weren't married, but he nodded. "Yes. My original commanding officer was killed when *Voyager* was pulled into the DQ and so that left a vacancy—"

"With your skills and talent, I'm surprised Captain Janeway didn't consider *you* for the position," Ksenia said. "It seems like a curious command decision to put a temperamental Klingon who got kicked out of Starfleet Academy in charge of a key department. It really should have been you."

Harren puffed out his chest. "I would have declined the position if offered. My interests lay elsewhere and running an engine room is mundane. *Not* a fit for my skill set."

"What was your relationship with B'Elanna Torres?"

Harren's face twisted into a grimace. "We disagreed a lot, knocked heads a few times, and eventually, she started ignoring me. I didn't care. It gave me more time to work on the things that were important to me, *ideas* that could change the very way we perceive the universe. Eventually she came around to recognizing my talents and assigned me to the relay room so I could spend time on my work."

"What you're implying here is that B'Elanna Torres essentially acted like you weren't even there."

"Yes."

"Even though you were a clearly talented theoretical engineer with fantastic ideas on how to implement technologies that could have brought *Voyager* home much sooner than the seven years you were out there."

"No one on *Voyager* was capable of understanding me," Harren said. "Perhaps Seven of Nine—"

"The Borg woman."

Harren nodded. "She is perhaps the only one who recognized my intellect, but I didn't spend as much time as I'd like with her as we were almost always assigned to opposite shifts. I am sure we could have developed a closer friendship if only we could."

"That must have been so hard for you. Being deprived of socialization with the one person who could have understood and appreciated you. While at the same time the captain was clearly not depriving herself of anything." Ksenia leaned forward on her forearms, her hair skimming her cheeks lightly. "You believe Captain Janeway and Lieutenant Paris had a relationship of a sexual nature. What gave you that impression?"

"It was after the transwarp flight," Harren said hesitantly. "There was a special gathering to honor Paris' achievement. And I saw the captain touch him. A lot. On his face, his hands, his shoulders. Anywhere she could put her hands on him, she did." Harren took a deep breath, thinking of how he saw Janeway lean into Paris, her fingers lightly curling around his. "And she told him she wanted to see him alone, after the meeting, and that surely he must see in himself now what she saw in him."

"Were there other witnesses to this incident?" Ksenia frowned.

"No," Harren said, "but I know if you ask the others – Nicoletti, Ayala, or Chapman even – they will all tell you that at the time, Paris and Janeway spent a lot of time together at Sandrine's."

"This is the holodeck program that was popular with the crew." Ksenia's eyes flickered in the studio lights. "A *tawdry* little Parisian bistro, isn't that right?"

“Yes.”

“I think everyone by now has heard what happened after Lieutenant Paris made his historic flight. What is *your* take on that situation, Mr. Harren?”

“My *take*?”

“Yes. You were *there*.” Ksenia’s voice took on a note of impatience. “You said Janeway couldn’t keep her hands off him. This was clearly an inappropriate relationship that it appears that Starfleet has attempted to brush under the rug all these years. Captain Janeway had a fiancé back on Earth, she was Paris’ commanding officer, *ten* years his senior. Isn’t it your contention that an improper relationship existed between Janeway and Paris?”

Harren flushed. *Contention* seemed like such a strong word to use. “I only tell you what I saw. I contend *nothing*.”

Calder jumped in at this moment. “Isn’t that what we’re asking, Mr. Harren? What *did* you see?”

“Mr. Harren,” Ksenia said again, this time more sharply. “You did say you witnessed some inappropriate moments between Janeway and Tom Paris, didn’t you?” Her high heeled foot rubbed suggestively against Harren’s shin.

Harren reached for the glass of water in front of him, took a sip, and then slowly nodded. “Yes,” he said. “I certainly did. In fact, it was quite by chance, being the right person at the wrong place... I saw them, outside of his quarters.” His lips curled up slightly as he saw the anticipation shining in Ksenia’s eyes. He leveled her gaze to meet hers. *This is for you*, he thought, as he recounted the scene of Janeway and Paris in the corridor.



Chapter Twenty-Three

Admiral Owen Paris’ office occupied the corner of the eighth floor of the main building at Starfleet HQ, its floor to ceiling windows offering gorgeous views of San Francisco Bay. Everything about the furnishings and décor spoke of power and influence. Tom took a deep breath as he faced his father. He hadn’t been surprised to receive a message that morning from the elder Paris asking him to stop by his office. The message had been to the point, as Owen Paris was wont to do, but Tom could tell by his father’s expression that he’d seen Mortimer Harren’s interview on the Starfleet News Network the previous night.

Tom himself had been unaware of the interview until he’d gotten a call from Michael Ayala, quickly followed by one from Susan Nicoletti. He’d watched the tail end of the broadcast live – in stunned silence – in the living room, and then caught the replay of the interview. He’d clenched his fingers into a tight fist as he watched Mortimer Harren spinning lies into truths and feeling grateful that a late evening meeting had kept B’Elanna at work, giving him an opening to tell her what had transpired before anyone else did.

"Quite a story, Thomas," the elder Paris said in that restrained voice Tom knew so well from his childhood, "about you and your former commanding officer." He pressed the tips of his fingers together as he looked unwaveringly across the wide expanse of his mahogany desk at his only son. "Is it true?"

Tom cleared his throat. "Yes."

"All of it?"

"Most of it," Tom said with a hint of annoyance. Of all the conversations he'd imagined having with his father over the years, this was not on the list. "Though I would say there were also plenty of embellishments. Don't want the truth to get in the way of a good story, right?" he said sarcastically. "But Harren is a fucking idiot. He spent seven years in the relay room in the bowels of the ship, hiding from the crew, and somehow he's positioning himself as an expert on all things *Voyager*, in particular what people were thinking and feeling?"

"I have to ask," Paris said, his tone sharpening. "In the interview, Harren insinuated that you and Janeway had a relationship... an *intimate* relationship. Was this one of the embellishments you were referring to?"

Tom cleared his throat, could feel the heat rising in his face. His father's piercing stare was unrelenting; Tom flashed back to his hearing over Caldik Prime, the days leading up to it, and how his father had offered no support. Like that time, Tom knew there would be no quarter now. He squared his shoulders and slowly nodded.

"That part is true."

Paris shook his head as if in disbelief. "How long did it go on?"

"A few weeks. It was over by the time of the transwarp experiment."

"Be that as it may," Owen said, "Harren had quite a platform yesterday and the news has spread quickly through the rank and file. What *in* hell were you *thinking*?" He shook his head, his eyes suddenly hard. "But then again, you've always led with a different part of your anatomy, haven't you?"

"That's not fair," Tom said hotly. Of all the accusations his father could level at him, this one seemed patently unfair. True, during the Academy, he'd had more than his fair share of romantic conquests, and then following Caldik Prime, sex and alcohol had fueled him across the Alpha Quadrant until he accepted Chakotay's offer to fly a mission for the Maquis. He'd had plenty of time to think about his sins while sitting in his cell in Auckland, and even the first year or two in the Delta Quadrant, he'd contemplated who he'd been, who he wanted to be. Of course, the moment he'd fallen for B'Elanna, he'd known the answer to that question. Tom thought his father had understood he'd changed, but the disappointment in his father's tone made it clear perhaps he'd been wrong. "What happened between the admiral and me was—" he paused. What *was* the right word? He finally settled on the wholly unsatisfactory, "an interlude."

Owen arched his eyebrow. "An *interlude*? We're not talking about a musical performance here, son, but a matter of discipline, integrity..." his voice drifted off. "I had *just* gotten used to not hearing our name in the news again."

At this, Tom winced. "Dad—"

Owen shook his head at him. "Well, the past is in the past, and more importantly, we have to deal with the serious PR problem your little 'interlude' with Janeway has caused." He let out a sigh heavy with displeasure.

"What do you mean?" Tom asked.

"We will have to wait and see what the fallout is. The PR office is still assessing the impact of the interview. I thought I knew everything that happened on *Voyager*." leaned back in his chair, looking deflated. "But all this time, you and Kathryn were hiding something."

"Do you blame us?" Tom asked pointedly. "What did you want me to do? Shout it from the rooftops? 'Hey Dad, by the way, when I was in the Delta Quadrant, I had sex with the woman you considered your mentee. Great to be home, hope you're still proud.'" Tom's face flushed. It had been clearly the wrong decision to visit his father this morning. "I didn't *mean* to hide anything from you. There just didn't seem to be a reason to say anything. Until now."

Owen Paris narrowed his eyes. "Well, your mother is shocked. As are your sisters."

It took all of Tom's restraint to not shrug off the comment. "It's not the first time," he said lightly. "And Mother is perpetually shocked, no matter what I do."

"That's *not* the way to talk about your mother."

"Fine. I'll go see her after work and explain."

"And you might want to explain your abandoning your offspring with Janeway as well."

Tom started at this. "What?"

"During the transwarp experience, or shall we say 'interlude.' Not surprisingly, your mother has many questions about her grandchildren."

Shit. Tom chewed on the inside of his cheeks. How the hell could this conversation get worse?

"There isn't much to tell, Dad," Tom said earnestly. "Neither of us remembered what happened on the planet and we never attempted transwarp again. The EMH spent some time trying to understand how to prevent the adverse side effects, but in the end, there was no solution and we abandoned the idea because we needed to spend our resources and time elsewhere." He held out his hands, palms up, in a gesture of apology. "With all that happened with our return, the Borg technology, the crew of the *Equinox*... well, this was *nothing*."

"Does B'Elanna know?"

The question struck Tom as particularly idiotic. He curled and uncurled his fists. "About the lizard spawn? Or about the affair? Come on Dad, do you think there's possibly a person in the whole quadrant who hasn't heard by now?" Tom bit his lip. "Yes, she knows." To make matters worse, B'Elanna had indeed heard about Harren's interview from a colleague and had promptly disappeared into the

bedroom, slamming the door behind her. Tom had contemplated following her in – after all, there *had* been a time in their marriage when he hadn't backed down. But instead, he'd looked at the closed door, and headed downstairs to spend another night on the sofa.

Owen's expression turned pained. "Miral will find out too, now." A pronounced sigh escaped from Paris' lips. "The allegation was made publicly and both you and Kathryn have to prepare yourself for whatever might come next. It's very possible the Board of Inquiry will decide a grave violation of Starfleet regulations occurred and must be addressed."



Chapter Twenty-Four

Later that night, Tom found it was impossible to sleep. The reporters still clustered outside of the townhouse – they must be conducting the siege in shifts - with bright lights illuminating the streets. He was surprised none of the neighbors had called the police to complain.

Tom paced the length of the house, from the entryway to the kitchen and back again. Bracing himself for more questions, he'd been surprised – but relieved – that Miral had been unusually taciturn when he'd picked her up from school, and had rushed through her homework and dinner, claiming she was exhausted after a tough day at school. His daughter was now fast asleep in her bedroom, which was thankfully toward the rear of the house, away from the clamor on the streets. B'Elanna sat at the kitchen table, her hands cupping a mug of *raktajino*, staring distractedly into space.

"Would you *stop* that pacing? You're making me crazy," she said finally. "And not in a good way." She sounded irritated but at least she was speaking to him.

"I'm so sorry," Tom said sincerely. He ran his hand through his blond hair as he stopped in front of B'Elanna. For the millionth time that day, he wondered how many possible ways he could apologize. He remembered the warning Harry had given him and not for the first time in the last twenty-four hours, he kicked himself for not following through on his friend's advice to tell B'Elanna. He didn't regret sleeping with Janeway, but he did very much feel guilt over how B'Elanna had found out. "I guess I never thought—"

"That's the problem, isn't it?" she said bitinglly. There was something in her tone that made him wonder whether she was trying to convince herself of the truths about their relationship she felt she once knew. As if she was rewriting history to account for his 'relationship' with Janeway. "You never thought any of this would get out and that made it okay to not tell *me*."

"I swear to you, B'Elanna, the relationship with Janeway... it was about feeling a physical connection with someone else, to keep the loneliness at bay." He hesitated. He didn't want to minimize necessarily how B'Elanna should feel about the revelation, but at the same time, he wanted to make it clear he was trying to rationalize what he did – and what he'd felt at the time. Lacking a solid underlying reason, the tryst had come to a natural end within a short period of time. And he knew Janeway's martyr complex would never allow herself to indulge in something that *felt* that good. He'd seen her hold Chakotay at

arm's length for years, even after she'd received word that her fiancé back home had moved on. It was as if Janeway proved her fidelity to her crew by depriving herself of any intimacy and was probably the main reason why she'd waited until after they'd returned to the Delta Quadrant to pursue a relationship with Chakotay. "It was something that just happened," he said, biting his lip. "But over time, it became clear that our real connections were elsewhere."

"You say that," B'Elanna said, bitterness underlying her tone, "but then I think about the timing, and how it wasn't long after that you asked me out for the first time." Her voice cracked. "That when all your options were exhausted, you decided what the fuck."

He white-knuckle gripped the back of the chair. "You *know* that's not true, B'Elanna!" He dropped into the chair next to hers and reached to cover her hand with his. He was relieved when she didn't pull away. "You know better than anyone else that Harren knows *nothing* about anything that happened on that ship and it's a fucking travesty that he's allowed to to put his own spin on what actually happened." He leveled his gaze at B'Elanna. "But you—you have never been a second choice." His voice took on a desperate tone. "You've got to believe that."

She directed her attention to her cup, as if her raktajino was suddenly the most fascinating thing in the world. The sounds in the house seemed ominously loud: the ticking of the clock, the gentle whir of the stasis unit, and just outside the walls, the low-level buzz of hovercrafts flitting back and forth. Tom didn't move. He desperately wanted to know what she was thinking, but her expression gave him absolutely no indication whether he was about to wear his tongue as a belt.

"B'Elanna."

She lifted her chin, her eyes bright with emotion. "I can't help but think about what happened with my parents. Growing up, I didn't know what a good marriage looked like, Tom, but I thought we had one. But this, *this* feels like what happened to my parents' marriage. How suddenly after all the shouting ended, there was nothing left to say. That everything that *should* have been said never was."

It took all of his efforts to keep his voice evenly modulated as he answered, "Your parents' relationship isn't *ours*. We've been over this before."

"Maybe, but this time is different." B'Elanna took a deep breath. "I don't want our marriage to end like theirs."

Tom swallowed hard. "Is... that what you think is happening?"

"You tell me."

Tom hesitated for a moment. He wanted to pick his words carefully. "We've hit a rough patch, B'Elanna, but I'm not thinking about walking away." He could feel his chest tighten. "Are you?"

"No, but I also don't know how we got here, or what I'm supposed to do to fix what's happening to us either." Her lips flattened into a thin line. "And it feels like we've been heading in the wrong direction for a while now and..."

"So we'll course correct," Tom said.

"You make it sound so easy, and I wish it was." She waved a hand distractedly in the air. "I don't know what to say to you, Tom, not when every single cell in my body wants to rip your heart out, but then there's Miral and I don't—" she paused. "It's not fair to her, Tom."

Tom's heartbeat sped up. "Look, we've been through tough times before. We'll get through this one too." He spoke in a tone that belied his actual anxiety. "I told you before all I want to be is the guy you fell in love with. That hasn't changed for me." He paused a moment, his voice cracking slightly as he asked the question, he wasn't sure he wanted the answer to: "Has it changed for you?"

The silence between them seemed to stretch for lightyears. Finally, B'Elanna said softly, "No." She took a sip of her *raktajino* and then lifted her gaze to meet Tom's. "It's going to take time, Tom."

"When I crossed the warp ten threshold, I was everywhere all at once, occupying every point in the universe. I can tell you with certainty that there's nowhere else in this universe I'd rather be than with you." He watched her intently. "Because I know what's real and what's not." He jerked his thumb towards the front door. "Mortimer Harren and those talking heads don't know *anything* about who *we* are."

B'Elanna's lips curved just slightly. It was just a hint of softening, but Tom decided he'd take it. He decided to forge on while B'Elanna seemed relatively calm.

"I don't want the media to write our story for us," Tom said. "Janeway asked me not to say anything and I know my father wouldn't like it, but I'd like to make a statement to the press."

B'Elanna shook her head. "And tell them what? When you can't even adequately explain to me what the hell you were thinking at the time? And what makes you think they're interested in explanations or finding out the truth? They just want more scandalous events to keep their viewing audience tuned in. They don't give a damn about the truth or the actual people involved or how much it hurts us." B'Elanna said. She leaned forward, the tips of her hair brushing her cheeks. "How exactly would a statement help us, let alone keep from making things worse?"

It was a good question. Issuing a statement would add fuel to the fire, and the story would continue for another news cycle at least. But if he stayed quiet, he'd be allowing the media – specifically Harren and Ksenia Williams – to control the narrative. It was an intolerable position to be in.

"I don't know." He got up and started pacing the length of the living room. "But I have to *do* something." He turned to look at B'Elanna. "I feel... powerless, especially as they are attacking *you*. The things Harren said about you last night... The attacks on me, I can handle, but you... and I suspect Miral has heard some of this at school at well." He stopped short. "The admiral is right about keeping quiet, as much as I hate to admit it." He chuckled sardonically under his breath. "Not that I know *what* I'd say."

B'Elanna looked down at her hands and then back at Tom. "Do you think about them?"

"Who?" he asked, before realizing what exactly B'Elanna was referring to. "The spawn?"

"I asked my father if he thought about me when he left," B'Elanna said softly, "and he said that at first he thought about me every day and then the longer he was gone, the further away I got in his memory." She got up and walked to the edge of the room, fingering a blue and white porcelain knick knack Julia Paris had given them as a house-warming gift. "Until one day, he didn't think of me at all."

Tom's breath caught in his throat. "B'Elanna, you can't compare me to your father!"

"At least he was honest with me," she said, her voice tinged with anger. She looked squarely at Tom. "But I didn't think *you* were like that."

"That's not fair! You're making me out to have more control of the situation than I did."

B'Elanna pressed her lips into a pensive line. "What about Janeway? Do you ever think about *her*?"

Tom stared. "In what way?"

"You *know* what I'm talking about."

"No. I don't." His voice was firm. "When it was over, it was *over*."

"That's what you don't understand, Tom," she said harshly, "for me, it's just *starting*."



Chapter Twenty-Five

Janeway stared at the image of Admiral Owen Paris on the viewscreen. He seemed to have aged since they had last spoken a few weeks previously; that chat had been more of a 'catch up', combined with some discussion regarding *Allegovia* and other administrative matters that Janeway wanted her mentor's advice on. Janeway had the sinking feeling that this conversation would have a more restrained tone. Paris stared at Kathryn Janeway with the same steely blue eyes he'd used on the Cardassians all those years before, but she refused to wilt under the intensity of it.

"I'm sorry to bother you so late at night, especially while you're on leave," he said. "I wouldn't have called if it wasn't important."

Janeway bit back her sigh of impatience. She had considerable appreciation and respect for her former mentor and she still felt gratitude at how he'd managed the circus surrounding *Voyager* crew's return and their subsequent integration back into the Alpha Quadrant so skillfully. She doubted *Voyager*'s crew would have been treated so kindly if it hadn't been for Paris' efforts and expertise in playing politics and managing the PR angles. But even with all that history, she didn't appreciate being called in the middle of the night. She pulled her robe tighter around her.

"What is it?" Janeway said, waving off his apology; Owen Paris was no idiot; he knew exactly what he was doing.

"You should know there's been some discussion about this relationship you allegedly had with Tom," Paris said, his lip curling in disdain.

Janeway took a deep breath. No point in obfuscating. "There is no 'allegedly', Owen."

Paris bit his lip. "Tom confirmed it as well." The right corner of his mouth turned down. "At least the two of you are on the same page." He cleared his throat. "I assume this relationship was not conducted under undue influence. You didn't take advantage of your rank to pressure him into something he didn't necessarily want, did you?"

"Are you asking as his father or as my superior officer?"

"Both."

"No." Janeway shook her head. What a fucking uncomfortable conversation to have with her mentor, she thought. "I assure you; it was entirely consensual."

Paris's forehead furrowed. "Help me understand, Kathryn," he said in an icy tone, "how a captain in command of a crew of 150 people ignores the standards of behavior, the *impact* on morale, to have an intimate relationship with a subordinate? Especially one *ten* years her junior? If I recall, when you told me you were asking him to accompany you to the Badlands, you said something about helping with his 'rehabilitation.' I trusted you to be a good influence on Tom—"

"As you damn well know, Tom is a *fine* man, and neither you, nor he, have anything to be ashamed of," Kathryn shot back. "I don't have to explain anything to you, Owen. Our circumstances, 70,000 light years from home, meant there were instances when I didn't follow the prescribed dictates of Starfleet. I'm sorry you're disappointed in me."

"The Kathryn I know would have never cheated on her fiancé."

"The Kathryn *you* know is a fantasy!" Janeway resisted the urge to cut the conversation right there and then.

Owen Paris lifted his head, his jaw tightening. "Well, I was hoping to keep this quiet, chalk it up to extenuating circumstances, but a former crew member of yours has been making the rounds on the Starfleet News Service. I've made some discreet inquiries, and apparently he's been wine and dined in return for any information he is willing to provide about what happened on *Voyager* and according to some of my sources, he has been corroborating some of the details in your and Command Chakotay's logs."

"If you're referring to Crewman Harren, then I'm aware of what he's doing and saying. Mortimer Harren had a mediocre record, at best, on *Voyager*, and rarely even came to the crew socials. No, he's not a witness to *anything*."

"The Starfleet Board of Inquiry is interested in hearing what he has to say."

"*Board of Inquiry?*" Janeway pressed her hand to her face. *What the hell was going on?* Then she recovered her composure and asked coolly, "Owen, why is there an investigation of something that happened over ten years ago?"

Paris cleared his throat. "Kathryn, I heard through the grapevine that there an order will be issued for you to come to San Francisco to answer some questions."

"I'm assuming this isn't a request?"

He shook his head. "I know you're on leave, but it's an order per Admiral Hayes and you'll hear about it through official channels shortly. I'm just giving you a heads up. I'm sorry, Kathryn." He cleared his throat. "There have also been some questions about your handling the current negotiations with the Ferengi. Obviously, this revelation doesn't help clear about any doubts Starfleet Command may have about the *Allegovia* project."

Janeway sucked in her breath. She had been unaware of any performance concerns on the project. "Is this why I've being sent to the Gamma Quadrant?"

Paris' jaw worked. "Your credentials as an ambassador are strong. You're a natural fit for the Dosi negotiations."

"You didn't answer my question."

"We can discuss the matter when you return to San Francisco."

The beginnings of a headache tickled at her temple. Janeway set her jaw. "I understand."

"And one more thing. The Inquiry Board has some questions to ask Chakotay regarding the contents of his logs as well. Admiral Hayes would prefer not to subpoena him so if he would be willing to participate voluntarily, that would be appreciated. It would be good to have a quick resolution to this matter between you and Commander Thomas Paris."

The formality in Paris' voice took Kathryn by surprise. She wondered if someone else was in the room with him and listening in on the conversation.

"I understand," Janeway said evenly. "Good night, Admiral."

Admiral Paris' face was replaced with the Starfleet insignia and then a second later, the view screen went black. Janeway turned away from the screen to see Chakotay looking at her.

"That went well," he said wryly.

Janeway rose from her seat and made her way to Chakotay. "You're under no obligation to come, you know."

"I know, but I'm not going to say no. I'm happy to answer any questions they may have." He cupped her jaw in his hands and tipped his forehead to touch hers. "Besides, you promised me a whole week, Kathryn. I'm holding you to that, Starfleet and their Inquiry Board be damned."



Chapter Twenty-Six

Tom Paris slipped out the back door well before dawn to avoid too much attention from the camera crews still parked in front of the house. It was clear the press wasn't going to decamp anytime soon

without a strong hint from the police that they were violating a neighborhood ordinance against large gatherings in the middle of the street. So, before he left, he made a quick call to the police who assured him they would come by shortly. Relieved, Tom strode rapidly across the yard, lifted the latch on the neighbor's back gate and then swiftly crossed the street. He drew a sigh of relief before catching the shuttle to the campus.

He made his way across the darkened campus of Starfleet Academy and waved his badge in front of the scanner for entrance. His boots echoed as he walked down the empty corridors to his office. Feeling relieved at not running into anyone, he unlocked his door and went inside. He settled into his chair, and against his better judgment, checked the news. One editorial waxed eloquently about holding Starfleet officers responsible for scandalous behavior, no matter how long ago, and there had also been a statement from one of the leading scientific institutions in the sector demanding the details of exactly what kind of beings he and Janeway had hyper-evolved into. There was also speculation about the spawn left behind and whether it would have been possible to change them back to human form and if so, was there an ethical question of whether Chakotay had made the proper decision to leave them behind?

The constant onslaught made Tom's head hurt, and he didn't want to contemplate what it was doing to his marriage. Other than the previous evening, when they seemed to have connected briefly, B'Elanna seemed to find every excuse *not* to talk to him, dividing her attention evenly between work and her daughter.

He resolutely shut off the newsreader and decided to take advantage of his early arrival at the campus and get some work done. He was so intent on his tasks that he nearly missed the door annunciator asking for entry.

"Come," Tom called.

The door slid open to reveal Admiral Paris.

"Dad," Tom said in surprise. Aside from the fact he'd seen his father the previous morning, Owen Paris *never* came to anyone and it was clear by Owen's straight-lined shoulder stance that this was no social call. Tom got up from his chair. "What's up?"

Owen glanced at the door as if to make sure it was shut. "We need to talk."

Tom immediately recognized that tone of voice from his childhood. It never boded well. He slumped back down in his seat. "What about?"

Owen put his hands flat on the desk, as he looked at Tom. "The Academic Board informed me that they met last night in a special meeting." Owen paused. "The sole topic on the agenda was your relationship with Kathryn Janeway."

Tom blinked. "Dad, that was fifteen years ago!"

Owen wasn't finished. "They made the decision to place you on a leave of absence, effective immediately. The official reason is they want to re-open the investigation into Ensign Tanaka's death."

Tom gaped. "It was established Tanaka's death was an *accident*. And I had *nothing* to do with it."

"You said he was certified to fly a shuttle and it turned out he overlooked a major detail on his very first solo flight, causing his death."

"And I will be *forever* asking why," Tom said furiously. "I've gone over Tanaka's records a thousand times since the accident. I've ignored my family trying to figure out what happened, and all of my documentation proves that he was able to fly that shuttle. I presented all of that information back in January."

Owen Paris held up his hand. "Perhaps, but the decision remains. You will be placed on a leave of absence."

"Oh, come on! You can't be serious!" Tom turned to the tiny replicator tucked into the back corner of his officer and ordered a coffee; he didn't offer his father anything. "This is about me and Admiral Janeway, isn't it?"

Owen's face appeared haggard in the harsh light of Tom's office. "There are concerns, yes, about your moral propriety. The relationship you both admitted to privately, and the offspring you left behind in the Delta Quadrant... it's taken on a life of its own." He cleared his throat. "There have been some calls, including from parents of legacy students. They are concerned about their children being taught by an instructor with a *questionable* history, especially one who qualified a student for flight when clearly he was not ready to pilot a shuttle." Owen pursed his lips as if the very words left a bad taste in his mouth. "And it's not the only aspect of your past which is drawing attention. Caldik Prime is also being revisited and comparisons are being drawn to what happened to Tanaka."

"That's *not* fair," Tom objected. Nearly twenty years after Caldik Prime, the pain was still visceral and difficult to talk to, even with B'Elanna. He'd chosen deliberately not to tell her that Tanaka's death had also re-awakened that nightmare. He lifted his chin defiantly to look at his father. "Don't forget, I'm also a former Maquis and an ex-con," he said bitterly. "Didn't we go over all that already when we returned from the DQ? It's not as if the Academy was unaware of my sordid past when it hired me. Why do we have to keep rehashing ancient history?"

Owen's expression remained resolute. "I'm sorry, Tom, but these are the consequences of decisions you've made in the past. While you've since turned your life around, this is *not* the story the Academy is hearing now. As a result, they cannot ignore it."

"*You* can stop it," Tom shot back. "Just tell them there's nothing there to be concerned about."

"I can't be accused of nepotism."

The two stared at each other.

Tom then said, "That's always been the problem, hasn't it, Dad? You have no problem overstepping and involving yourself in matters that don't concern you, but when it comes to actually helping me, you've always stepped away." His jaw hardened. "How did you find out about the Academic Board anyway?" He held up his hand, forestalling his father's response. "Let me guess, you have friends who keep an eye on me and tell you what's going on even though you have absolutely no authority when it comes to Academy matters. Because the Paris name, the Paris *reputation*, means more to you than anything else."

Owen didn't flinch at his son's accusation. "Your career has always been of interest to me—"

"Has it?" Tom felt the heat rising in his cheeks. "You didn't support me when I decided to leave Miramar and join the Academy as a flight instructor. You thought it was a step down—"

"You are a talented pilot, you could have your pick of any starship assignment—"

"I'm not prioritizing my career over my family!" Tom shouted. "Not like you did."

Owen's eyes narrowed at that comment. "That is not fair. I gave you every opportunity—"

"You were never there when I needed you."

A beat passed and then Owen said coolly, "I won't lie for you, Tom."

Tom silently counted to ten. "Dad, all this happened while we were *stranded* in the Delta Quadrant. We were looking at a minimum of 70 years before we'd make it back home – if we would at all. It's not fair to second guess decisions or actions that were made 15 years ago! No one could possibly understand what it was like."

"The statute of limitations hasn't expired, Tom."

Tom stared at his father. "*Statute of limitations*? No crimes were committed."

"It's what I came to explain to you, Tom." His father drummed his fingers lightly on the edge of Tom's desk. "There are some questions over whether you kidnapped your captain, whether you had sex with her against her will, though I assume if your affair was concurrent with transwarp incident, then the issue of consent may be moot. But there's also a line of inquiry regarding whether Chakotay made a bad decision to leave Federation citizens behind—"

"*Federation* citizens?" Tom gaped. "Dad, they weren't human."

"The Federation includes plenty of other humanoids, as well as non-humanoid species, Tom, not just humans. That kind of protest isn't going to stand up in the hearing."

"*Hearing*?" Tom's eyes widened in surprise. *How the fuck could this conversation possibly get worse?*

Admiral Paris nodded grimly. "Janeway has been recalled from her leave to answer questions about the incident. Chakotay will be coming as well and there's some discussion as to whether Tuvok will be able to travel from Vulcan given his 'health concerns.' Starfleet doesn't want to have this matter linger longer than necessary and would like it resolved as soon as possible. The hearing has been scheduled for next Tuesday morning at 0800." Paris got up and his voice hardened. "Your entire career is hanging in the balance here." And then he nodded towards the sparsely decorated office walls. "The good news is, if the worst-case scenario pans out, well, at least it won't take you long to clear out your things."

Tom swallowed hard as he watched his father leave.



Chapter Twenty-Seven

At breakfast the next morning, Tom sipped his coffee, as his wife tensely moved around him, getting Miral ready for school. B'Elanna had been tight-lipped all day, locking herself in her office to work. To make matters worse, the reporters had discovered—or been tipped off about—the back gate, which meant it was now impossible to go in or out of the house; to make it worse, the police seemed curiously hands-off about the situation, refusing to do much more than to ask the reporters to maintain a respectful distance from the house and to keep the noise down. After his meeting with his father, Tom arranged with Michael Ayala for a private transporter service. When the sun rose over San Francisco the next morning, he used Ayala's service to escort Miral to school. They materialized just inside the lobby, and he could see a few reporters standing at the edge of the school grounds. One reporter, accompanied by a videographer, had accosted a parent.

"That's Camila's mom," Miral said.

Tom twisted his mouth into a frown. Camila's mom didn't look happy and after a moment, she walked past, her footsteps heavy with irritation as she headed into the school.

"This is getting ridiculous," Camila's mom announced to no one in particular. "How are the children supposed to learn in a circus like this?" She stared angrily in Tom's direction. "This is *your* fault."

"I'm really sorry," Tom said, spreading his hands in a gesture of apology. Next to him, Miral squirmed and pulled her hand free of his and took a tentative step towards Camila, but Camila sidled closer to her mother.

Camila's mother dismissed him with a wave of her hand as she stalked past him, pulling her daughter behind her. Miral stared after her friend in confusion.

"Let's get you to your classroom," Tom said hoarsely.

Miral looked at her father and then at the retreating figure of her friend. "You don't have to do that, Dad," she said brightly. She shifted the weight of her backpack on her shoulders. "The classroom is just that way. I can go by myself."

Tom nodded. He certainly didn't want to run into Camila's mother again and the classroom was indeed *right* there. He dipped down and placed a soft kiss on Miral's forehead.

"I'll see you this afternoon," he said.

"See ya," Miral said, and she was walking down the hallway, her posture confident. Tom couldn't help the tiny smile playing on his lips and then he hit the little device that would transport him back to his home.

He materialized in his bedroom just a minute later. As he'd peered out the second-floor windows down at the lights and cameras on the front lawn, he wondered if they should take John Torres' up on his invitation to visit him in Dora, New Mexico. Though Tom had his doubts if the offer was genuine, as John was currently away on a trip himself, at least, it'd be good to get Miral and B'Elanna away from the insanity. He was still standing there when he heard footsteps behind him. Slowly, he dropped the curtains and turned to face his wife.

"I didn't know you were back," she said shortly. She was dressed in her Starfleet Corps of Engineers coverall, her long hair pulled back from her face, accentuating her cheekbones.

"Sorry," he said, almost reflexively. Apologizing had always been second nature to him, especially lately. "I didn't mean to startle you." He cleared his throat. "We need to talk."

"Now?" Clear annoyance colored B'Elanna's tone. "I need to get to work."

"Well, you didn't want to talk earlier. In fact, you spent most of yesterday ignoring me." He instantly regretted the whiny note that injected itself into his voice.

At this, B'Elanna turned on her back, putting her hands behind her head as she stared up at the ceiling.

"What do you want?"

"The hearing is in a couple of days."

"All right," she said flatly.

He took a deep breath. "It'd mean a lot to me if you would come with me."

"I don't know if I can, Tom." Her lip curled slightly. He clearly heard what she left unsaid: *after your betrayal*.

"You don't have to say anything. It'd just mean a lot to me if you were there." Against his better judgment, he couldn't help adding, "Are you going to make me beg?"

A few minutes passed. The sounds of the city outside grew louder – the roar of a flitter, voices of passersby, the siren of an emergency vehicle. Tom shifted in his place, careful not to breach the physical distance B'Elanna seemed intent on preserving. He knew he was asking a lot of B'Elanna, but he couldn't imagine what it would be like to enter the hearing without her at his side. Not just because he desperately wanted her support. He instinctively knew her absence would cause the press to focus even more on their personal life, and perhaps even speculate about the state of their marriage in the face of the recent revelations.

The silence hung between them and Tom dug his fingernails into the palm of his hand, wondering what she was thinking.

"I don't know," she said at last, with just the slightest tremble of emotion underscoring her voice.

"At least think about it." And when she didn't answer, he decided to take the plunge. "Is there anything you want to say to me?"

B'Elanna turned away, her head drooping just slightly, and then with a firm step, she left the room. Tom sighed. He had his answer.



Chapter Twenty-Eight

Miral followed the rest of her class into the cafeteria. Her class usually occupied the table at the far-right corner of the room, and she headed that way after picking up her tray of food from the food line. Today's meal was an over-cheesed slice of pizza, an assortment of steamed vegetables, and a hard chocolate square that called itself dessert. Miral wrinkled her nose as she poked at the food. She usually brought her lunch but every now and then, she preferred to eat the hot lunch; this morning, given the tension she felt in the air at her home, she'd opted for the hot lunch without discussing it with her parents. Maybe things would be better in the evening.

She saw her friends, Camila and Shreya, heading her way and then they stopped and exchanged glances. Miral frowned at their obvious hesitation and then waved at them. After a whispered conference, Camila and Shreya walked slowly, reluctance in every step, to the table where Miral was seated.

"We were thinking about sitting over there," Camila said, tipping her head in the direction of another table.

"Okay," Miral said, standing up.

"Um," Shreya said, shifting her weight from foot to foot. "We were going to eat with *them* today." She gave a significant look to Camila. "Just *us*."

Miral swallowed hard. "But we always eat together."

"We just want a change," Camila said. "We hope you don't mind."

Mind? Miral swallowed hard. "I can join you. There's room at the table—"

"All the seats are taken," Camila said firmly. "Come on, Shreya."

Miral sank back to her seat as her erstwhile friends walked past her to the other table. The food in front of her had cooled, and the cheese had congealed, making it even less likely she would eat. She dropped her fork, her eyes watering and unfocused. She had a hard time understanding what had just happened. She, Camila and Shreya had been fast friends since the first day of the school year, and now it seemed as if the trio had become a duo.

Miral roughly brushed the back of her hand against her eyes. She was aware of other students passing her table, but no one stopped to sit with her. A cafeteria aide stopped to ask if there was a reason she wasn't eating but Miral just answered that she wasn't especially hungry, that she'd had a big breakfast this morning before coming to school. It took all her self-control to get the words out without her voice cracking.

When the bell rang, signifying the end of lunch, Miral cleared her tray, and as she turned to walk away, she heard some giggles behind her.

"How does it feel to be the little sister to a bunch of lizards?" a boy whose name she didn't know called out.

Miral froze in place, her mouth suddenly dry.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said hoarsely.

"Yeah, Casper," another boy said, "they aren't lizards, but amphibians." He cackled. "So maybe you should get your facts straight; she's the little sister of *amphibians*."

Miral blinked back her tears. "That has nothing to do with me."

"Sure, it does," Casper said. He pointed at Camila and Shreya who were approaching to return their trays. "I heard Camila's mother complaining to the principal this morning about you." His eyes narrowed as Camila was within earshot. "Isn't that true, Camila?"

Camila looked down at her feet. "Yeah," she mumbled.

The lump in Miral's throat grew harder, larger. "That's not my fault."

"No," Camila said. "This is all because of your dad. I even heard my mom say so when she was talking to Mrs. Nzeogwu. She says it's crazy that they even let you still stay here after all the things they say your dad has done." She brushed past Miral and put her tray away. "Come on, Shreya. I don't want to be late."

The group of students evaporated through the double doors at the far end of the cafeteria, leaving Miral standing there until the cafeteria aide came, put her hand firmly on the small of Miral's back and gently eased her out of the room.



Chapter Twenty-Nine

Stepping out of the transport station and into the clear blue afternoon, Chakotay inhaled the fresh air – tinged with the saltiness of the ocean – gratefully; the recycled area on the shuttle from Utopia Planitia to San Francisco had been noticeably stale. He glanced sideways at Kathryn, aware of the tension etched across her face. Chakotay squeezed her hand comfortingly and she smiled back at him.

"I'm fine. Really," she said.

"You look like you'd rather be staring down the Borg," Chakotay said lightly. He shifted his bag to his left shoulder and then took Janeway's duffle bag from her, even though he knew she was perfectly capable of carrying it herself.

"There's not much of a difference, is there?" Kathryn asked grimly. "The panel consists of a bunch of hunters looking for something that just doesn't exist."

"You know what they say in one of my favorite legends," Chakotay said as they crossed the street at the designated crossing; Janeway's apartment was just a few blocks away. "It will be all right in the end and if it's not all right, then it's not the end."

Kathryn sighed. "What upsets me most is that this is time I should be spending with *you* and then preparing for the negotiations with the Dosi. And yet, we're occupied with needless distractions instead." Then with a sideways glance at Chakotay, she added, "I'm planning to meet Commander Tatsuki this afternoon at the Officer's Club to officially hand off those damn Ferengi to him, assuming all of this made-up concern over my managing of *Allegovia* doesn't scuttle *all* my plans."

Chakotay cleared his throat. As irritated as he'd been over this summons to Earth, he was also grateful for the opportunity to spend more time with her, even if it was under uncomfortable circumstances. They'd been through stressful situations plenty of times before and he knew this would be no different. He did realize that from Kathryn's perspective, she was looking at the possibility of censure, a black mark on a career she still cared deeply about. And after all the hearings, all the seemingly endless questioning they'd endured after *Voyager's* return, they'd both assumed they were done with explanations.

"You've said it yourself," Chakotay said. "Starfleet Headquarters is full of bureaucrats tasked with micromanaging every detail without any real idea of how to do the work themselves." His lips turned up slightly. "But I thought you were sick of the Ferengi."

"But not so sick of them that I want to be *exiled* to the Gamma Quadrant!" Janeway said with a sudden burst of pique.

"It's a high-profile mission, Kathryn," Chakotay said gently. "They wouldn't have selected you if they didn't think you were capable of handling it. All this sudden concern about *Allegovia* must be a distraction. I doubt there are any real issues about how you handled matters."

"I hope you're right."

Seeing Kathryn's furrowed brow, Chakotay decided to change the subject. "On another note, I've made reservations at a restaurant in Carmel tonight that has a tasting menu that I thought you'd be interested in. Usually you need to make reservations months in advance, but I got lucky and they had an opening this evening due to a last-minute cancellation. So, I took the opportunity to book it," Chakotay said lightly, "if you feel up to it."

Kathryn looked at him in surprise. "When did you have the chance to make a reservation?"

"During our stop at Utopia Planitia, courtesy of a friendly gate agent who recognized me from the news." He smiled ruefully.

"Aren't you meeting B'Elanna this afternoon?"

"Yes, but just for an hour. She has to pick up Miral so we're just meeting at a café near the school."

"I hope Tom finally cleared the air with her," Kathryn said. They arrived at the apartment building and Kathryn keyed in her code. The door slid open and they walked down the hallway to the one-bedroom unit at the far end of the first floor. Once inside, they quickly unpacked their bags, and Chakotay took a quick shower. When he came out of the bedroom, he saw Kathryn seated at the table, her shoulders squared and feet flat on the floor, as she drank coffee and read her PADD.

"Catching up on correspondence?" he asked.

Kathryn sighed. "Diplomacy and bureaucracy wait for no one."

"Have fun," Chakotay said. "I'll see you in a couple hours."

It didn't take more than fifteen minutes to walk to the café B'Elanna had selected, and Chakotay was gratified to see his old friend was already there, seated in a shadowy far corner. She rose as Chakotay approached.

"Hey," she said, as he wrapped her in a big hug. They clung to each other for a moment before separating. "I took the liberty of ordering tea for you, but I wasn't sure if you wanted some food to go with it in case you haven't had the chance to eat yet." She glanced towards the door. "Looks like you managed to avoid the press corps."

"I had a sandwich on the shuttle from UP. The tea will be great." Chakotay regarded B'Elanna with a critical eye. He'd last seen her eight months prior at the picnic at Pismo Beach and she'd confided to him then she was pregnant again and optimistic this time would be successful; he'd heard the bad news from Kathryn a couple of months later. "How are you doing?"

B'Elanna bit back a bitter laugh. "As well as one can expect, given the news." She studied Chakotay's face. "Did you know about Tom and Janeway?" she asked, her features contorting in anguish.

"Yes."

"Then why didn't you tell *me*?" B'Elanna demanded. "So I'm *really* the last one to find out?"

"It wasn't *my* story to tell." Chakotay drummed his fingers against the table. "Kathryn swore me to secrecy, and I kept my word." He offered her a comforting smile. "You, of all people, should understand loyalty."

B'Elanna bristled at the comment. "How long have you known about their affair?"

"Since New Earth."

He saw the stricken look on her face at the confirmation that she was truly the last to know, but all she said was, "Doesn't it *bother* you?"

"Not anymore, no, but at the time, yes." He let out a soft sigh. "But I guess I've had a lot longer than you to process what happened between Kathryn and Tom." He patted her hand lightly. "I was shocked when Kathryn first told me, but I was quickly able to see it was just a short-term affair that healed something in both of them but didn't have staying power. And whatever else, Tom loves *you*." He leaned forward. "No news story can change *that*."

B'Elanna bit her lower lip, and then slowly nodded. "I never doubted him in the past, but lately it seems—"

"Like something's changed?"

"Yeah. I don't know what it is, but it happened so gradually, I can't even pinpoint when we started turning away from each other. And then *this* happens, and now it feels impossible to get back to where we were before."

"You've always managed to figure it out in the past," Chakotay said softly, then changed the subject. "How is Miral?"

She sighed. "She's doing really well in school. Art is still her favorite class, and she's quite talented. I'm not sure where she got it from, because no one on either side of the family tree is particularly creative or artistic, though my mother did dabble in writing poetry at one point."

At that moment, the waitress placed a mug, a basket of glass jars filled with different tea flavors, a tea strainer, and a small white ceramic teapot filled with boiling water in front of him. Chakotay selected a Vulcan blend of leaves and herbs and carefully poured the water into the mug. The waitress then refilled B'Elanna's cup with a particularly aromatic coffee.

"And you?" Chakotay asked.

"There aren't enough hours in the day, it seems, to get everything done that I need to," she said. She gave a little laugh. "Remember when we returned to the Alpha Quadrant and we docked at Deep Space Nine for a few days while Starfleet was trying to figure out what to do with us? Those twenty-six-hour days seem like a luxury now. What I could do with an extra two hours!"

"Get some sleep maybe?" Chakotay asked.

B'Elanna shook her head. "Damn near impossible these days with the press camping outside of our house. I had to arrange for a site to site transport through Ayala's company so I could get here without being spotted. Hopefully when this hearing is all over, we'll get some peace again."

"I haven't received official confirmation for the time I'm supposed to appear before the board," Chakotay said lightly.

B'Elanna sighed. "Tom asked me to accompany him but..." her voice trailed off.

Chakotay watched her carefully as she played with the small silver spoon. "I know it will be difficult," he said neutrally.

"I know I should go," she said. "If I don't, that's another angle for the media to play upon, and I just, I just want this whole thing to go away so we can get on with our lives. But at the same time, how could he not *tell* me about the affair? How could he hide it from me all these years?" She lifted her chin and Chakotay was pleased to see a spark of defiance in her eyes. "I thought we knew *everything* about each other. Or rather, *most* things and now I feel like I don't know him at all."

"We were stranded over 70,000 light years from home, in hostile territory, away from anything familiar. All we had were two crews, getting to know each other. It's understandable that Tom and Kathryn were drawn together in those early days, taking comfort where they could. What happened then has no bearing on the relationships we have *today*."

"But they produced *offspring* together. That's a bond that can't be broken."

Chakotay sighed. "It wasn't like that, B'Elanna. You know as well as I do. Neither of them was quite in their right minds when it happened."

B'Elanna waved his words away. "And every time I see *her*, I'm going to think of her and Tom together." B'Elanna's shoulders trembled. "Tom and I have been trying for years for a second child now and it hasn't worked out, and then I think about Janeway... that *she* had everything I've been wanting for years and she left them behind."

"I am the one who made the decision to leave the offspring behind, not Kathryn, and certainly not Tom," Chakotay said firmly. "The Doctor and Tuvok both agreed with me. Naturally, we didn't make the existence of the offspring public knowledge. Kathryn and Tom knew because they were directly involved. Also, the Doctor was concerned the hyper evolution could have some impact on their future reproductive ability." He stared directly at B'Elanna. "They were both shocked when we told them and I think, a little bit embarrassed." Chakotay still recalled the incredulous expressions on Kathryn's and Tom's faces when the Doctor had given them the news. "We agreed to move on and not speak of this again. Until recently, this incident was nothing more than a distant memory." He took a deep breath. "If you're going to blame anyone, it should be me."

"It's not just this," B'Elanna said. "Lately, Tom spends all of his time at work because of that accident involving his student a few months back. He won't talk to me about it, but I'm worried that he's blaming himself because his student was careless and overlooked something fundamental. Tom wasn't there so I don't know how this is *his* fault. And it makes me so mad that he doesn't think he can talk to me about this." She smiled sadly. "We used to fight about how he spent his free time and now we don't even see each other long enough to fight." She took a sip of coffee. "How you and Janeway make it work, with all that distance between you—" she shook her head "—whereas it sometimes feels like Tom and I are light years apart and we still live in the same house."

"It's not easy," Chakotay admitted. "But we make a point of trying to see each other at least every six weeks, if not more often. Sometimes we spend longer shuttling between points than we spend together, but it's worth it. When we're not physically together, we still talk several times a week." He added, mostly to himself, "It'll be more challenging to work out the logistics in the future though. She's going to the Gamma Quadrant in a few months."

"The Gamma Quadrant? At least reporters won't follow her *there*. It's so far away, even with the wormhole."

Chakotay considered the statement carefully and then he focused his attention back on B'Elanna. Impulsively he reached out and grabbed her hand, noticing in passing how he could clearly feel her bones through the skin. "I know you and Tom are having a hard time, but if you don't go to the hearing with him, even if you're just doing it to keep up appearances, your marriage won't recover." He eyed her closely. "I'm sorry to be so blunt. But if you want to save your marriage, you must be willing to do whatever it takes. You do want that, don't you??"

B'Elanna swallowed hard. "Yes," she said softly. "But I don't know how."

"Well," Chakotay said. "In any relationship, the first rule is showing up," he said. "Once you're there, you can figure out what comes next. But if you're not willing to do even that, then, yes, I suppose the relationship is over." Chakotay gave her hand a tight squeeze before letting go. "Do you still love him, B'Elanna?"

Her voice barely more than a whisper, she nodded. "Yes."

Chakotay finished off his tea. "Then you know what you need to do."



Chapter Thirty

Janeway paused at the entrance to the Officers' Club, located on the top floor of Starfleet Academy. It had originally started as a place for the instructors to gather between classes, and then later evolved into the exclusive wood-paneled and green-carpeted restaurant that it was today. The floor to ceiling windows offered a spectacular panoramic view of San Francisco, and tables with accompanying comfortable armchairs were scattered throughout the room.

Not seeing Commander Tatsuki right away, Janeway inquired at the hostess' station, and was told he hadn't arrived yet.

"I could show you to a table," the hostess said genially.

Janeway acquiesced. "Thank you."

The table the hostess showed her to was located not far from the bar – a massive polished block of walnut wood, with brass embellishments, surrounded by low-backed barstools. While she waited, Janeway pulled out the PADD she had prepared for Tatsuki; it contained all the background details regarding the *Allegovia* project, the various contracts signed by the Ferengi, and her action plan for the future. She had no doubt that the Ferengi would take advantage of a new Starfleet officer at the helm of this project, but she was determined to arm the commander to the best of her ability to deal with them. After a few minutes, she put the PADD aside and rose to order a glass of wine from the bar. As she approached, she was struck by a familiar figure, hunched over, at the bar. She paused, frowned, and then squaring her shoulders, she marched forward.

"Tom," Janeway said with genuine affection as she saw her former helmsman. Tom seemed startled to see her. It had been a few months since she'd last seen Tom Paris in person, but Janeway was struck by how much he'd aged in that time. His hair was thinner than before, and his face appeared gaunt. New worry lines appeared on his forehead, and there was a slouch to his posture Janeway found disconcerting. She hadn't seen Tom Paris look so defeated since the day she had approached him in the New Zealand prison.

His eyes rested briefly on her face, appraising her in turn. "Admiral." A half-empty glass of a golden liquid sat in front of him.

She reached out to hug him, but he leaned away from her.

"Probably not a good idea," he said. Unspoken was the understanding that any physical contact between them could give rise to rumors they had resurrected their affair. "I'm persona non grata around here." He let out a bitter laugh. "Just like the good old days."

"What are you doing here?" Janeway asked gently.

"Having a drink. What does it look like?" there was a bit of an edge to his words, a throwback to the Tom Paris she had met at Auckland. "What are you doing here?"

"I have a meeting about the *Allegovia* project."

"Ah." Tom drained his glass. "So, then you're not here because of—"

"That too," Janeway said. She put her hand lightly on Tom's shoulder. "Tom—"

He shrugged off her touch. "You don't stop, do you? Do you even *know* what people would say if they saw us here, *together*?"

"Tom—"

"I've been put on administrative leave," he said abruptly.

"Why?" Janeway frowned. "Because of what happened between us?"

"Among other things. I guess I'm not such a good influence after all on impressionable minds." Tom bit his lip. "I was supposed to meet with the substitute this afternoon and bring him up to speed on the final exams coming up shortly, but I came here instead." He sighed. "I have a feeling they aren't going to let me back in the classroom when all of this is over. There were already a few questions about a student of mine who died in that accident a couple months back—"

"Ensign Tanaka."

"Yes." Tom looked surprised. "You know about that."

"Your father mentioned the incident to me. He said you weren't to blame."

"I wish he'd said that to me." Tom signaled for a refill of his drink. "No, it was a completely avoidable accident, and a situation that a pilot who had passed my class should have been able to handle. But Danny didn't, or couldn't, or maybe he thought the rules didn't apply to him." He looked directly at Janeway. "Sound like someone you know?"

She caught another whiff of alcohol on his breath and turned her face slightly to the side. "Tom—"

He held up his hand. "You know, people don't change. Superficially maybe, but not—I don't know. Maybe transforming into a lizard—amphibian—was the best thing that ever happened to me."

“Tom.” Janeway took his drink and pushed it away. “You don’t mean that.”

“My life is shit right now, Admiral. My wife is barely speaking to me, my father thinks I’m a disappointment to the Paris name once again, and the Academy? Well, I’m not sure I’ll be welcomed back after all this. Not only am I the guy who killed three people at Caldik Prime, and maybe that could have been forgiven in the aftermath of *Voyager’s* glorious homecoming, but I’m also the guy who hyper-evolved into an amphibious being, copulated with his captain and then left his resulting offspring behind. How’s that for a role model for impressionable young officers?” Tom shook his head, his eyes heavy with contempt.

“Tom, you can’t let these incidents define you,” Janeway said firmly. She glanced over her shoulder and was relieved to see Commander Tatsuki still hadn’t arrived. “You are a responsible father and husband and I’ve met some of your students on my missions; you are very well liked and respected.” She leaned forward. “You can’t let some trumped-up allegations from the past derail everything you worked for.”

“That’s the problem, Admiral. They aren’t allegations. I’m not going to lie about what happened, but telling the truth?” He sighed. “Perception is everything in Starfleet. You know that.”

He had a point, Janeway thought. She settled herself on the barstool next to him, angling so that she could keep an eye on the door in case Tatsuki arrived. “What about B’Elanna?”

“She’s furious at everyone in the galaxy, including me, and possibly you too, but it’s difficult to tell because she won’t talk to me. I’ve tried to explain a thousand times, but you know how stubborn B’Elanna can be once she’s made up her mind about something.” He scoffed under his breath. “Miral seems to be the only thing holding us together right now.” He ran his hand through his hair. “I thought we’d answered for all of our sins when we came back home. Now I can only see a future filled with even more disclosures, expected and unexpected. Maybe we should have *stayed* lost.”

“I know what you mean,” Janeway said with feeling. She and Chakotay had discussed exactly that on their trip from Betazed to Mars. “It’s understandable that this story has gotten a lot of play in the media – it provides a good distraction from the rebuilding effort occurring on other worlds. It’s just unfortunate that we turned out to have the leading roles in this very public production.”

Tom didn’t smile. “I’d better get home,” he said. “I was told I had no business being on campus until I’ve been cleared.” His expression became even more bitter, if that was possible. “You know, this is exactly like it was after Caldik Prime. I was persona non grata then too, held responsible for the deaths of three Starfleet officers thanks to my own reckless behavior. It’s the exact same feeling, of being shunned by everyone. I can’t even enjoy the fact that everyone knows I am the first and only person in history to break the transwarp barrier.” He sighed. “The circumstances are fucking miserable, but it’s good to see you again, Admiral.” He rose from his chair and stumbled forward. Janeway caught him by the arm.

“Tom,” she said gently. “Let me help you.”

He shrugged off her arm. “I’m *fine*.” He glanced towards the hostess station where a red-uniformed officer with three full-colored pips on his collar stood. “I think your guest is here.”

Janeway turned her gaze in the same direction and recognized Tatsuki immediately. “Tom—”

“Don’t worry about me,” Tom said quietly. “I’ve been in difficult situations before. You rescued me before, and this time,” he cleared his throat, “it’s up to me. The stakes are higher for me than they were before. I had nothing to lose when you came to find me in Auckland and everything to gain. But now, it’s more than that, and I’m not letting everything that matters to me slip away. My family, my career, my self-respect...” he nodded lightly. “Have a good evening, Admiral.” There was a note of finality to his tone and he turned away and walked out of the club. Janeway sighed, squared her shoulders and went to greet Tatsuki.



Chapter Thirty-One

B’Elanna cupped her hands around her coffee mug as she settled behind her desk at her office, located on the fourth floor of the main engineering building on Starfleet Headquarters’ grounds. This morning, the four-bedroom home nestled in the hills of San Francisco seemed too small for the emotions that threatened to overwhelm her. Retreat to where she felt safest –her work – seemed to be the best move. So, she’d asked Tom to take Miral to school and transported directly to her office.

Now B’Elanna quickly scrolled through her morning messages and was grateful that there were no burning fires to put out. The technology Ayala had given her to test had performed well and could possibly be included in the final nacelle design, depending on how it fared against competitive products. B’Elanna made a note to pass on the results to Ayala, before moving on to reviewing the latest updates on the various projects she was overseeing. Thankfully, progress was being made at a good rate; most of the updates were notes of milestones being met or resolutions of earlier issues. A few lingering problems remained, and she put those messages aside to deal with separately.

She was about to replicate a second cup of coffee when she was interrupted by the comm unit.

“I’m looking for B’Elanna Torres,” the woman on the other end said. B’Elanna immediately recognized her as Mrs. Nzeogwu, the principal at Miral’s school.

B’Elanna nodded, even as she wondered why the school was calling. “This is B’Elanna Torres.”

“I am calling to let you know our records indicate Miral Paris was marked absent today.”

“What?” B’Elanna asked. “That’s not correct. Please check again.”

Mrs. Nzeogwu appeared to consult a PADD in front of her. “Her bio-signal is not registering on our systems and the fifth-grade teacher said she was not in the classroom when attendance was taken.”

“That’s not possible. Her father took her to school this morning.” B’Elanna put the cup down carefully. Her hands were shaking. She hadn’t bothered to check in with Tom to see how drop-off had gone because even routine domestic issues seemed to be so hard for them to discuss these days.

"If you don't mind waiting, I'll be happy to check again," Mrs. Nzeogwu said with an expression clearly indicating that she was anything *but*. The school logo appeared on the screen and B'Elanna resigned herself to waiting on hold.

The minutes that passed seemed to be composed of more than sixty seconds each. B'Elanna willed herself to stay still but as time ticked on, it seemed incredible to her the school was unable to find one little girl. Where else would Miral be, unless Tom had impulsively decided to play hooky with Miral and not inform anyone, least of all her? It seemed unlikely, but then again, they hadn't been communicating well lately, so who the hell knew anyway? If this was the case, she was going to kill him when he finally did come home. How *dare* he 'forget' to tell her something like this? This wouldn't be the first time he'd 'forgotten' to tell her something important.

She comm'd Tom repeatedly, but there was no answer. Where the hell was he? After all, he no longer had a class schedule to maintain. Every nerve in her body seemed to be on fire, curling and uncurling in the pit of her stomach. After her fourth attempt to get through, Tom, looking a bit disheveled, answered.

"Where the fuck have you been?" B'Elanna asked, but before Tom could answer, she said, "Miral is missing. Mrs. Nzeogwu is double-checking—"

"That's impossible," Tom said. "I brought her to school—"

B'Elanna pressed her fingers to her forehead. "And you took her to her classroom, right?"

"Well—"

"Ms. Torres?" the principal's voice crackled over the viewscreen, interrupting B'Elanna's conversation with Tom. Mrs. Nozeogu's face wore a grim expression and B'Elanna's heart skipped a little bit faster. "I checked the school visual files and I have evidence of your husband bringing Miral to the door of the main building. However, Miral is not on the campus. Our security team is looking for her everywhere now, but we've run multiple scans and we cannot find her on our grounds."

B'Elanna took a deep breath. *Inhale, exhale, inhale*. "I'm on my way," she said with a calm she didn't feel. "Tom, meet me there."

The school administrator seemed bewildered as she faced Tom and B'Elanna from behind her massive mahogany desk. The walls of the office were covered with plaques and certificates highlighting different accolades and certifications the school had received and it took all B'Elanna's willpower not to yank them down from the walls.

"I understand you say you dropped her off at school," Mrs. Nzeogwu said, tapping the end of her stylus against the desktop. She glanced first at B'Elanna and then Tom and then back again. "However, our records indicate otherwise."

"Why didn't you notify us earlier?" Tom asked.

"I notified you as soon as we were aware she was absent, which is at our standard attendance time of 0903 hours, as you would know from our academy's handbook," Mrs. Nzeogwu said primly. "And I understand you are in contact with other family members and none of them know where she is?"

"No," Tom said in a strained tone.

"I assure you, Mr. Paris, that we are doing everything we can to locate Miral, including contacting the appropriate authorities. You should understand this has *never* happened before and we are at a loss to understand how a child in our custody could simply vanish from our school."

"Try," B'Elanna said. She pressed back against the wall, feeling nervous anxiety coursing through her body as she stared at the woman. She didn't understand how Tom could just *sit* there, the *petaQ*, as if he was attending a grading policy briefing at the Academy. "What kind of security do you have in place that a child could just go *missing*?" she whirled on Tom. "You saw her to the classroom, didn't you?"

"Well, no. She's *ten*, B'Elanna. She knows where her classroom is."

B'Elanna clenched and unclenched her fists. "Well, that doesn't help us know where she is *now*."

The school administrator cleared her throat. "Leaving aside the question of why she would run away, is there some place you can think of that she would go? Someone she would want to see, who may have knowledge of her whereabouts?"

B'Elanna considered. There were a handful of girls whom Miral would consider close friends and with whom she'd had playdates before. But the principal had made it clear only Miral was missing; the other girls were accounted for.

"I can't think of anywhere she would go," B'Elanna said. She glanced sideways at Tom. "On my way here, I called everyone I could think of in case they'd seen her. I talked to your mother, as well as your sisters. She isn't with any of them either." She shrugged helplessly. "I don't really know who else there is."

"We called for the security holo of the external grounds during the time period in question," the school administrator said. "Perhaps we can see which direction she went *after* Mr. Paris dropped her off. We've already talked to her teacher and the teacher doesn't recall seeing her this morning, nor do any of her classmates, so it's very possible after you dropped her off, Mr. Paris, she never entered the building."

"I can't believe it took you more than *two* hours to figure out she was gone," B'Elanna said irritably. In two hours, Miral could have gone *anywhere*. She could have taken a transport to Bangkok, maybe even one to Mars. "She might not even be in San Francisco anymore."

"I'll ask my father to look at transport records," Tom said. "His clearance should give him quick access to everything."

"Yes, because your father has just been so helpful lately," B'Elanna shot back.

Tom got up from his seat. "Hey," he said, putting his hands on B'Elanna's shoulders, the way he always did when he was trying to calm her down. She shook off his touch and paced around him to stand directly across from Mrs. Nzeogwu.

"How much longer will it take for you to get that security video?" she demanded.

"I asked for it about twenty minutes ago, right after I called you," Mrs. Nzeogwu responded. "It should be here very soon."

The office was not more than ten paces wide, and B'Elanna suddenly felt very hot and claustrophobic. *Twenty minutes to review surveillance footage?* Once they found Miral, she was going to seriously reconsider whether she would allow her daughter to return to this school. "This is ridiculous. I need to get out of here or I'm going to explode."

"And go where?" Tom asked bluntly. He got to his feet. "At a time like this, you're thinking about running away?"

"I need to get away from this incompetent administrator and do something productive, because it's clear that no one here knows what to do," B'Elanna told him. She shot a look in Mrs. Nzeogwu's direction, and the other woman had the courtesy to look abashed. "They've lost a child, Tom, *our* child, and you're just *sitting* there, doing *nothing*."

"Look, I said I'd talk to my father."

"Please. Your father is *useless*," B'Elanna said. "Oh yes, I've made up with my son, our relationship is so great now', and then the minute we could use some support, he says he can't help."

"This is different. This is his granddaughter—"

"And you're his son!"

At that, Mrs. Nzeogwu raised her voice, cutting into their conversation. "You should also know that we've contacted a Mr.—" the console on Mrs. Nzeogwu's desk beeped insistently. "Would you step outside while I take this, please?"

Tom and B'Elanna stepped out into the hall. Tom pressed his hands against his face as he leaned against the cinder-block walls, while B'Elanna paced back and forth between the floor-to-ceiling length windows just a few meters away. Outside, the sun illuminated the broad expanse of green lawn and the carefully manicured shrubbery edging it. A copse of trees towards the far end of the yard sheltered a collection of wooden benches. It was a peaceful area, and when they had first toured the school three years ago, B'Elanna had been drawn to the oasis of nature in the middle of San Francisco.

"B'Elanna," Tom said hoarsely.

She didn't turn around.

"I promise, we'll find her," Tom said.

"You should have seen her in the classroom," B'Elanna said in a low voice.

Tom let out a sigh.

"You know the fucking circus our life is right now," B'Elanna said, turning sharply to face him. "You're her father. It's your job to protect her, to *be there*."

Tom spread his hands in a gesture of surrender. "You're right. I'm sorry." He reached for his personal comm device.

B'Elanna held up her hand. "Don't bother. I'm going to call Ayala. His company can look at transport records just as easily as your father."

The principal's loud *ahem* caught their attention. Tom turned.

Mrs. Nzeogwu looked relieved. "They've found her," she said quietly. "She's safe, unhurt."

"Where is she?" B'Elanna stepped forward.

"A Mr. John Torres just called." Mrs. Nzeogwu glanced from B'Elanna to Tom, apparently registering the expressions of shock on their faces. "Apparently Miral is at his home in New Mexico."



Chapter Thirty-Two

John Torres stood outside of his beige stucco home, Miral next to him. B'Elanna rushed out of the hovercraft and scooped Miral into her arms fiercely, Tom right behind her.

"Mommy, Daddy!" Miral exclaimed as Tom, relief surging through his body, caressed her cheek lightly.

"I came back from my trip a day earlier than expected. I guess she remembered the code from the last time she was here and let herself in. I found her in the kitchen reading a book." His face was drawn, his deep-set eyes filled with omnipresent anxiety. "I had no idea, B'Elanna. I'm so sorry for the delay in calling you. I was so surprised to find her here and find out what she wanted. I contacted your office immediately, but your secretary said you'd left in a rush and gone to the school. That's when I called there." He tucked his hands into his pockets. "If I'd been here when she'd arrived, I'd have brought her back home immediately."

"Thanks, Dad," B'Elanna said. She let go of Miral and watched as Tom wrapped her securely in his arms.

John cleared his throat. "I need to take care of a couple of things in the house so if you'll excuse me." John Torres disappeared into the house, leaving the family standing outside. The warm air of a New Mexico spring wrapped around them, but Tom still felt a chill running down her spine.

"What are you doing here?" Tom asked. A dull ache had taken hold behind his right eye and he moved, almost as if in a daze, to sit down and placed Miral on the bench next to him. A beat passed and then B'Elanna, her hand gripping Miral's, took a seat on his other side. "We were so worried."

"I just wanted to see *abuelo*," Miral said. "You always promise that we can visit, but somehow we never do."

"That doesn't mean you just *leave* school," B'Elanna said. "And to come all the way *here*? If something was wrong, you should have called one of us!"

"You just seem so busy right now," Miral said. "I didn't think anyone would notice. I just wanted to talk to *abuelo* for a while and then I was going to come home." Her little face was so earnest and endearing, that Tom almost forgave her for scaring them half to death. "I just needed to get away."

"Why?" Tom asked sharply.

"All the kids at the school were saying stuff about Dad, and Admiral Janeway, and *Voyager* and they don't know what they're talking about."

B'Elanna took a deep breath. "What were they saying to you?"

Miral's eyes were large beneath her gently ridged forehead. Impulsively, Tom smoothed a strand of unruly hair away from her face.

"What did they say?" he asked gently.

"They said that you had another family in the Delta Quadrant," Miral said softly, "and that you left them because they weren't human."

Tom groaned, pressed his hand to his forehead as he rose from her seat. A string of expletives in a variety of languages danced at the tip of his tongue, but he restrained himself.

"What else?" B'Elanna asked, striving to keep her voice low so as not to spook her daughter.

"And that he'd leave us too, because we're not human."

Tom balled his fingers into fists. *One, two, three*. He could hear B'Elanna soothing their daughter and then he turned back to them.

"That is never going to happen," Tom said evenly. "The people who said that to you don't know what or *whom* they are talking about."

"But is it true?" Miral asked. "That you and Admiral Janeway have another family and that you were in love with her once?"

Tom sighed. *Family? Love?* These terms were heavy loaded with significance, and he certainly wouldn't have used them himself. "Honey, it's complicated. I care very much about Admiral Janeway and at one time she and I...helped each other through some really bad times. But I was never in love with her, not the way I am with your mom."

"But what about your children? Why didn't you bring them on the *Voyager*?"

Telling her that the situation was 'complicated' again felt like a cop out to Tom, but he wasn't sure what else to say. He also didn't want to completely absolve himself of responsibility by throwing the decision

to abandon the offspring at Chakotay's feet. After all, he could have protested the decision once he'd been reverted to human form, but he didn't. He also had never thought he'd have to answer for that decision to anyone, let alone his one-quarter Klingon daughter.

"It's true that they weren't human," Tom said finally. "They were comfortable on the planet where they were born; it was their home. I don't think they would have been happy on *Voyager* because we wouldn't have been able to provide a habitat for them that that would have been conducive to their survival." He pressed his lips together. "At the time, it was the right decision."

Miral still looked troubled. "But who took care of them then?"

"They didn't need anyone to take care of them," Tom said, casting a look in B'Elanna's direction, but her expression was clear: he was on his own on this one. "They were able to look after themselves."

"So, they were grown up enough that they didn't need you anymore?" Miral considered this idea for a few moments. "But they're okay, right?"

Tom shook his head. "I don't know for sure, but I assume they are okay, and living happily on that planet in the Delta Quadrant."

"They probably miss you," Miral said, a catch in her voice. "I would if you left me."

Tom shook his head. "I'm never going to leave you, Miral."

"But I don't even see you anymore," Miral said, so quietly he had to strain to catch her words. "You are never home. And when you are, you and Mom just each go off into separate rooms by yourselves." She glanced from one parent to the other. "Do you have another family here? A *human* family?"

"No," Tom said. He grasped Miral's smaller hands in his. "It's just you and Mommy. You're my only family." He looked up at B'Elanna. Her expression was stoic, but he thought he saw her lower lip quiver slightly. Keeping his gaze firmly upon B'Elanna, he said, "There is no one else, hasn't ever been, will never be anyone else." He clasped B'Elanna's hand in his and was relieved when she didn't pull away. He turned his attention back to Miral.

"Hey," he said softly, wrapping Miral in another warm hug. "Trust me. I'm not going anywhere."

B'Elanna thrust her hands into the deep pockets of her coveralls as her boots left shallow imprints in the reddish dirt edging the shores of Eagle Nest Lake. The air was warm, and the sky above was a deep blue without a cloud in sight. Under any other circumstances, it would be a beautiful day to spend at the lake. A few paces ahead, Tom and Miral walked together.

"B'Elanna." John Torres was slightly out of breath as he jogged to catch up with her. B'Elanna stopped and waited for him. She realized suddenly that she hadn't yet expressed her appreciation to her father for his help.

"Thanks for taking care of her, Dad," B'Elanna said.

He waved her words away. "I'm her *abuelo*."

B'Elanna stared after Tom and Miral. They had stopped and were now practicing skipping stones across the serene surface of the lake. It brought back a memory of a time when she and Tom had done the same thing; she'd been amazed at just how adroit and quick Tom's wrist motion was, how smoothly he flipped the stones and sent them dancing across the surface of the water. She'd never quite gotten the hang of it, despite Tom demonstrating the exact angle at which to hold her wrist and how to select the perfect stone. Miral appeared to be hanging on his every word, her face turned up to his adoringly. B'Elanna swallowed hard, almost oblivious to her father's presence until he placed his hand lightly on her shoulder.

"You look tired, B'Elanna," John said. "Are you working too hard again?"

She sat down abruptly, then dragged her attention back to her father. "There's always something more to do," she said. "Both at home and at work. There are always analyses to run, reports to check...or homework to do or a mess to clean up. Even though I really like my job, it's really hard to juggle all of my responsibilities at work without feeling like I'm neglecting Miral or failing to be a good enough mother to her." Even to her own ears she sounded whiny. "There are times I just find the whole thing to be so overwhelming."

John carefully lowered himself to sit beside her. "Why don't you ask Tom for help? Around the house at least, or with Miral."

"Because he should *know* what needs to be done."

"Maybe he doesn't," John said gently. "Not without your telling him. Have you thought about that?"

B'Elanna paused to consider his words. "Maybe I *was* unfair to expect him to read my mind," she admitted. "It's a bad habit I have." She cleared her throat. "We've had a rough time of it lately, and the last miscarriage was hard on both of us and I think, I think we knew we were out of options. I guess I wanted him to help me be strong, but he didn't react the way I wanted him to." She tried to think what she was trying to say. "He seemed to treat me like a fragile thing, not even telling me about something that happened at work that was so so stressful for him. I was so mad at him for that, but I couldn't bring myself to confront him. I didn't want him to think I was weak, that I couldn't handle things but at the same time—"

Her father was watching her carefully. "So now Tom probably doesn't know what you need or want anymore. It's a hard place to be." His tone was wistful and B'Elanna wondered if he was speaking from experience. She remembered growing up and constantly listening to her parents' arguments, and how it would suddenly grow silent between them. As a child, she'd assumed the quiet had meant the storm had passed and all would be well again. Now, she knew better. Nothing was more deafening than the silence that fell between two people who no longer had anything to say to each other.

"I'm having a hard time calming down. I'm so mad at him all of the time." B'Elanna tried to force a smile. "If you can believe it, my doctor recommended I take up yoga for stress relief, but I only made it to a single class once a few months ago."

"I used to run," John said, nodding in acknowledgement. "When I was stressed out, I would just lace up a pair of sneakers and go out and hit the dirt. And as you remember, there was *a lot of* dirt on Kessik."

"It was a miserable place. I counted the days until I could leave."

"It never felt like home to me either," John said. They watched as Tom knelt at the edge of the water and picked up another collection of rocks, which he promptly offered to Miral, then watched as she made her selection. Miral leaned against him, her small hand hovering over her father's cupped one. "Your mother really hated it there, and I felt guilty that we stayed but I didn't feel like we had any other options than the job your uncle Carl offered me to run his trading operation there."

"And then you left us."

"Yes." John bit his lip. "But Tom's stronger than I was, and that will make all the difference." He turned so that he was no longer looking directly at B'Elanna. "I never wanted to be on Kessik, it was just something that circumstances dictated when I was dishonorably discharged from Starfleet. My entire life was about serving in Starfleet, and then suddenly, I wasn't an officer anymore. I never adjusted to my new reality, and your mother tried her best, she really did, but then eventually her patience turned to anger and then to resentment. If there's one thing I've learned, once you've started resenting the person you love, there's no recovering."

"Is that what happened between you and Mom?" B'Elanna asked. She and John had always danced around the subject of her parents' separation, subsequent divorce and then his abandonment of them both; when they'd reconnected after *Voyager's* return, they'd focused their efforts into building a new relationship and even that was fraught with tension. "I always thought she pushed you away because her Klingon nature was too volatile."

"No, that was just an excuse for not being strong enough to really face the problems in our relationship, some of which I was directly responsible for. I took the coward's way out in leaving." Now he looked back at B'Elanna. "I'm sorry I haven't been around lately. I guess old habits die hard."

B'Elanna let that last comment slide. "Well, we *would* like to see more of you. I think Miral made that pretty clear by her actions today."

"I would like that too," John said. He reached for B'Elanna's hand. "I heard something on the news about a hearing. What's that all about?"

B'Elanna said sharply, "It's a waste of time, that's what. Dredging up events that took place decades ago...Starfleet is just poking their nose into things that don't concern them. You know how they are."

"Bureaucratic and overly moralistic and intent on rooting out problems at the lower levels when the highest ranks are full of corruption?"

B'Elanna stared at her father in surprise. "Something like that." She got up and started walking again toward her husband and daughter and John rose as well, his long stride easily managing to keep pace with her. "One of the things they're focusing on is the relationship between Admiral Janeway and Tom, early in our voyage." She exhaled forcefully. "It happened before Tom and I got together. I didn't even know about it until recently. To be honest, I don't know if I want to hear any of the details." She glanced at her father sideways. "I was aware of Tom's reputation as a skirt-chaser before I decided to get involved with him. In fact, I was quite wary at first, but," she couldn't help the tiny smile lifting the corners of her mouth, "the heart wants what the heart wants."

“That’s how I felt when my mother suggested that my pursuit of your mother wasn’t exactly the smartest course of action,” John said.

“Was she right?”

John pressed his lips into a thin line and then shook his head. “No,” he said. “I have no regrets about getting involved with your mother. I never found anyone else after I left the two of you. I never even wanted to meet anyone else. I loved Miral, and only her. I couldn’t figure out how to make things right between us, but I never stopped thinking about her. I was too ashamed to come back and plead with her to give me, give *us* another chance. As a Klingon, I knew she’d see it as human weakness. And so, I ran away.” He stared into the distance. “If there had been any chance that she’d forgive my cowardice, I’d have come back in a heartbeat.”

A warm breeze kicked up and stirred B’Elanna’s hair as they neared Tom and Miral. “Are you suggesting I forgive Tom?”

“No,” John said, “I’m just telling you a story.” They stopped at the edge of the path just in time to see Miral’s rock take two skips across the surface of the lake before it sank into the water. Tom whooped and clapped his daughter on the back. “We’re a lot alike, you and me. More than I would have thought.” Tentatively, he put his arm around her shoulders, and then, surprising them both, she leaned her head against his shoulder. He felt warm and strong, and for the first time in decades, she felt like she had a father.

“You should tell more stories,” B’Elanna said softly. In the background, she could hear Miral laughing.



Chapter Thirty-Three

After a dinner of enchiladas with John Torres, B’Elanna, Tom and Miral boarded the shuttle back to San Francisco. Miral took the window seat, curling her hand around her father’s, while B’Elanna sat on the other side of the aisle, leaning her head against the window. The physical distance between them was only about a meter but Tom had never quite felt further away from his wife than he did at that moment. The last time he’d felt this disconnect, this *space*, had been more than a decade ago, when B’Elanna had been inventing increasingly interesting ways to harm herself on the holodeck. He’d known – no, *felt* – at the time something had been wrong, but he’d attributed her distance to the heavy workload in Engineering and their differing schedules. He’d kicked himself in retrospect for not noticing – or, for that matter, being more *vocal* – and made a promise to himself to never let things go unsaid again. Tom Paris had become pretty good at keeping promises, but this was one that seemed to be slipping.

Once at home, Tom saw his personal comm device was buzzing with messages from his parents. While B’Elanna helped Miral get ready for bed, Tom sat down on the sofa and called his parents back.

"Miral is back home, safe and sound," he said, before his mother could say anything.

"Thank God," Julia Paris said, her worried face filling the screen. "Where did you find her?"

"With B'Elanna's father, in New Mexico." Tom nodded at his mother's curious expression. "She's spent some time with him before, but it didn't occur to us that she'd make the trip by herself. Miral can be very resourceful."

"Did she explain why she skipped school?" Owen Paris appeared behind his wife, his hand gripping her shoulder. Tom pressed his lips into a thin line; it certainly felt like old times again when it came to his father. "You must impress upon her, Tom, how serious an offense this was."

"She was upset, Dad," Tom said through gritted teeth. "She's been hearing all of the stories about me and Janeway from her friends at school and she wanted to get away."

Owen frowned. "I didn't realize Miral was so sensitive." There was a definite note of condescension in his voice. "I thought being a quarter Klingon, she would be tougher."

"Owen," Julia said reproachfully. "She's just a child."

"It's okay, Mom," Tom said. He took a deep breath, willing himself to be calm. There was no point in losing his shit with his father, though he was very tempted to. Hurling accusations was counterproductive, and his focus needed to be on his daughter. "Miral is home now and B'Elanna and I are now aware of what's been going on at the school and we'll deal with it."

"I'll let Kathleen and Moira know everything is fine," Julia said, referring to Tom's sisters. "They've been very worried." She reached out with her fingertips, as if to caress Tom's face through the screen. "This must have been terribly stressful for you and B'Elanna, Tom. Let us know how we can help."

One look at his father's stern face was enough to convince Tom that was one offer he wouldn't be taking his father up on. He bid both his parents a good night and then stretched as he rose from the sofa. He could hear B'Elanna moving around the kitchen, the clatter and clink of breakfast dishes from earlier that morning as she tidied up. He stood watching her, his mouth dry. There were so many things he wanted to say, but he felt curiously tongue-tied. Suddenly, she looked up and saw him looking at her.

"Who were you talking to on the 'comm?" she asked curiously.

"My parents. They wanted to know if we found Miral. They also said to send their love." He coughed nervously. "They were quite worried and are relieved she's home."

B'Elanna arched her eyebrow but nodded. "A whole lot of people were worried. I tried explaining that to our daughter, without coming down on her too hard." She pulled the full trash bag out of the container and headed for the recycling unit located in the backyard, stopping short just outside the door. When she turned to face Tom, she had an odd expression on her face, one he couldn't quite define. "You... you bought new plants for the garden." Her voice sounded as if she were about to cry.

Tom took a step forward. Was she upset? Had he overstepped? He decided to go with the cautious approach. "I figured I'd make myself useful while I'm 'on leave'," he said. "It was too beautiful of a morning to stay inside so I was in the middle of replacing the roses when you called about Miral." He

cleared his throat. "I hope you don't mind that I went ahead and did this without telling you first. I know we'd been planning to hire a landscaper but--"

B'Elanna's lower lip trembled as she took in all the work that had been done. "No," she said softly. "It's lovely. Thank you." She put the trash bag down as she took a step onto the patio and looked around. The turquoise and beige terracotta pots were filled with flowering plants and the flower beds were dug up, with half of the rose plants still in their green planters and the rest of the bushes in the ground. Tom made a mental note to water the plants first thing in the morning.

Tom felt a weight lifted off his chest. "You like it?"

"Yes," she said. She reached her hand towards him and he took it willingly. "It was very thoughtful of you."

"I'll finish the rest in the morning," he said. "I know it's been bothering you," he said, trying and failing to sound nonchalant. "And as I said, I guess I have a lot of time on my hands right now."

"I'm sorry about that," B'Elanna said sincerely. "I know how much your students mean to you. I'm sure you'll be back with them soon."

"I don't know about that." Tom bit his lip. "It depends on how the hearing goes."

"What else?" she asked gently. "Is it Ensign Tanaka?"

Tom looked surprised. "How did you know?"

She shrugged. "It's not that big of a campus, Tom." She lifted her gaze to meet his. "I wish you'd talked to me about that."

"It happened right after—"

"I know," B'Elanna said. "But that doesn't mean I couldn't be there for you."

"I'm second guessing everything now and with all of this increased scrutiny on my past, I know the Academy is feeling the same about me." He looked directly at B'Elanna. There was the very slightest ribbon of chill in the night air, and she shivered, hugging herself and hunching her shoulders forward. "I'm trying to be optimistic, but—"

"What?"

"If my father is any indication—"

"Fuck your father," B'Elanna said heatedly.

Tom held up his hand. "B'Elanna."

She sighed. "Sorry." She twisted her lips. "What makes you think this time is any different than every other time he's let you down?"

"Because Janeway's involved."

"What do you mean?" B'Elanna's tone was sharp. She took a step backwards.

"He won't let *her* down, I'm sure of it." He hesitated, unsure if he wanted to voice his suspicions out loud. "She might regard him as her mentor but he-- I've always felt like there's something more to his feelings for her."

B'Elanna's lip curled slightly. "I guess the Paris men have a weakness for Kathryn Janeway. Like father, like son."

"The difference is I don't harbor feelings for any woman other than the one I'm married to," Tom said, meeting her gaze frankly.

They stared at each other. After a moment, B'Elanna gave an almost imperceptible of nods.

"Okay."

"Okay *what?*" Tom asked. He couldn't help the note of frustration that slipped into his voice.

"You're right. I'm not being fair."

Tom felt the tension ease out of his shoulders. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." She took a deep breath. "I've been thinking, Tom, about your asking me to come to the hearing with you."

He held very still. "What did you decide?"

"If you still want me to, I'll come."

He lifted her fingers to his lips, not daring to ask for more. His lips were light against her skin, tentative, almost as if he couldn't believe she was real. "I do," he told her. And then he wrapped his arms around her, the scent of roses and jasmine wafting through the night air.



Chapter Thirty-Four

The next morning, B'Elanna slipped into a plain maroon dress that ended just above her knees. She pulled her hair back from her face into a tight chignon and then applied a more muted shade of lipstick than she usually wore. She studied her reflection in the mirror for a moment before turning to face Tom. He was standing to the side of the window, staring off into the distance. He looked ill at ease in his black suit.

"Hey," she said, crossing the distance between them. She put one hand lightly on his forearm and with the other smoothed back his hair from his furrowed brow. Earlier that morning, he'd gotten a Starfleet

haircut, she noticed, regulation right down to the triangular-shaped sideburns. He let the curtain drop and sighed. "You ready to go?"

"As ready as I ever will be," he said in a hoarse voice. She slipped her hand into his, liking the feeling of his skin against hers. "How about when this is all over with, you and I, we go somewhere fun? Get away from all of this?" The wistfulness in his tone tugged at her heart.

"I'd like that," B'Elanna said. She gave his hand a gentle tug.

"Let's go," she said.

They transported with Miral to the school, and in the hope of eluding the press, they then transported to Ayala's office.

"I was surprised you two said you wanted to see me, considering the hearing is in a couple of hours," Ayala said as they materialized in his office building, located in Telegraph Hill. "Good to see you. Tom, it's been a while." The two men shook hands, and then Tom and B'Elanna followed Ayala through the glass-walled hallway into his office suite just beyond. The doors clicked close behind them. "You said on the comm you were thinking of retaining my services for Miral. Everything all right?"

"We had an incident at Miral's school yesterday," B'Elanna said.

"Is she being bothered there? I can send someone—"

"Let us fill you in first," B'Elanna said. She offered a thin-lipped smile. "I just don't want this to be a bigger deal for her than it already is, you know?" Quickly, she related how Miral had been distraught by all the stories and had run away to see her *abuelo* in New Mexico. "Tom and I met with the principal this morning to discuss what happened and she has assured us that the school takes this kind of behavior – both Miral's leaving school and the ostracization which precipitated it – very seriously and *of course* they will look into the circumstances to make sure it doesn't happen again." She twisted her lips into a quizzical frown. "When we asked her, Miral *said* she wanted to go to school this morning, and has assured us that she will let us know if anything like this happens again but..."

"But you're not convinced," Ayala said gently.

"It may not be the right school for her, and we have serious questions about the competence of the administration," Tom said. "My father recommended it because it's geared towards Starfleet families, but it bothers me just how *casual* the administration has been around this whole incident, how they seemed unaware of what Miral was going through at school."

"I get it," Ayala said. "You just have to say the word and I can make sure Miral is well looked after."

"I hope it doesn't come to that," B'Elanna said.

"Thanks for the offer. We appreciate everything you've done for us," Tom told Ayala.

"Glad I could help. This whole situation is bullshit," Ayala answered warmly as he led them to a small break room where coffee and breakfast pastries awaited them. Ayala gestured them to sit, and they obliged, but B'Elanna had no appetite. "Every time I turn on the television, I see Harren's smug face,

offering his insight into *Voyager*. I have half a mind to call the Starfleet News Service and tell them *exactly* what Harren did on the ship."

"We haven't been paying attention," Tom said grimly. "We've been busy with other matters." He massaged the back of his neck with a rueful smile. "I can't believe this has grown to be such a big deal. I thought all the excitement about *Voyager* had died down a long time ago."

"Lucky Tuvok on Vulcan or Seven on her deep space mission," B'Elanna said, taking a sip of her coffee. "Maybe I should've taken the Doctor up on his offer and gone to Qo'noS."

"I can arrange security for you, 24/7," Ayala said briskly. "There's no need to run off to the Klingon homeworld." His lips quirked up in a grin. "You'd invite a whole new set of problems."

"You're probably right," B'Elanna said, casting a look at Tom, who looked more thoughtful than concerned. "The hearing is going to start in an hour; we better get going."

Tom dragged himself to his feet. "Thanks, Michael. Say hi to the wife and kids for us."

Ayala clapped Tom firmly on the back. "Don't hesitate to call if you need anything." He pressed his lips into a thin line. "And let me know if you want me to take care of that fool, Harren."

"I don't think that will be necessary," B'Elanna said quickly, recognizing the glint in Ayala's eye from their days fighting the Cardassians; the last thing she needed right now was for Ayala to go full-blown Maquis on Harren. She looked at Tom for agreement, but once again, he appeared distracted. She knew the hearing was weighing on him, but she curled her fingers around his. "*Tom*. Let's go. We might as well get it over with."

Tom and B'Elanna materialized at the edge of the Starfleet campus, and with Ayala's stolid presence next to them, they made their way – hand in hand – to the Jonathan Archer Administrative building. Quickly, Ayala escorted them into the building, and after securing their credentials with the security desk, Tom and B'Elanna took the lift to the third floor. As the doors opened, they found themselves in front of a conference room they knew quite well. B'Elanna exchanged a sardonic glance with Tom; Starfleet had quite the sense of humor. They had both spent many hours testifying in that room after *Voyager* had first returned to the Alpha Quadrant. In those days, the stakes had been considerably higher with both B'Elanna and Tom concerned about the very real possibility of a prison sentence. It'd been a relief when the Starfleet Parole Board had recognized the terms of Janeway's agreement with Tom, and when the Maquis had received a suspended prison sentence with immediate relief due to services rendered aboard *Voyager*.

"I hate this place," Tom said with feeling. He kept his hand intertwined with B'Elanna's as he stared at the double wooden doors in front of him.

"I know the feeling," B'Elanna said. She nodded toward a bench against the wall. "Come, sit down before you wear a path in the carpet."

"You really don't have to wait, you know."

"I know, but I want to."

“Who knows how long it’ll take, and you have things to do.”

“I’ve cleared my schedule for today,” B’Elanna said. She gave him a small smile. “I just wish I could come into the room with you, but at least you know someone who is on your side is just on the other side of the door.”

Tom pressed his lips to her cheek. “That means a lot to me.” He added sardonically, “Though this really ought to be the world’s shortest hearing. I don’t know how many ways I can say ‘I don’t remember’.”

The doors swung open and a lieutenant nodded toward Tom. “We’re ready for you, Mr. Paris.”

Tom gave B’Elanna’s hand a tight squeeze and then he walked into the room. B’Elanna leaned back against the wall, pressing her fingers against the hint of tension banding around her forehead. She was only dimly aware of footsteps until they stopped in front of her.

“B’Elanna.”

B’Elanna jumped, startled to see her father standing there, an uncertain expression on his face.

“Dad.” She sat straight up. “I-I – what are you doing here? How did you get inside the building?”

“Your father-in-law arranged for a security pass at my request,” John Torres said. Startled, B’Elanna saw Owen standing right next to the closed door. She hadn’t noticed his arrival.

“Well, that was nice of him.” It was hard to keep the note of sarcasm out of her tone, but John didn’t seem to notice.

“I figured if I had to come into San Francisco to pick Miral up after school today, I might as well come early in case you wanted some company.” John held out a cup of coffee toward her.

B’Elanna accepted it and shifted to the space Tom had most recently occupied. “I’d like that,” she said.



Chapter Thirty-Five

Tom shifted in his seat uncomfortably. His suit felt uncomfortably tight and despite the cool air blasting from the environmental controls, Tom had to wipe a bead of sweat off his forehead. He stared at the panel in front of him, which consisted of three admirals, one captain and one commander. He’d been startled by his father’s appearance right before he went inside, and Owen Paris had blithely said that he wasn’t there in an official capacity, just as a supporter.

“For whom?” Tom had responded. And then with a scoff, he added, “You don’t have to say anything; I know you’re here for Admiral Janeway.”

Owen Paris had frowned. “Tom—”

"Never mind," Tom had said, and he'd brushed past him. It was a relief when he'd heard the heavy wooden doors close, putting a physical barrier between himself and his father.

The room was paneled in heavy mahogany wood and the carpet on the floor swirled in shades of gray and maroon. The lights above were bright, harsh. The overall impression he'd had during his post-*Voyager* hearings was of a decor somewhere between a courtroom and an interrogation room; time hadn't changed that opinion. Tom Paris had experienced both kinds of environments and he considered himself something of a pro when it came to answering questions about what he did and did not do.

Admiral Kelvin, who occupied the center seat, smiled genuinely at Tom as she scanned the PADD in front of her.

"Thank you for joining us this morning, Mr. Paris," Kelvin said.

Tom bit back a snarky response that a summons to appear wasn't exactly a choice, but instead responded, "You're welcome."

"I understand you've chosen not to have counsel represent you today," Kelvin said.

"That is correct," Tom said. His voice felt chalky and dry. "I understand that this is a fact-finding mission and not a punitive session, and for that reason, I feel perfectly capable of representing myself."

Kelvin raised her eyebrows but didn't challenge him on the statement. "As you know, we have some questions about your transwarp flight which took place on stardate 49373.4," Kelvin said. "First of all, let me congratulate you on your achievement. It was something that had never been accomplished before, and as far as we know, has not been accomplished since. So please, accept my sincere congratulations."

"Thank you."

"Now, your flight itself is not in doubt. What concerns us is what happened *after* the flight. Our understanding, from your EMH's logs as well as those of First Officer Chakotay, is that afterward, possibly because of the flight itself, you transformed into another type of lifeform, one that can be categorized as sentient amphibian. Is this correct?"

"So, I've been told."

"What do you remember of this experience?"

Tom considered. "Very little, to be honest." He remembered being in Sickbay and the incredible pain he felt throughout his body. It felt like every limb was being stretched in multiple directions and all his joints throbbed. He remembered feeling lightheaded, nauseated. "I thought I was dying."

"The EMH's logs say your cellular membranes were deteriorating and he was desperately trying to find a way to halt the process. In subsequent logs, including those of Chief Engineer Torres, we find out that you were placed in a restraint near the warp core. Do you remember this?"

Tom nodded. "Vaguely. I believe they were trying an antiproton radiation treatment to stop my evolution."

"The treatment was unsuccessful?" Kelvin asked.

"I really don't remember much more than this," Tom said apologetically. "During the flight itself, I remember this *feeling*. At the time, I described it as being everywhere all at once, and that I could see every point in the universe." He paused. "I'm not going to lie. It was an incredible sensation. Afterward, I felt so *limited*, constrained. Being restrained was quite literally holding me back from exploring what was out there. It was infuriating." Beneath the table, he flexed and curled his fingers.

Kelvin exchanged a look with the admiral to her right. "So, you escaped from Engineering. Do you remember when you first encountered Captain Janeway?"

"This is where it gets foggy," Tom said. "I'm not sure what is memory and what was told to me after the fact."

"What do you believe happened?"

"I believe Captain Janeway was on her way to the Bridge." Tom swallowed hard. "I encountered her in the turbolift." He looked down at his fingers. "I might have been experiencing sensations that were nothing short of hallucinatory, but I was afraid. I didn't know what was happening to me and I didn't want to be alone." Tom laughed nervously. Above him, one of the lights dimmed briefly, and then came on full brightness again. "So, I took her with me."

"Did you *ask* Captain Janeway if she wanted to go with you?" Admiral Sutton, a tall reedy human woman with stern features seated to Kelvin's left, asked.

Tom shook his head. "By then I'd lost the ability to speak, at least in human terms."

"Lost the ability to speak?" repeated Sutton, dumbfounded. "What do you mean?"

"I regurgitated my tongue earlier in Sickbay," Tom said, realizing how absurd it sounded.

Members of the panel winced at this revelation.

"So, you did kidnap Captain Janeway," Sutton said.

Tom flushed.

"In a manner of speaking, yes," Tom said quietly.

"And then what?"

"I commandeered the shuttle, we set off and crossed the transwarp barrier again and that's about all I remember."

"What was your relationship with Captain Janeway?"

"What about it?" Tom asked sharply. He'd decided during his sleepless night that he wasn't going to make the line of inquiry easy for the panel. "She was my commanding officer."

Kelvin's cheeks turned pink as she said, "No, I mean, were you sexually involved with her prior to this incident?"

Tom kept his features carefully composed. This was the line of questioning he'd been anticipating, and even with a rehearsed response at the ready, he still felt a quickening of his heart, a tension in his muscles; everyone in the room was staring at him. When he spoke, his voice did not quiver. "Yes."

"You had an affair with your commanding officer."

"Yes."

"At the time of the transwarp incident, were you still involved?"

"No, we—we agreed earlier that it was best to end it."

"When did you end it?"

"A few weeks before we started working on developing transwarp capability."

"Did that upset you?"

Tom shook his head. "No," he said clearly. "As I said, we agreed mutually to move on. We—we wanted different things and it was clear a long-term relationship was out of the question."

Kelvin cleared his throat. "But one could suggest that you, while hyper-evolved, were not quite over the end of your relationship with Janeway, and that could have been a motivation for you to kidnap her."

Tom swallowed hard. How ridiculous was this line of questioning? He lifted his chin defiantly. "You're putting words in my mouth, making insinuations that I can neither deny nor verify, given my mental state at the time."

"But the fact remains," Sutton said, his ruddy cheeks turning bright red in the harsh lighting, "that you kidnapped the Captain and then had sex with her against her will."

"I don't know that that's true," Tom said, feeling even warmer now than he'd when the hearing had first begun.

"Are you *denying* you had sex with the captain when you were hyper-evolved?"

"Well, no. Obviously I did as the existence of the offspring shows," Tom said. He resisted the urge to loosen his tie.

"Was it consensual?"

"I don't know," Tom said. "I don't remember."

"But you don't disagree that you took her from ship against her will? Would Captain Janeway have left *Voyager* willingly at this point, if given a choice?"

Tom bit his lip and then nodded slowly. "No, she would not," he admitted.

"You do understand how this looks, Mr. Paris," Sutton said. "You abducted the captain and when you were found, you were in the presence of your offspring. So clearly sexual relations must have occurred, with the question of whether or not they were consensual." He leaned forward, rapping the end of his stylus on the mahogany table. "This could be considered nothing less than a sexual assault."

Tom slumped back in his chair. Only thirty minutes into the hearing, and he was exhausted. But more to the point, he didn't have a good feeling about the questions to come and he sincerely regretted his decision *not* to bring a lawyer.

When the hearing finally concluded about two hours later, Tom found B'Elanna still sitting on the bench where he'd left her, her father by her side. He stifled his surprise at seeing John and slung his arm around his wife's shoulders, pulling her close, as he pressed his lips to the top of her head.

"How did it go?" B'Elanna asked, studying his face as if seeking clues.

"Fucking awful," Tom said. "I've got a headache."

A moment later, Admiral Owen Paris joined them. He shook hands with John and then cast a grim look towards his son.

"I assume we'll talk later," Owen said in that dismissive tone Tom knew oh so well. "John, B'Elanna."

B'Elanna frowned as she stared after her father-in-law's retreating figure, and then she turned back to Tom.

"Was he with you the whole time?" Tom asked B'Elanna in a low voice.

"No," she said. "But he checked in regularly." She offered him a strained smile. "I think he was irritated he couldn't be in the room and no one would tell him what was going on. He kept making comments about you, but I ignored him after a while." She sighed. "I told him not to expect us for lunch as usual this Sunday. I hope you don't mind."

Tom shook his head. "I'm sure we can find something else to do."

"No doubt." B'Elanna studied his face intently. "Want to talk about it?"

"Not now," Tom said, clenching and unclenching his fists repeatedly. Unlike his hearing for Caldik Prime, his father had shown up. But he still couldn't shake the feeling that Owen Paris was more concerned about the family honor, perhaps even Kathryn Janeway, than for his own son. "And certainly not here." He was now incredibly grateful that Starfleet had made the decision to keep the hearings private.

John Torres, clearly noting the tension in the air, gave B'Elanna a quick hug. "I'm going to head to the school to pick up Miral," he said. "I'll bring her home around dinner time, okay?"

B'Elanna smiled gratefully at her father. "Thanks."

After John left, Tom sank to the bench and cradled his head in his hands. B'Elanna tentatively put her hand on his back.

"Let's go home," she said. They once again took advantage of using Ayala's transporter service to beam directly to their home, thus avoiding the reporters still congregating in their front yard. Tom stripped off his suit and jumped into the shower. He let the hot water pulse down on his skin, washing away the residue lingering from the sordid questioning he'd endured that morning. Close to an hour later, he pulled on loose pants and a T-shirt. B'Elanna sat on the bed in their room, watching him with concern.

"You want to talk about it?" she asked again.

"Not really, but I guess I owe you a recap." Tom kicked his shoes under the bed and then headed into the bathroom, where he splashed water on his face. He wiped his face with a towel before turning to face B'Elanna. He took a deep breath. Might as well get it over with. "They accused me of raping the captain while I was hyper-evolved."

"What the hell?"

"That's what I said." Tom went to the window, peeked around the edge of the curtain, and then turned to face B'Elanna. "They said it was clearly non-consensual as I carried her off against her will and mated with her when neither one of us was in our right minds."

"By that standard, they could just as easily have accused her of raping you!" B'Elanna said heatedly.

"I could lose my commission over this. At this point, I'll be lucky if I keep my job at the Academy." He set his jaw firmly. "I can't imagine how this story is going to play on the news."

"This is a hell of a serious accusation."

Tom braced himself for the question he thought B'Elanna would ask next. "At this point, that's all it is," he said. "An accusation. But you know what could happen if that reporter gets wind of what was said today—" Tom broke off and held up his arms in a gesture of surrender. "I don't know how we would get through it."

B'Elanna toyed with the fringe edging one of the throw pillows on the bed. "When we were briefed on these hearings, we were told Starfleet wants to keep these hearings confidential. It's in everyone's best interest that they do. So, it's very unlikely anyone will ever hear anything about what was said today."

"I wish I could believe that, but you know the media. They indulge in non-stop speculation and who knows what they're thinking of or what they will come out. And there is *always* someone who talks." Tom's jaw tightened. "It's not pleasant to think about, but we need to prepare for the eventuality that this false accusation gets out."

"Should we think about getting a lawyer?" B'Elanna asked. The fringe had come unraveled now. "There has to be *something* we can do. Maybe a restraining order against that reporter?"

"Restraining her from what? The hearings were confidential."

"Well, we need someone on *our* side."

Tom touched the tips of his fingers together. B'Elanna was right. They were wading into a murky situation and they would likely need someone to help navigate the swamp. One good thing, the heat in her voice convinced him that they were in this together. For the first time since the story of his transwarp fight and the ensuing allegations broke, Tom felt a sense of relief. He and B'Elanna were always at their best when they had a common enemy to face. "We can certainly consult a lawyer. I'll ask Ayala if he has anyone he can recommend."

"Chakotay might know someone too."

Tom laughed bitterly. "You know, at the time I made that flight, I was still so fixated on what people thought of me, felt I had so much to prove to everyone--and myself most of all. Then, when we accomplished our goal of breaking warp ten, I wondered if people at home would ever know what we'd done. Now all I can think about is how I've let you and Miral down."

B'Elanna shook her head. "Don't worry about me," she said. "I'm fine."

Tom wished he could believe that but decided not to press the issue. He rose and put his arms around her.

"As long as you don't believe those accusations about me."

"That's another thing you don't have to worry about."

Tom looked down at his hands. "Look, I'm really sorry about all of this. It's not fair to you, or to Miral." His vision blurred slightly as he swallowed hard. "Neither of you should have to pay for my mistakes. And I've made so many of them over the years, B'Elanna."

Her hand was warm as she grasped his. "We both have."

He inhaled sharply, looked up towards the ceiling and felt her lean against him. After all that had happened, it amazed him she was still here, hadn't run screaming for the hills. "I'm going to do better," he said. "You deserve better."

B'Elanna leaned even closer to him, put her hands on his face. "You're right about that."

He pressed his lips to the nape of her neck. Her body felt small, frail, against his. It was like holding a small bird, and he realized suddenly how much weight she'd lost in the last several months, how she seemed to be fading away before him, and he wondered how the hell he'd managed to miss this. She trembled in his embrace. He pressed his forehead against hers and she leaned back to meet his lips with her own. He slipped his hand to the small of her back. It didn't matter in that moment that there was a crowd of people just hanging outside their house, waiting for the next salacious word to fall out of Harren's gossipy mouth. It didn't matter that a panel of Starfleet officers – and his father – thought he was capable of rape. None of that mattered in that moment. He pulled B'Elanna down onto the bed and her dark eyes signaled desire as he reached for her.



Chapter Thirty-Six

John Torres placed a bowl of fruit in front of his granddaughter. Miral wrinkled her nose as she looked at the colorful combination of berries and banana slices. After a moment, she gingerly reached for a strawberry.

“What’s the matter?” John asked anxiously. He’d picked up Miral after school to give Tom and B’Elanna some time to decompress after the hearing. Originally, he had thought about taking Miral to Black Sands Beach in Sausalito – a place he had taken her grandmother decades earlier – but then thought better of it and decided to bring Miral back to his home where the media was less likely to look for her.

“I was hoping we could have ice cream,” Miral said, in a pouty way that reminded John of B’Elanna at that age.

“Your mother wouldn’t appreciate it if I filled you up on ice cream now and then you wouldn’t have an appetite for dinner later.”

“Just a little bit? I won’t tell if you won’t.”

John bit back a smile. “You shouldn’t keep secrets from your mother. She loves you and has your best interests at heart. In this case, however, that doesn’t extend to ice-cream.” He nodded again towards the bowl of fruit. “But help yourself to that.”

To his relief, Miral nodded and she reached for another strawberry.

“How long do I get to stay?” Miral asked as she delicately nibbled at the strawberry. Not for the first time, John thought marveled at just how amazing this grand granddaughter of his was.

“Just until dinner,” John said. “Which I promised your mother I would *not* ruin.”

“I wish it was longer.”

“Maybe next time, honey.”

Miral glanced around the kitchen. Bright yellow curtains hung at the windows, and there was cheerful vase decorated with Kokopelli figures – a gift from John’s mother a few years before her death – decorating the countertop. The patio doors were directly behind her and led to the deck which had a nice view of the lake in the distance. It wasn’t fancy, but it was comfortable, and more importantly, to John, it was home. He had spent so much of his first four decades bouncing from place to place, and even now he felt the occasional tingle of restlessness.

“What do you think is going on?” Miral asked curiously. “Do you think the hearing is over?”

“You know about that?”

“They were talking about it at school.” Miral pressed her lips together. “They like to ask me questions about what’s going on. Or talk about me like I’m not there.” She lifted her chin with a bit of defiance that reminded John of B’Elanna at that age. “I don’t like it.”

"Who are *they*?" John asked.

Miral picked at the fruit with her fingers. "Some of the kids, but I heard a couple of the teachers talking about it too. They were wondering what was going to happen. They stopped talking when they saw me. That's how I know they were talking about me."

"It'll pass."

"Are you sure?" She wrinkled her nose. "It doesn't feel like it."

"Yes. People have short memories. They'll eventually forget this story and move on to the next shiny object. There is always a next thing," John said confidently. He watched as Miral finished the rest of the fruit. "Do you want more?"

"Yes, please."

John rose from his seat and quickly refilled Miral's bowl. "You're hungry today."

She acknowledged his comment with a beguiling smile. "We ran a timed mile in gym today. I did it in 7 minutes and twenty seconds. That's my best time ever."

"That's great. You know, I like to go running," John said. He sat back down, put his elbows on the table, and regarded Miral critically. "Maybe we should go together one day."

A broad grin spread across Miral's face. "I'd really like that." She considered for a moment. "I've been thinking about *Voyager* a lot." Miral's expression turned pensive. "Nobody would be talking about Daddy and Mommy if we'd stayed in the Delta Quadrant."

"Possibly, but then you and I wouldn't be sitting here right now." John's lips twitched upward into the slightest of smiles. "And I thought about your mother a lot when she was gone, so while I know you are having a rough time at school right now, I'm glad you aren't still lost in the Delta Quadrant."

"You know," Miral said with the pedantic seriousness of a ten-year old, "*Voyager* wasn't lost; they knew exactly where they were, even if Starfleet didn't."

At this, John did laugh. "You're right. But *Voyager* was gone for four years before anyone knew what had happened to them." He sucked in his breath. "To be honest, I didn't even know your mother was on that ship. I'd, I'd lost track of her after she left the Academy. When I learned she was alive, it was like finding a treasure again."

"I've read some of my dad's logs," Miral said. "They had so many adventures. Do you know once my dad disobeyed the captain and took a shuttle to rescue a planet that was nothing but water?" Her voice rose excitedly. "I can't even imagine a planet that is made of water!"

"Don't worry," John said gently. "There are plenty of adventures to be had on Earth. And who knows? Maybe one day you'll decide to go into Starfleet yourself." He saw Miral brighten at the suggestion.

Miral said, "I've been drawing *Voyager* for my art class. I like to imagine what it would have been like to be in space and all the way in the Delta Quadrant. I've never been further than Jupiter Station."

“Don’t worry. Like I said, there’s plenty of time to explore when you’re older.”

“I guess you’re right.” Miral sighed and pushed her empty bowl away. “Let’s go outside.”

John followed her to the patio. At some point, he figured, they should sit down and do homework, but for now, he was willing to let her explore a little bit. Miral sat in one of the red and orange striped lawn chairs on the deck, and leaned forward, resting her elbows on her thighs, contemplating the vista in front of her. The gentle roll of red sand, sprinkled with scrub brush, and the occasional prickly pear cactus, and the wide shimmering expanse of the lake beyond.

“It’s so quiet here,” Miral said. “I like it. In San Francisco, everywhere you turn, there’s noise.” She wrinkled her nose. “I guess that’s why you prefer to live out here.”

“I’ve always preferred being outside,” John answered, settling into the chair next to hers. “I spent a few years in San Francisco during my time at the Academy and then after I graduated. It’s a nice city but—” He paused. “I like it out here better.”

“I do too.” Miral bit her lip. “That’s why I wanted to come out here the other day.”

“I’m glad you feel comfortable enough to come to me.” Truth be told, John had always thought that Miral had enjoyed a closer relationship with her Paris grandparents, but he was starting to wonder about that. “I’ll always listen, but you really need to talk to your parents first.”

“They seem so busy lately, and so *sad*.” Miral scuffed at some dirt on the wooden slat with the toe of her shoe. “I don’t want to bother them.”

“They have a lot on their minds, but you’re never a bother to them.”

“I liked it better when they yelled.”

John closed his eyes briefly as the memories flooded in. As his marriage had deteriorated, he and his wife had fought, until one day he decided it wasn’t worth having a conversation with her because she would react badly to anything he had to say, argued about everything, acted as if everything about him just irritated her. He couldn’t even remember what the topic was, what irritated him at that moment, but he kept quiet to avoid another pointless fight until eventually he concluded that it wasn’t worth carrying on like this anymore. Eventually she too had given up. He’d kept his distance from his daughter and her husband, but what little he’d seen of their interaction over the years, he’d felt the strength of their commitment and connection. A tinge of worry nibbled at the back of his mind. What if his daughter was reenacting the family history?

“They will get through this,” John said finally.

“I just hope the hearing went okay.”

“You don’t have to worry about that. Your parents will handle it well,” John said firmly. “After *Voyager* returned, your parents had to go to a lot of meetings and hearings about their journey. There was a lot of curiosity, a lot of stories.” He smiled. “It was stressful, but once it was over, your parents were able to settle into their new life with you.” John recalled very little of those halcyon days. Owen and Julia Paris monopolized most of Tom and B’Elanna’s time and attention. After all, Owen Paris was a ranking

admiral with a lot of influence, and he was the proper person to shepherd his son and daughter-in-law through all the bureaucracy, not John Torres whose Starfleet days were long behind him. With the Paris family always front and center, John had melted into the background, not quite knowing how to rebuild a relationship with the daughter whose moods seemed to alternate between anger and sarcasm. Only Tom Paris seemed to be able to smooth out her edges, sometimes with just a look. Over time, John found it easier to just stay away. "I thought you had a school trip to *Voyager* recently?"

"I did, but I want to go back. There's so much to see," Miral said wistfully. "I used to think it was neat that I was born on *Voyager*, but now I'm not sure. My friends seem to think it's funny now that I'm from outer space. They like to talk about my dad turning into a lizard. Someone asked me if I was part-lizard." She looked down at her fingers. "I don't really want to go back to that school."

"Did you tell your parents?"

"No."

"You should," John said gravely. "Parents aren't mind readers, you know. They don't know what's going on if you don't tell them." He paused a moment, remembering similar moments with a surly pre-adolescent B'Elanna. He'd longed to reach out to his daughter, to understand what she was thinking, but she'd always seemed moody and would shut down when he tried to pry. After a while, he'd given up. Now he had a second chance to make it right and he was determined not to give up. "How was school today?"

A frown crossed Miral's face. "I just felt like everyone was staring at me at lunch." She brightened. "But I showed them when I ran that mile faster than almost everyone else today. A Klingon is just as good as a human."

John reached for Miral's hand, wrapping his weathered and brown fingers around hers. "There's no comparison," he said gently. He stood up, gently urging Miral to her feet. "I know you have homework to do, but why don't we go down to the lake for a few minutes?" And then with a teasing note in his voice, "I'll race you!"

And with that, Miral took off, jumping off the edge of the porch, and running towards the lake, her brown hair flying behind her.



Chapter Thirty-Seven

"You're going to do great." Ksenia stood on her tiptoes and kissed Harren lightly on the lips. Her hands were warm as she cupped his face. It was impossible for him to think straight when Ksenia was around. She pulled gently away from him, and then took his hand and urged him onto the set. "Later," she said seductively, "I'll thank you properly."

Harren followed Ksenia and took his seat next to hers. He knew Ksenia was feeling exhilarated over all the attention her scoop on the transwarp flight had garnered, and the revelation of the affair between

Admiral Kathryn Janeway and Tom Paris had only added to her rising star status. Ksenia had basked in the spotlight, and the previous night, when they'd been curled up on the sofa in Harren's luxurious hotel suite, Ksenia had been beside herself with excitement.

"I always dreamed something like this would happen, and now that it has, it's all because of you!" Ksenia had said, looping her arm around his neck. "It was my investigative reporting skills that led me to believe there was a story just begging to be told, and I did uncover the basic facts on my own, but you certainly helped." Her eyes shone in the dimly lit suite. "I can never thank you enough for this."

"There's no need," Harren had answered primly.

"This story has changed everything for me," Ksenia had continued, enthusiasm coloring her voice. "Did you know that the local news anchor on Jupiter Station has moved on to the Mars beat? As a result, Starfleet News made me an offer to fill that vacancy."

"You're going to Jupiter Station?" Harren asked in disbelief.

"Yeah. Isn't it great? I'm finally getting my big break, Morty baby. It's about time." She'd risen from the sofa, headed to the fully stocked minibar at the far end of the room, and poured two glasses of champagne. She returned to Harren's side, pressing a glass into his hand. "They want me there in two days."

"Two days?" Harren swallowed hard.

"Yeah. I know it's short notice but it's an incredible opportunity and if I delayed, they might just ask someone else." Ksenia sipped her drink, her shoulders relaxing as she settled against Harren. *Couldn't she see how well she fit with him?* "I can just take a few things now and have the rest shipped later. I've already found quarters on the station." She inhaled more of her champagne. "I've never been to Jupiter Station. You'll have to tell me about it."

Harren had so many questions he thought he might choke, but instead he gulped down the champagne and when Ksenia offered him more, he didn't say no. By the end of the evening, he felt lightheaded and stumbled into bed. He'd slept heavily, and when he rose late in the morning, he saw Ksenia had already left – if she'd even stayed through the night.

Now, staring at her in the bright studio lights, he felt his insides clenching. Henry Calder was there too, his face stiff with make-up, as he leaned in towards Ksenia. Harren resisted the urge to move his chair in between the two of them. After all, as he'd been reminded many times, the cameras were running.

"So, we know Starfleet has been investigating these two incidents," Calder said in his smooth baritone. "The transwarp flight as well as the affair, but what's interesting is we have no idea what is currently happening."

Ksenia nodded. "I've checked with my sources and they have no word on the outcome of the hearings, which I understand have concluded at this point and deliberations are underway. Starfleet has been very hush-hush about the whole situation. My sources tell me that Tom Paris hasn't been seen at the Academy in nearly a week – rumors have it that he's been put on administrative leave - but there was a sighting of Janeway and Chakotay in Carmel a few nights ago. My sources inform me that they ordered the Purple Eggplant's tasting menu—"

"Pricey but delicious," Henry put in.

"Then you know it?" Ksenia's lips curled in pleasure. "It is very exclusive, and reservations are hard to get. No doubt Janeway was able to use her connections to get in." She tossed her hair lightly. "Tell me, Henry, what was your favorite dish there?"

"I was quite fond of the crab," Henry said. "And of course, the ribeye was stunning. The chocolate torte as part of the dessert serving—" he puckered his lips to two of his fingers and flicked his hand outwards "—was delightful. I wonder what Chakotay and Janeway ordered, hmmm?"

Harren couldn't help but roll his eyes. *How utterly inane*. He let his thoughts wander as Ksenia and Henry continued to discuss the menu for another few minutes, including commentary about the décor ("Very French" and "the linens are exquisite") as well as accolades for the service ("top notch"). As the conversation diverted into a comparison of replicated meat versus actual meat, Mortimer's thoughts wandered to some of the computational intricacies of gravitational wave dynamics and the difficulty he'd been having in defining 11 dimensions as required for string theory. This was the one block standing between him and the ultimate demolition of Wang's Second Postulate. He was mentally calculating the numbers when Ksenia's sharp-toed shoe kicked him in the shin. He winced in pain.

"What do you think, Mortimer, based on your knowledge of the Admiral and Commander," Ksenia said pleasantly as Mortimer valiantly attempted to ignore the pain radiating up and down his leg. "Chakotay is a vegetarian, I understand. What do you think he would have eaten at a place like this? Do you think he would have appreciated the cuisine?"

Harren shook his head, partially in disbelief. "I don't know," he said finally.

Ksenia appeared surprised by the revelation. "I thought you said you knew the crew well, that you *are* familiar with Chakotay's eating habits."

"Aboard *Voyager*, he ate a vegetarian diet, but I haven't shared a meal with the man in many years," Harren said. "I have no idea what he'd like *now* or if he's even still a vegetarian."

Ksenia tossed her blond hair irritably as she twisted away from Harren. "And, Henry, apparently Janeway and Chakotay spent the night at the adjoining inn rather than returning to her place in San Francisco." Ksenia leaned a little closer to Henry. "It's clear there are no problems between Janeway and Chakotay regarding these incidents. The eyewitness accounts detail a couple who seemed very attentive to each other and were smiling and laughing. Certainly not the picture you'd get if her career was at stake."

"You really think Janeway's career is at risk?" Calder asked.

"It's hard to say. I've asked a few people with knowledge of military law and their opinions were inconclusive. Later in the program, we'll have retired Admiral Daniel Curry join us to give us his opinions on exactly what he thinks will happen to Admiral Janeway and Tom Paris," Ksenia said. "It will likely depend heavily on how Janeway handles the panel at her hearing. Of course, based on her performance at the debriefings ten years ago, I have no doubt she will have the Inquiry Board eating out of her hand." She turned to face Harren. "You know Janeway well, Mortimer. What do you think?"

He cleared his throat, very aware of the heavy weight of Henry's stare upon him. He felt the heat rising in his face as he tried to formulate a response, but no words came. "I wasn't in the room when she was

being questioned,” Harren said finally. “I wouldn’t want to speculate on how she’ll handle the new questions now.”

“But you served on away missions with her,” Ksenia said with a steely edge to her voice. “You know how she reacts in a high stress situation.”

Harren waved off the comment flippantly. “Frankly, Admiral Janeway has faced many challenging situations but I don’t think these incidents are on a par with our struggles with the Borg or even when the Hirogen decided to turn *Voyager* into a battlefield for their own entertainment. I don’t think it’s very productive or even useful to your viewers for me to cogitate on how Janeway handled this so-called hearing.”

Henry Calder pressed his lips into a thin line, and he gave a slight nod to a producer standing just off the set. “When we come back, we’ll have more insights on what Janeway and Tom Paris might be thinking while they wait as their fate is decided.” He and Ksenia fixed plastic smiles towards the camera and after twelve seconds, Ksenia ripped her microphone off. She turned on Mortimer in a fury.

“What the hell is the matter with you?” she shrieked.

Harren arched his eyebrow. “With me? Nothing.”

“You are here as an expert witness and you gave me absolutely nothing to work with. What the fuck are you doing? I’m counting on you, Mortimer.”

“It sounds like you already got what you wanted: a job on Jupiter Station.”

“Is that what this is about?”

“I could ask you the very same question.” Harren got out of his chair and circled past Henry so that he was standing in front of Ksenia. “This is stupid; you’re both just sitting there spouting nonsense. Who cares where Janeway and Chakotay went to dinner or what they ate? What difference does it make?”

“Our viewers care about these details and they are counting on us to supply them. As a journalist, it’s my *job* to make sure our viewers know every detail, that they clearly understand *everything* that happened in this very important story. Details that *you* should know,” Ksenia said, balling her fists into her fist, her elbows jutting out as pointy triangles. “Or is it that you’re a liar?”

Harren recoiled. “A liar?”

“That’s right. One of our producers got a message from someone named Michael Ayala who apparently served aboard *Voyager*. You know him, don’t you? Well, he says you spent the entire seven years of the journey down in the plasma relay room. You never served with the bridge officers, you barely even knew Tom Paris, let alone Janeway.”

“I did go on an away mission with Janeway,” Harren said quietly.

“*One* mission. *One*. So, everything else you’ve been saying this entire time has been nothing but a fabrication? I’ve staked my whole career on this *Voyager* story and you were my primary source,” Ksenia said angrily. “I bet you aren’t even as close to proving whatshisface’s theory about the Big Bang.

You just talk and hope people will actually take you seriously, believe you're someone worth believing when really you're nothing but an arrogant fraud!"

The entire crew around the set was looking at them. Harren carefully unclipped his microphone and put it on the table.

"I'm afraid you're going to have to do the rest of the interview without me," Harren said. The set went quiet as Harren headed for the exit, his hands stuffed nonchalantly in his pockets, whistling a tune. As much as he would have liked to take one last look at Ksenia, he stared straight ahead as he walked out of the studio, into the turbolift, and onto the streets of San Francisco.



Chapter Thirty-Eight

It was just after 1800 hours when Janeway returned to her apartment. She was grateful not to have run into anyone she knew on the short journey from the Starfleet campus. If she was being truly honest with herself, the Gamma Quadrant sounded good to her; she couldn't wait to put some distance between herself and her colleagues. Janeway put her bag inside the hall closet and then went to check on the selection of wine in the cupboard. She selected a vinho verde from Portugal and had just poured herself a glass when her personal comm device had rung and an exasperated Doctor showed up on her screen. Janeway had sipped her wine while listening to the Doctor's rant.

"So, all the Board of Inquiry wanted to ask me was about the treatment we used to restore Captain Janeway and Lieutenant Paris' DNA, and why didn't we try it on the offspring as well. I kept telling them we didn't know if it would work, as the offspring had never been human in the first place, unlike the captain and Mr. Paris, and I didn't have the opportunity to study their DNA and determine if it was feasible. I tried to explain that all our resources and efforts were going toward recovering our crewmembers, but I don't think they were really interested in anything I had to say," the Doctor had huffed, his holographic ego clearly wounded by his time in front of the Board of Inquiry. Janeway had pressed her fingers to her forehead massaging the skin, told the Doctor she understood but that she was needed elsewhere. She'd ended the call then and headed into the bathroom to run a bath.

Janeway closed her eyes as she leaned back in the warm water, the faint smell of lavender wafting through the air, ebbing away the stress from earlier in the day. She'd spent most of the day sequestered in a briefing room - the same one she'd spent many hours in post-Voyager's return, in fact - staring down a panel of her peers who were pursuing a subject she had no interest in discussing. When it was over, she'd briskly and professionally taken her leave, and had headed straight home. When Chakotay hadn't been in the apartment when she'd arrived; she expected that he was still undergoing his own debriefing, which had been scheduled to start two hours after hers.

His decision to appear in front of the Board of Inquiry had surprised her. He was no longer under Starfleet's jurisdiction; his presence would have been completely voluntary. "I don't have much to add to the story," he'd said when he'd told her he planned to answer Starfleet's summons, "but I know this

is important to your career, and I'm going to do whatever I can to support you, especially since Tuvok can't be here."

She'd been touched by his words. "I'm so sorry about all of this," she'd said.

He'd waved off her apology. "Don't be," he'd said. "None of this is your fault."

Now, the slam of the front door roused her, and she realized she'd nearly fallen asleep. She shifted position and realized from the decidedly cooler water that she'd been in the tub for a long time. Footsteps sounded outside the bathroom door. There was a soft knock, and then Chakotay came into the bathroom.

"Hi," he said. He gave her a warm smile as he sat down on the stool she kept tucked neatly under the vanity. "I was going to apologize for being late, but from the looks of things you seem to have lost track of time yourself."

Janeway rose from the tub and gratefully accepted the large fluffy towel he handed her. Wrapping it around herself quickly, she said, "You're right. What's the time?"

"No need to worry about that," he said, alluding to the tentative plans they'd had for the evening. "I brought home some food for dinner since I figure you'll have plenty of replicated fare in due time. Plus, I imagine after the day you had, you wouldn't want to go out."

"Especially after the debacle the other night at the Purple Eggplant," Janeway said, nodding in agreement. She sighed, thinking about what had happened. She'd been excited to visit the restaurant, but apparently the press had gotten wind that she and Chakotay were there. Fortunately, they hadn't been disturbed during their meal, but as they exited, they'd suddenly been surrounded by a crowd of reporters and greeted with a flurry of questions. Janeway had immediately recognized the woman with the flowing blonde hair as Ksenia Williams – the reporter from Starfleet News Service – who seemed to have made uncovering the truth about Tom Paris' transwarp flight her mission in life. She recalled that Williams had also been the one who had broken the news of Janeway's past romantic relationship with Tom.

"This can't have been an easy day for you either," she said, watching him in the mirror.

Chakotay smiled. "I knew what I was getting into," he said. "The hearing wasn't that bad." He rose, cupped her face in his hands, and kissed her deeply. "And for you, I'd do it again." And then there was no more talking.

Sometime later, Janeway entered the dining room wearing a pale blue linen wrap dress, her damp chestnut red hair loose on her shoulders. The back-patio doors had been thrown open to let in fresh air. Chakotay had set the table and was pouring white wine into goblets. Janeway surveyed the salad sprinkled with currants, the slices of grilled chicken on the side, accompanied by a plate of crostini topped with roasted peppers and olive tapenade, as well as steaming bowls of a carrot soup; the assortment of fragrant aromas filled the air.

"Looks delicious," Janeway said, taking her seat opposite him. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." He took a tentative sip of the wine. "This is a pinot grigio from Vulcan."

Janeway arched an eyebrow. "I had no idea you could grow grapes on Vulcan."

"Nor did I." Chakotay grimaced. "Tuvok recommended this vintage a long time ago but I never came across it until now. It's not bad but—"

"It's all right," Janeway assured him. "I appreciate the gesture." She took a deep breath. "So how was it?"

"Better than yours, I imagine. I told them I couldn't really talk about your relationship with Tom because I didn't know about it until it was over so that line of questioning ended pretty quickly," Chakotay said. He bit into the crostini delicately and then put it down on his plate. "What about you? Do you want to talk about it?"

"It was as uncomfortable as you guess." Janeway shook her head. "When I came out of the briefing room, Owen Paris was waiting for me." She frowned at the memory of her former mentor sitting ramrod straight on one of the uncomfortable benches outside of the briefing room. "I can't figure out if he's angrier at me or Tom, but at this point I've run out of things to say to him."

"You don't owe anyone any explanations."

"I know that," Janeway said. She speared a piece of chicken with her fork. "But it's *Owen*, Chakotay, my former mentor, the man I spent the early part of my career looking up to. And this is his *son*. And he just sat back and let Tom be thrown to the wolves."

"His son is a grown man who made his own decisions."

"Well, there were six people in that room who didn't seem to think that was the case. Apparently, as the captain, this was all my responsibility." Janeway gritted her teeth. "There were questions about whether it was *appropriate* for a commanding officer to have a relationship with a subordinate in her chain of command... I pointed out it wasn't the first time in the history of Starfleet that this had happened, but that didn't seem to hold water. It's as if there was a different standard for me compared to everyone else." She slumped back in her chair. "I don't know, Chakotay. There was a moment when I was just so *tired* of fighting. The questions kept coming, but I don't think I gave them the answers they wanted, because they kept getting more and more intrusive."

Chakotay's expression turned serious. "Do I want to know?"

Janeway sighed. "They wanted all the details. When did the affair start, how did it progress, were we 'in love', who broke it off and when, and how the transwarp flight figured into the general timeline of *our* relationship. They even hinted that I may have had ulterior motives for getting him released from prison to join me on *Voyager*."

"Other than the purpose you've already acknowledged, to use his knowledge of my cell to track me down."

She took another sip from her glass, noting that the taste seemed to improve with more exposure, and smiled wearily. "To be honest, given how long ago all of this happened, my own memories of dates and events are fuzzy."

"So, what's the outcome?" Chakotay asked.

Through gritted teeth, Janeway said, "I was informed that the panel would announce its conclusion as soon as they had finished gathering all the evidence." She frowned. "The Doctor testified before me, apparently."

"Our Doctor?" Chakotay said in astonishment. "Did they say why?"

Janeway looked away. "Well the Doctor called minutes after I arrived home and I guess they wanted to know more about the offspring we left behind," she said with a grimace.

This time it was Chakotay's turn to look away uncomfortably. "You mean that I left behind, a decision which I had to discuss *ad nauseum* this afternoon with the Board."

"Yes." She tried to smile but failed. "Yours and Tuvok's." She anticipated his next words. "You don't need to apologize, Chakotay. You've already explained your reasoning, and I accept it. You did what you thought was best – for all of us."

"I wasn't going to apologize," Chakotay said. He laid his hand on hers. "I was just going to say that there was no need for *you* to feel any guilt whatsoever in what transpired."

"Thank you." Janeway picked up her soup spoon and to change the subject, said, "You never did tell me how your get-together with B'Elanna went the other day." She pushed away the bowl, untasted. "I wonder how she's managing all this drama."

Chakotay pursed his lips into a thin line. Finally, he said, "I think you can guess how she's doing. But she and Tom will work it out. They always do."

Janeway shook her head. That there was even something to work out dismayed her.

"It all happened a long time ago. There shouldn't be anything to work out." It sounded like rationalization, a bit of guilt nibbling away at her. Firmly, she pushed the thought away. "I don't suppose you have any secrets you'd like to share with me," she said with a lightness she didn't quite feel.

Chakotay's lips twisted into a lopsided grin. "I think you know everything there is to know about me," he said easily. "The question is whether *you* have any doubts."

"About us?" She shook her head. "No, of course not."

"I'd hate to leave anything unsaid before you disappear into the Gamma Quadrant."

"Provided I keep my commission."

"I have no doubt you will," Chakotay said. "You're too respected, too valuable to Starfleet for them to discharge you." He leaned forward, the light catching in his eyes. She thought she detected just the slightest hint of watery emotion. "You're going to come through this, Kathryn, just like you always do."

His confidence and faith warmed her. Janeway reached across the table, intertwining her fingers with Chakotay's. "Well, whatever happens here, I've decided to accompany you back to Betazed," she said.

"It will actually be easier for me to catch a shuttle from there to Deep Space Nine and then head to the Gamma Quadrant. So, provided I'm not drummed out of Starfleet for 'conduct unbecoming to an officer,' we'll be able to spend more time together before my next assignment actually begins."

Chakotay paused for a moment and then nodded. "I'd like that," he said finally, and Janeway wondered at the momentary hesitation.



Chapter Thirty-Nine

Tom's audible sigh caught B'Elanna's attention. He'd been thumbing through a PADD, his expression glum, but sitting mostly in silence, only occasionally responding to a very chatty Miral who sat across from him at the breakfast table.

"What is it?" B'Elanna said, not bothering to disguise the sharp undertone. During the twenty-four plus hours that had passed since Tom's hearing at HQ, she'd vacillated between anger, compassion, empathy and frustration. There were moments when she wanted to wrap her arms around him and other times when she wanted to chuck a heavy object in his direction. Her husband had always had the propensity to be a thoughtless idiot, but the current situation strained every nerve. Even now, the fact that Tom seemed to be taking *forever* to respond to her question was beyond annoying. She tightened her grip on her coffee mug. "Tom?"

"The Inquiry Board has made its decision and they will announce it in a closed-door session at 1400 hours today," Tom said.

Miral, seated across the table from him, looked at him, concern clearly etched across her face. A few meters away, coffee cup in hand, B'Elanna took in the scene. This domesticity was something she'd once thought she'd never thought she'd have in her life, and even now, she didn't take it for granted. A guilty verdict from the Inquiry Board could mean any number of things for Tom, including removal from his post at the Academy or possibly even the loss of his commission in Starfleet. She had no idea what was going to happen to their family, or how any of them was going to handle what came next, but for now, she would be grateful for this moment.

"Oh." B'Elanna's hands trembled as she put the cup down on the counter. Miral chewed on her bottom lip, and to assuage his daughter's concern, Tom reached across the table and patted Miral's hand.

"Don't worry," he said, "it will be fine." His gaze shifted to B'Elanna. "It will be fine," he repeated as if trying to convince himself.

"Does this mean you're still in trouble?" Miral asked softly. Something in her daughter's voice caught at B'Elanna's heart; this was too much stress for a young girl to have in her life.

"Nothing I can't handle," Tom answered. He got up, and on his way to the coffee maker, ruffled Miral's curly brown hair. "I've been in trouble before, and while it was hard, I got through it."

“But you and Mom keep saying everything they’re mad about happened a long time ago, even before you were dating,” Miral said. “Why are you *still* in trouble?” Her voice was tremulous.

B’Elanna bit back her instinctive retort that there was no statute of limitations on idiocy and decided instead to go with a safer response. “Starfleet officers represent the Federation, and as such they must always conduct themselves in such a way that there is never any suspicion about their actions. It’s the job of Starfleet Command to make sure officers are behaving in such a way as not to elicit reproach.” The words sounded bureaucratic and hollow even to her own ears.

Miral’s very skeptical look told B’Elanna that this explanation held no water. “Even if it was *years* ago?”

Tom muttered under his breath. In a louder voice, he said, “Yes. And because I do teach at the Academy and it’s—well, parents want to make sure that whoever is teaching their kids is a good role model.” He placed his hand lightly on Miral’s shoulder. “So that’s why there was a hearing. To clear up any of those doubts.”

“Could you go to jail?” Miral asked.

Tom let out his breath slowly. “No, I don’t think that’s likely.”

B’Elanna shifted uneasily in her seat. Catching sight of the time, she said, “Miral, time for school.”

The ten-year old seemed to move slower than molasses in winter. B’Elanna took a step towards her daughter, taking in the slouch of the shoulders, the drop of the head. Miral had been eager to go to school the previous two days and had seemed relatively happy but now B’Elanna wondered if something else had happened.

“Maybe she can take the day off,” Tom said, turning towards B’Elanna. “I’m sure everyone is going to be talking about this and—” he swallowed hard. B’Elanna realized he was already thinking about the worst-case scenario. And regardless of the verdict, they would need time to react, calibrate their responses. She swallowed hard, nodding her acquiescence to his suggestion.

B’Elanna shifted her glance towards Miral. “Maybe my father can spend the day with you.” Only a few weeks ago, Julia Paris would have been her first phone call. Now, B’Elanna was heartened to see Miral’s face brighten at the suggestion of spending more time with her maternal grandfather. “Miral, why don’t you go upstairs and get dressed?”

After Miral left, B’Elanna called her father and quickly explained the situation. He had an appointment in the morning, but assured B’Elanna it was not a problem to move it to another day. A surreptitious look out of the windows showed that the press still there, and B’Elanna knew it was imperative to get Miral out of the house. She made a second call to Ayala, who was able to arrange a multi-jump transport so Miral could be beamed directly to John Torres’ home in an hour’s time. After B’Elanna had finished all the arrangements, she returned to the kitchen to find Tom glumly staring at the message his father sent.

“I guess I’ll have to go down there this afternoon,” he said finally. He stroked his chin. “I’m going to have to shave.”

B'Elanna took in his disheveled appearance, and the new lines furrowing his forehead. She pressed her palms on the table, resting her weight forward, as she looked intently at her husband. "I'm coming with you."

"Thanks, but you don't have to. The media will be lying in wait." Tom's lips twisted into a sardonic grin. "You don't have to be a part of that."

B'Elanna took a deep breath. "I already am. We're going to get through this as a family."

Tom offered her a thin-lipped smile. "Thank you for that." He pushed his chair back, ran his hand through his hair. "I've got a few things to do and you've probably got some engineers who are missing you right now." He left his coffee cup behind as he went up the stairs, his footsteps receding.

B'Elanna settled in her home office, and as she logged onto her work terminal. She spent the next couple of hours going through some technical specs and making sure each one met requirements before signing off on them as well as working through some personnel issues, but it was difficult to concentrate.

She rubbed her eyes with the back of her hand. She thought about Tom's comment that their lives needed a course correction and she knew that where they navigated to next depended entirely on whatever conclusion the Inquiry Board had reached, and how that decision would affect Tom's future both in Starfleet and at the Academy. She remembered what her father had told her: that it had been difficult to adjust after he'd been discharged from service.

At lunch time, she found Tom in the garden, digging up the garden beds. His face was sweaty, his hands crusted with dirt, as were the knees of his blue jeans. He grinned at her as she approached.

"I didn't know you were out here," she said.

"I didn't want to bother you," he said.

She surveyed the garden. All the dead plants had been removed and the rose bushes were planted in even spacing against the wooden fence. Tom had even replaced a few of the bricks which had tumbled from the edge of the beds.

"Thank you for doing this," she told him.

"You're welcome." He brushed a dirty hand across his sweaty brow. "It's a good distraction." He glanced at her sideways. "And I thought the flowers would make you happy." There was a slight catch in his voice that caught B'Elanna's attention.

"What about you?" she asked, her throat dry. "What will make you happy?"

Tom's shoulders slumped slightly, his gaze distant. "I guess I haven't thought about it."

"You haven't been happy since you came back to San Francisco from Miramar."

That caught his attention. "It was the right decision for me to come back."

"We never talked about it," she said. "You never let me know that you were considering making a career change. One day, you just were here. Is that when we stopped talking to each other?"

Tom glanced at her sideways. "I didn't think there was anything to discuss. I promised you that I'd always be there for you and Miral, and all I was doing was following through."

B'Elanna swallowed hard. "But I always supported your choice to be at Miramar because I knew it made you happy. Were you afraid I was going to talk you out of it?"

He sat back on his haunches, contemplating her. "Maybe." His lips held the faintest hint of a grin. "I can never tell when you need me, and when you don't."

"So, you just assumed what I needed was for you to give up your dreams?"

"Yeah. I guess so."

"And you've resented me ever since."

"No!" Tom's voice was sharp. "B'Elanna—"

She sank down on the bench, staring at the freshly turned flower beds. It would be lovely once they bloomed, a cacophony of color. That Tom was putting so much effort into bringing this garden to life gave her hope.

She held her hand up. "I'm sorry," she said. "I guess it's so easy to fall into old patterns, isn't it? We never stop being who we were, no matter how hard we try."

Tom let out a heavy sigh. "Yeah."

B'Elanna clasped her hands together as she watched Tom kick at a clod of dirt with his boot. Finally, he looked back at her.

"I've got to shower if I'm going to report to Starfleet Command at 1400 hours." He managed a very slight smile. "You know, I've never been good at sticking at any one thing for very long. Why not just prove to my father that he's been right about me all along?"

"That's not true!"

Tom hesitated, and for a moment she thought he was going to launch into a recital that would include Caldik Prime, the Maquis, New Zealand and then of course, *Voyager*. She'd heard him say in the past that it was only because they were stuck out in the Delta Quadrant that he'd managed to hold onto his role as chief helmsman for seven years. Instead, Tom's expression was pensive as he wordlessly passed her and went into the house. Standing alone in the courtyard, B'Elanna shivered and then followed Tom. She went into her office, intending to work some more, but found she couldn't concentrate. Finally, she went up to the bedroom and found Tom there, his facial stubble gone, his hair neatly combed, and dressed in the same black suit and white shirt he'd worn to his hearing.

"How do I look?" he asked. "Like a middle-aged Captain Proton?"

"Captain Proton has nothing on you." She cupped his face in her hands. A familiar gesture from years ago, but one that felt curiously foreign now. "I'm coming with you."

Tom looked surprised. "You don't have to do that."

"I know. I want to." She slipped her fingers into his. "You came home when I needed you the most," her voice shook slightly, "and I'm sorry I forgot that." She looked at him unflinchingly. "We'll face whatever it is - together."



Chapter Forty

The Inquiry Board room, despite having ample seating for up to 50 people, seemed claustrophobic to B'Elanna, even though there were only a handful of spectators – no press, thank God -- present. She could almost feel the walls closing in on her as she settled into the seat next to her husband. Tom's fingers curled around hers, and she resisted the urge to massage the tension out of his straight-line shoulder posture. Admiral Kelvin and the rest of the Board of Inquiry had yet to arrive.

"You all right?" she asked Tom.

"I just want to get this over with so we can go back to living our lives."

She squeezed his hand in response. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Janeway arrive, Chakotay a few steps behind her. Deliberately, B'Elanna glanced towards the empty table in front of them. A few minutes passed and then Admiral Kelvin, followed by the rest of the Board came down the center aisle of the room.

Kelvin took her position in the center seat, her hair pulled sternly away from her stern face. She looked first towards Tom and B'Elanna, and then to the other side of the room to take in Janeway and Chakotay.

"Thank you for joining us," Kelvin said. B'Elanna bit back a nervous giggle at the statement. *As if there had been any other choice.* "We appreciate your cooperation as we work through this matter. We understand that the two incidents under consideration did occur many years ago, but we have a responsibility to evaluate all questionable events that occur under Starfleet's purview, whether during a mission or here at the Academy." She took a sip of water from the glass in front of her before picking up a PADD. "After speaking to everyone involved, we have decided to close this inquiry as we've found no evidence of wrongdoing. We accept the narratives regarding the relationship between Kathryn Janeway and Thomas Paris as presented and we accept the testimony of the Emergency Medical Hologram who was acting as Voyager's chief medical officer at the time, who did stipulate that as sentient beings, regardless of evolutionary form, both Kathryn Janeway and Thomas Paris were able to consent to what occurred between them. There will be no further investigation or repercussions."

B'Elanna felt dazed at the sudden anti-climax. She turned to Tom. Did this mean what she thought it meant?

"We thank you for your time and your attention and are sorry for any inconvenience. This matter is hereby dismissed," Kelvin continued primly. She glanced around the room, and sensing no questions, she rose. "We will release a statement to the press in approximately one hour." And with a curt nod of her head, Kelvin left the room. The other members of the Board were quick to follow.

"Thank God," Tom said softly as B'Elanna put her arm across his shoulders, resting her chin against him. Tom's chest heaved as he dropped his head, his hands clasping hers tightly.

They were still sitting like that when Owen Paris approached them. B'Elanna had been unaware that her father-in-law had been in the room, and she wondered where and with whom he had been sitting. Remembering how Owen had disappeared completely during the Caldik Prime hearings, she thought it would have been a nice – if not belated – gesture of support if Owen had come to sit with them during the announcement.

"Hello, Tom, B'Elanna," Owen said as he stood in front of them. Tom cleared his throat, his grip tightening around B'Elanna's hand.

"Hello, Father," Tom said, his shoulders stiffening as he sat up a little straighter in his seat.

"Now that the Board has concluded their deliberations in your favor," Owen said, giving his daughter-in-law a brief glance but keeping his primary attention on his son, "I'm optimistic we can put this little affair behind us."

Tom stiffened at this comment, but B'Elanna lifted her chin defiantly to look at her father-in-law.

"Does this mean Tom can return to his position at the Academy?" B'Elanna asked. Might as well cut straight to the chase.

It took a moment for Owen to respond and then he nodded slowly. "So it appears. Of course, the *circumstances*," he said and the peculiar way he emphasized the word 'circumstances' grated on B'Elanna's nerves, "were highly irregular. Obviously, what happened between Tom and Kathryn is *not* the way Starfleet would like its officers to conduct themselves."

The haughtiness of Owen's tone grated on B'Elanna's nerves, but also seemed to jerk Tom to attention.

"You mean the circumstances under which I would have an affair with my commanding officer? Or the circumstances in which I abducted and mated with her while we were both in a state of hyper evolution?" Tom asked softly.

"Fortunately," Owen went on as if Tom had not spoken, "the board decided to be lenient. There will be no further repercussions, nothing entered into official service records." His gaze was direct. "This incident should not negatively impact your chances for future promotion."

Tom's jaw tightened. "I took a step back three years ago, Dad, in a decision that you've never agreed because it meant I was putting my family first, before my career," he said quietly. "That I was worried about promotions is laughable."

"You got off scot-free," Owen pressed on, "but you do understand your behavior also put your post at the Academy in jeopardy. The fact that you've been cleared-- I assume you will petition the Academy for reinstatement. If you'd like, I can put in a good word for you with the Chancellor."

Tom pressed his lips into a thin line, his eyebrow arching as he looked at his father.

"I thought you said you didn't ask for favors," he said carefully, but the way he said the words made B'Elanna wonder what he was really thinking. It occurred to her that it had been a long time since she'd asked that question. Tom had always been an open book, or so she'd thought until recently. Now she realized just how little she understood about him anymore. "Or is it because I've been cleared that you're willing to help me *now*?"

Owen crossed his arms against his chest. "You understand I couldn't be seen as—"

Tom held up his hand. "Forget it, Dad," he said, his voice carrying clearly across the mostly empty room. "I *do* understand." His fingers tightened around B'Elanna's, and she leaned in closer to him. "Whenever I've needed you the most, you seem to disappear. I don't know why I should expect anything different from you." His gaze was unwavering as he looked at his father. "I don't need your help. My wife and I will decide what to do next based on what's best for our family."

Owen opened his mouth to speak but then was distracted by approaching footsteps. "Ah, Kathryn."

B'Elanna felt the heat rise in her face. Though she'd met Chakotay for coffee near the beginning of this whole media firestorm, this was the first time she'd seen Admiral Janeway since the news of the affair had come to light. This wasn't the time to lose her composure, she knew. She didn't twist in her seat to look at the new arrival. But it wasn't necessary. Within seconds, Kathryn Janeway was standing next to the Admiral.

"Hello, Owen," Janeway said briefly, then turned to Tom and B'Elanna. "I'm sure that you're as relieved as I am that the Inquiry Board came to its senses and ended this farce." Her glance briefly rested on her former mentor. "And I assume you're also pleased to have this whole episode behind us as well."

"Well, of course," Owen said.

B'Elanna was fascinated by the way Owen seemed to cower just slightly in the presence of Kathryn Janeway. She'd never imagined Owen to be awed by anyone but then there was something about Kathryn Janeway that had always been larger than life, a charismatic pull, this feeling that you were the only person in the room she was speaking to. B'Elanna had basked in that glow early in her days aboard *Voyager* when she and Janeway had connected over esoteric engineering concepts, but it had been a long time since she'd seen that effect on someone else.

"Obviously, I would have preferred a reunion like the one we had last time, at Pismo, but it's always good to see you two." An uneasy silence descended on them and then Janeway said softly, "B'Elanna, could I talk to you privately for a moment?"

B'Elanna exchanged a look with Tom; his nod was barely perceptible. She slowly rose to her feet, emotion churning within her, and followed Janeway a few steps away from the men.

"How are you?" Janeway asked, concern plain in her voice. She reached out and gently touched B'Elanna's arm. B'Elanna resisted the urge to pull away.

"I wish I knew," B'Elanna said softly. "It's been a lot to absorb."

"I'm sorry about all of this," Janeway said. She waved her arm indicating the room. "This wasn't the way for you to find out about the spawn... or the affair."

"No," B'Elanna said sharply. "I don't know why Tom didn't tell me—"

"When our affair ended, I asked him not to tell anyone," Janeway said. "At the time, it seemed to be the best for all concerned." She angled away, her chin lifted a bit as if concentrating on some spot in the distance. "What happened between us was something that shouldn't have. If I'd been thinking rationally about it at the time-- we were both lonely and so reached out to each other. It didn't last because ultimately, we knew we both needed something the other person couldn't – *wouldn't* – be able to provide. It was very early in our journey and obviously, it didn't last."

"But you told Chakotay!" B'Elanna burst out.

"Yes. Because when we were on New Earth, I believed *Voyager* was in my past, and the boundaries of my relationship with Chakotay were evolving," Janeway said. "If we hadn't been on the brink of—well, let's just say that I wouldn't have told him otherwise."

"Well, Tom never told me," B'Elanna said evenly, aware of her husband, Owen, and Chakotay only a few meters away.

"The longer a secret exists, the harder it is to reveal the truth," Janeway said. There was a catch in her voice as she added, "I suppose it became a part of who we were and it's easy to forget the impact the past can have on the present. And I'm sorry you found out this way."

B'Elanna took a deep breath. "Me too."

"Tom loves you, B'Elanna. I hope you give him another chance and work out the difficulties you're having." Janeway glanced back over her shoulder at Chakotay. "Second chances are hard to come by."

With that, she walked away. B'Elanna stood, rooted in place for a moment, and then she turned slowly. Tom was looking at her, and she could see an imploring look in his eyes. *How much of their conversation had he overheard?* His jaw worked slowly, as if caught in indecision, and in that moment, she decided for them both. She closed the distance between them and wrapped her arms around him. She held him, feeling the tension release from his body.

Then softly she said, "Let's go home."



Chapter Forty-One

Janeway threw open the doors to the patio, letting the fresh morning air fill her apartment. She inhaled deeply and then padded back into the kitchen. She stared at the stainless-steel French press, for a moment and then at the replicator. Indecision plagued her for a moment and then she decided to go for the replicator as the effort to make coffee seemed too much this morning and the replicated stuff was *nearly* as good. She was holding a steaming mug of coffee perfection when Chakotay emerged from the bedroom.

"Good morning," he said, leaning down to sprinkle a series of kisses on the nape of her neck, tracing the outline of her face with his fingers. His touch sparked her nerve endings and she felt warm anticipation flooding through her body.

"Sleep well?" she asked, as she turned into his embrace, her arms snaking around him. It felt good to have him here by her side. She kissed him with feeling, reveling in the moment of intimacy.

"Better than well," he said after a moment. He ordered himself some tea at the replicator while Janeway curled up on the sofa, positioning herself so she had a good view of the bay through the open patio doors. After her promotion, knowing she would have to spend more time in proximity to HQ, Janeway had made the decision to move out of the rather drab Starfleet housing and find her own place. At the time, she had toured a variety of apartments, many of which were bigger or more luxurious but none with a view like this. So many times, after a stressful or frustrating day, she'd calmed herself just by staring out at the white swirls of waves crashing against the boulders lining the shore and the blue-green outlines of the hills of Marin County. As Chakotay nestled beside her, she felt a small pang at leaving this all behind.

"I'm going to miss this," she said, waving her hand in the direction of the bay. "You know, I never thought I'd get tired of starship life, but there are certain moments when replicated food and environmental controls can seem so *sterile*." A wistful look crossed her face. "We were lucky to have Neelix on *Voyager*."

"Have you considered trading Starfleet for the Great Betazed Desert?" Chakotay asked, his tone more teasing than serious.

"Hmm, as tempting as that sounds, I could do with a lot less heat and sand," Janeway said. She sighed. "Just feeling a little bit nostalgic." She put her mug down and lightly caressed Chakotay's cheeks with her fingertips. "But there are times when the path I've chosen feels hollow."

"Then you *are* considering the desert..."

"Not that, per se, but I am second guessing the Gamma Quadrant. I spent seven years of my life in the Delta Quadrant, and now I'm looking at a mission whose duration keeps increasing." She looked at Chakotay wistfully. "Commander Tatsuki is excited about the *Allegovia* project and I know he will bring life to it that I never could. But still, I'm wondering if the tradeoff is worth it." She shook her head as she took another sip of her coffee. "If it means being away from you." It was the clearest and most specific comment she had ever made about their relationship.

He intertwined his fingers with hers. "It's been ten years since I resigned from Starfleet," he said carefully, "and this whole episode reminds me of why I left in the first place. I've been on the dig on Betazed longer than I thought I would be, and there isn't much more to accomplish there. It's time for a new challenge."

Janeway remained very still, not wanting to jump to conclusions. "What are you saying?"

"It was nice waking up with you every morning for the past couple of weeks, and I don't want so much time elapse again before I have another opportunity to do so."

"Now that the inquiry has wrapped up and there are no more questions about my fitness to serve, I can't back out of the Dosi negotiations."

"I'm not asking you to." Chakotay took a deep breath. "How would you feel if I came with you?"

"What about the dig?"

"I've been doing some research and there is a Federation-dig on a world not too far from the Dosi homeworld. It would take about three days to get there in a runabout." He shrugged. "There's still a lot of trepidation about the Dominion out there and as a result, there aren't many people willing to go to the Gamma Quadrant. It seems they're looking for a supervisor, someone with a strong background in pre-Kalerian cultures and experience in overseeing a large multi-year excavation. It would be a two-year contract, to start with." He looked at her carefully. "I know how these negotiations go, Kathryn, and you could very well remain out there for that amount of time, if not longer. So, if you agree, I'd going to accept their offer." His lips turned up into a dimpled smile. "In terms of travel time, I think I could handle a few weeks on a starship and once we're out there you might consider taking a day or two off every now and then to get away from replicators and environmental controls while I'll tolerate a few days of civilization to join you on Dosi. What do you think?" He watched her expectantly.

Kathryn looked at him thoughtfully for a moment and then grinned. As he moved to kiss her, she murmured, "Your decision-making ability is one of the things I've already admired about you. I'm glad you're coming with me."



Chapter Forty-Two

He stood in the doorway for a moment staring at the little girl fast asleep in her bed before turning off the light. He went down the hallway where he found B'Elanna getting ready for bed. He watched her brush out her shoulder-length hair. The silky cream-colored nightgown she wore hung loosely on her muscular frame. Tom remembered the young Maquis woman he'd met nearly twenty years prior; her face had been more angular then, her brow ridges more prominent, and her hair short and wild. Over time, her curves had given way to a more muscular physique, her forehead ridges more subdued, and the angles of her face more accented. She put the brush down when she realized he was watching her.

"What?" she asked.

"You're beautiful," he said.

She offered him a tentative smile. "Thanks."

"Thank you for yesterday," he said. "For coming with me."

"You're welcome." B'Elanna rose and went around him, but he caught her by the wrist.

"Hey," he said, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her close. He put his fingers beneath her chin, tipped his head down to kiss her lightly. "I've missed you."

Her voice was shaky. "I've been here."

"I know." Tom said. He loved feeling her against his chest. "I didn't realize I was falling into my father's pattern of behavior, of caring more for what was going on at the Academy than at home. I just couldn't get Tanaka's accident out of my head, and this feeling that there was *something* I could have done. I over-compensated for that, and it took time away from you, Miral, and I'm sorry." He brushed his lips against the top of her head. "The last thing I ever want is for Miral to feel like she can't count on me for anything. And you too, for that matter."

"That makes two of us," B'Elanna said, her voice muffled against his blue t-shirt. "I'm more like my own mother than I realized." She gave a small laugh. "Not telling you what I wanted, my expectations for you, and then condemning you for not realizing what I needed or lashing out when you attempted to help. That wasn't fair to you." She sighed. "You once told me I wasn't my mother, you weren't my father, and I have to believe that that's still true."

"Yes," Tom said with feeling. "I promise to do better in the future. For all of us."

"Me too."

A beat of silence passed between them.

"I really thought my relationship with my father had improved, that we both had changed for the better," Tom said. His voice caught in his throat. "But the moment things got tough, I couldn't rely on him for anything. It was just like Caldik Prime."

"And then my father..." B'Elanna said softly.

"Came through when we needed him to, when he hadn't ever before," Tom agreed.

B'Elanna wrapped her arms around his neck, standing on her tiptoes to kiss him on the lips. "I don't want to talk about them anymore," she said breathlessly. "I just want to start all over again with you."

He put his hands on her hips, pulling her even closer. He enveloped her with his body, and he was grateful that she didn't pull away. She wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him closer to her. A few stumbles later, he pushed her backwards onto the bed, pushing the nightgown up to her hips.



Chapter Forty-Three

Tom finished boxing up the last of his personal items, including the holovid of B'Elanna and Miral. He took one last look around the office that had been his 'home away from home' for the last two years.

"All good things come to an end," he said under his breath.

He placed his hands flat on the desk, leaning forward to compose himself. He'd always been great at escaping situations in the past, but this time, it felt different. He heaved a sigh and was about to pick up his box when there was a knock at the door.

"Come in," Tom said. To his surprise, Mortimer Harren stood in the doorway. Despite the major role Harren had played in the recent scandal, Tom couldn't remember the last time he'd seen the man in the flesh; he'd heard rumors that Harren had been at the reunion on the fifth anniversary of *Voyager's* return to the AQ but hadn't actually seen him.

Harren stood in the doorway, shifting from foot to foot uneasily. Tom rested his elbows on his box, contemplating Harren. The years had apparently been kind to Mortimer; he seemed to have changed little from his *Voyager* days.

"Commander Paris," Harren said awkwardly.

"It's just Tom now. What do you want?" Tom said quietly.

"I guess, just, just to talk?"

"About what?" Tom's voice rose slightly in pitch. "I don't understand *what* you're doing here—"

"I just came to explain—"

"Explain *what*?" Tom said. "What the hell was going on in your head? Do you even know what you unleashed on me and my family?"

Harren's face flushed. "I didn't expect – I didn't think. I was talking about *Voyager* in a bar one night and one thing led to another. I didn't expect a few stories would take a life of their own."

"You turned my life – and my wife and child's lives – upside down," Tom said incredulously. "Why? You went on the Starfleet News Service and presented yourself as an expert about the things and people you know very little about, and with little regard as to the damage you might cause."

"I never expected things to go the way they did," Harren said defensively. "I know what I saw between you and the captain at your commendation ceremony and I know what I heard her say to you later, in the corridor outside your cabin. That was all true."

"Whatever you saw or heard was taken totally out of context. My ten-year-old daughter heard all of it – all the allegations of the affair, and the sordid details that followed," Tom said heatedly. "Look, I'm aware you don't have a high opinion of me, and I know you and B'Elanna didn't always get along when she was your superior officer. If you have a problem with us, then deal with *us*. You don't take it to the media, Harren."

Harren looked at his feet. "I don't have a problem with you," he said. "I thought I was happy alone on my ranch—"

"Until?"

"I wasn't." Harren shook his head. "I went out to west Texas because I wanted the peace and quiet. I wanted to be away from the city lights so I could look at the stars without distraction. I thought this is what I wanted. And then," he smiled wistfully, "I met *her*."

"Who is 'her'?" Tom asked and then comprehension dawned on him. "Ksenia Williams? The reporter?"

Harren nodded. "Yeah. She came by my ranch and we spent the entire day talking. She was interested in me, or so I thought and—" he spread his arms in a gesture of surrender – "she told me she'd read the recently released *Voyager* logs and did I know anything further about the circumstances?" Harren bit his lip as he shook his head. "So, I told her sure, I knew things. She arrived around lunch time and left after breakfast. It had been years since I had – well, let's just say it was nice to have someone to talk to." Harren's lips turned up slightly.

Tom stared at Harren in disbelief. "You turned my life inside out for a *fuck*?"

"I figured as long as I had stories to give her, she would keep coming back," Harren said. "And I was right, but then a couple of days ago, I realized it wasn't me she was interested in, but rather in advancing her own career." He chuckled bitterly. "You know, I'd always tell the other engineers that people were a waste of time. What is true and steadfast are numbers, and how the universe can be explained with such elegance with multivariate equations."

"So, you were caught in a trap of your own making and you decided to bring me down with you."

"That *wasn't* my intention," Harren protested. "When Ksenia looked at me, I felt important, like I finally mattered. When Ksenia—when she asked me if I was willing to be on television, well, I thought I'd get finally get the *respect* I deserved. Do you know how *hard* it is to spend your entire life working toward a goal and have no one take notice?"

"About the same as it does to spend the last decade trying to prove to the entire galaxy that you're not the person they think they you are, that you've overcome your ill-advised past, and then watch it all evaporate overnight?" Tom asked. "Yeah, I think I got a sense of how that works." He eyed Harren. "Sounds like you haven't made much progress disproving Schlezholt's theory of multiple big bangs then?"

"I, uh, I am closer than ever to achieving my goal," Harren answered.

"And has Wang ever forgiven you for disproving *his* second postulate?"

Harren shifted from foot to foot. "You know about Wang's second postulate?"

"Only by reputation," Tom said, his voice scratchy and rough, "and like him, mine has taken a beating in recent days." He waved his arm around the office and then indicated his packed box. "Just a couple of weeks ago, I thought I had my life figured out. I was on tenure track here, probably would have retired

from Starfleet as an Academy instructor.” His lips twisted into a bitter smirk. “But that’s impossible now, thanks to you.”

Harren gaped. “But you were cleared of all charges? I read the statement myself.”

“Perhaps, but enough history has been dug up, reminders of who I used to be. It’s impossible to return to the classroom now,” Tom said. His expression turned thoughtful. “I suppose it’s time to try something new.”

“I’m really sorry about that, Tom.”

Tom didn’t bother to conceal his contempt at Harren’s apology. “Yeah, me too, but you know, maybe it was time for a change.” Tom picked up his box. “A little advice, Mortimer? Get your head out of the stars and closer to civilization, so you’re not tempted by every shiny little thing that comes by.” With that, Tom brushed by Harren, and stalked down the Academy’s hallowed halls for the last time.



Chapter Forty-Four

The sun hung low in the sky as Tom walked across the Presidio and into the Museum of Starfleet History. A security guard asked if he needed any help, but Tom shook his head. For the first time in years, he knew exactly where he was going.

In the back courtyard, a scaled down replica of *Voyager* cast a shadow across the green. Tom shivered as he walked into the shade. About forty or fifty meters away, he could see B’Elanna sitting on a bench while Miral stood in front of her easel. Tom shoved his hands into the pockets of his leather jacket and quickened his step.

“Hi,” he said as he crossed to give Miral a quick squeeze and examined her drawing closely. “Looks good.”

“You always say that, Dad,” Miral said, but she was smiling.

“Because it’s true,” Tom said, kissing the top of her head. “Don’t let me distract you. I’ll be over here with your mother.”

He sat down next to B’Elanna.

“Sorry I’m late,” he said.

B’Elanna waved his comment off. “It’s a lovely evening and your daughter is intent on getting the windows on Deck Nine absolutely perfect.”

“I have wonderful memories of Deck Nine.”

"And Deck Six too. Those were the good old days, weren't they?" B'Elanna asked wistfully.

"Speaking of the good old days, I was late because Harry called as I was leaving the house."

"Really? What did he want?"

"He and Jyoti got married. Followed our lead and decided on the spur of the moment to ask their captain to perform a marriage ceremony," Tom said, grinning. "He apologized for not inviting us to the wedding, but..."

"We'll send him a gift," B'Elanna said. She hugged herself as she watched Miral carefully and intently painting. "She really *is* talented, Tom. I've been researching schools that specialize in art for her. I think the change will be good for her. I know your father won't like us pulling Miral out of the school because of its Starfleet credentials, but after talking to her more, I think finding a place that's more suited to her would be in her best interest."

"I agree." Tom's smile was thin. "After four generations, I guess there will be no more Parises in Starfleet."

B'Elanna eyed him carefully. "She's only ten, Tom. Kids change."

"I suppose you're right." On his way to the museum, Tom had debated whether to tell B'Elanna about Harren's apology and had initially decided not to bring it up. Now he found himself reconsidering. After all, keeping things to himself had gotten him in trouble with his wife in the first place. "There's something else. Mortimer Harren came by the Academy this afternoon."

B'Elanna stiffened. "What did he want?"

"To apologize."

"A little late for that, isn't it?"

Tom nodded. "That's what I told him, but I guess he wanted to get it off his chest. I hope he feels better now."

B'Elanna laughed shakily. "Well, I'm glad he feels remorse. To be honest, I'm surprised. Mortimer never really had much use for any of us."

"Maybe he's changing," Tom said thoughtfully.

"Perhaps," B'Elanna said in a tone that implied she didn't believe Mortimer Harren had any chance of changing. "Speaking of changes, did you finish packing?"

"Yes." He took a deep breath.

"Any regrets?"

"None."

"How did your father take the news you've decided to leave Starfleet?"

Tom shook his head. "I haven't told him yet, but I imagine he won't like it. Starfleet might be everything to my father, but it's not to me." He pulled a small black box out of his pocket and snapped it open, showing B'Elanna the three pips inside that he'd removed from his uniform collar. She touched them reverently and then pulled her fingers back as she regarded Tom with some concern.

"He'll accuse you of running away," she said quietly.

"So what? I joined Starfleet because of him, and I stayed in Starfleet because of him too. It was never about me, but about him, and what I could do to make him proud. And I know now that will never happen." Tom's expression turned pensive. "Do you realize everything we've worked towards was jeopardized because of the release of some old ship's logs and a lonely asshole who was trying to make himself look important? Tom said. "We both know that there are more of *Voyager* logs that will be released one day, with potentially more secrets that perhaps we don't want to be public knowledge. I don't want to take the risk of some reporter poking around, making a mountain out of a molehill, and then we're scrambling to find some semblance of security again. It's not worth it to me, B'Elanna."

"The revelations will still come even if you're no longer part of Starfleet," B'Elanna said. "Whatever comes, we can't run away from them."

"I realize that, and don't get the wrong idea – I'm not running away. But this entire incident has made me consider just how tenuous our life here is. As long as I'm affiliated with the Academy, I run the risk of being put on leave or having my tenure track yanked away from me and God knows, there could be more that comes out when other logs are declassified." Tom wove his fingers together. "I have few regrets about what happened in the Delta Quadrant, but I'll be damned if I spend the rest of my life having to explain why we did what we did."

"Yeah," B'Elanna said. She took a deep breath. "But we have to be honest with each other." She looked at him questioningly. "There isn't anything else I should know, is there?"

"No. You have my word on that," Tom said. He drew her hand to his lips. "I promise."

B'Elanna shifted her position on the bench. "So, what will you do instead?"

"I thought I'd test the holonovel market."

At this B'Elanna looked amused. "You're not planning to bring back Fair Haven, are you?"

"Maybe not *that* particular program," Tom said. "I have so many stories to tell, and maybe this is the time to take advantage of the opportunity." He looked at her intently. "That's if you agree."

"I want you to do what makes you happy," B'Elanna said.

"Being with you makes me happy," Tom said.

B'Elanna furrowed her brow. "But what about flying? You're *not* going to be happy if you can't fly, Tom." She stroked the top of his hand lightly. "Ever since you left Miramar..."

"I'm leaving Starfleet and all related things behind," Tom responded firmly, then remembered something else. "But there *is* a new spacecraft test facility near Qo'noS..."

"Tom..."

He held up his hand. "I wouldn't ask you to move—"

B'Elanna let out a sigh of relief. "It's not that I want to stay in San Francisco..."

"But you have your own career. I get it." Tom gave her a lopsided grin. "Not everyone gets a chance to design Starfleet's next generation nacelles."

"Speaking of which, did I mention Ayala's sensors do show a marked improvement over the previous technologies? I've decided to incorporate them into the design."

"I'm sure he'll be happy to hear that."

They sat in silence for a moment, both watching Miral who seemed lost in her own world.

She looked wistful. "So where would we live if you took a job at this test facility?"

"I haven't looked into it because I didn't think you'd be interested but if you are.... I'm sure there's a Federation colony somewhere nearby or possibly living quarters at the test facility itself. It doesn't have to be Qo'noS. Why?"

She bent her head. "I *do* have a reason to go to Qo'noS. The Doctor recommended someone there who could possibly help us have another baby. I'd been meaning to tell you about it but then everything blew up and..."

"Is that something you want to do?" Tom asked softly.

"I don't know," B'Elanna answered, her voice cracking. "I don't know if I can go through all of those treatments again with the very real possibility of being devastated again." It was, Tom realized, the first time B'Elanna had put a description on her emotional state.

"Then we don't have to do that." Tom glanced towards Miral who seemed intently focused on her drawing. "I was thinking our family was already perfect. You, me, Miral."

B'Elanna cleared her throat. "You once said you wanted two or three kids," she said shakily. "I don't want to let you down..."

"You're *not* letting me down," Tom said softly. He leaned over to kiss her lightly on the cheek. "I'm okay with stopping, B'Elanna, if you are. If more kids come along, there's no question that I would love them as much as I love Miral. What I'm saying is I don't *need* them to be happy. All I need is you. That *is* the truth."

She was very still, and he wondered if he had said the wrong thing. Finally, she nodded.

"If that's what you want," she said finally. "But if you ever change your mind, we'll talk about it before we make any decisions." She squeezed his hands tightly between hers and then leaned forward to give him a long kiss on the lips. Tom relaxed and put his arm around her, pulling her close. In the light of the setting sun, *Voyager's* hull gleamed.

~ the end

