

Chapter 1

My lawyer told me I shouldn't talk to you, but this is important. You need to know I didn't do anything wrong. Illegal, maybe, and I'll accept my fate. But it was the right thing to do.

Let me explain.

Everything started on July 1, 2388. I woke up as I always did: at 7:35a.m. precisely, at which time I got out of bed, measured 23 grams of coffee, and made an espresso. I foamed 150ml of milk, added it to the coffee, and sat at my LCARS terminal to read the news while enjoying my drink.

It had been ten years since Voyager had returned to Earth from the delta quadrant, and the now famous former crew was hosting a celebration at Starfleet Academy in San Francisco, an event open to the public but only for the first 10,000 who showed up. The event had been publicized for a long time and, since I wasn't really interested in the Voyager story, I decided to stay home (I was living in Kuala Lumpur at the time) to avoid the crowds.

But the headlines were all about the event, with story after story about Janeway's latest Borg training project as admiral and Chakotay's ecological work in the Amazon. I ignored the news, until I saw a headline about the event that caught my attention despite my disdain for these celebrities (and celebrity in general).

SELECTED LOGS FROM VOYAGER PUBLISHED

That got my attention, simply because I thought something about the legal systems in the delta quadrant would be there. I was six months away from finishing my law degree with a specialty in intergalactic law and diplomacy. Reading about the laws of distant civilizations would at the very least be interesting, if not even useful for my career.

So I called up the Voyager logs, which had been published as a book titled *Missives from the Delta Quadrant*.

I didn't get a chance to read much, because I almost immediately got a call. It was Trevor.

"Jason?" he asked on the call as his face showed up on my screen. At the prompt, I turned off the video.

"I am not going to video call you this early in the morning," I said mildly, with hopefully a touch of bemusement in my voice. "Weird of you to call this early."

"Yeah, well, I knew you wouldn't be going to the Academy today, so I wanted to see what you're up to."

"No plans, really," I said. "Maybe go for a walk in London, grab some food and do a bit of reading."

Trevor laughed. "So basically what you do every Saturday, but on a Friday."

I blushed a bit--good thing the video was off. "Am I that boring?"

"Nah," he said, "it's not boring to have a routine. You've just got one, and that's great. Wish I had one."

I knew that meant he wanted me to probe.

"Okay, tell me. What happened last night?"

He laughed. "So Rick and I went to a nightclub in Barbados. Nothing really was on the agenda, just get a couple of drinks and maybe smoke some snakeleaf. But when we got there we saw four girls at the bar, and, man, they were perfect. Two Vulcans and two humans, and the vulcans were--"

"No need, I know what you're going to say. So I guess you slept with one of them?"

Another laugh. "If I slept with one of them I wouldn't be calling you to brag about it. I slept with *three* of them."

I was honestly puzzled, and my better nature knew not to pry with Trevor's shenanigans. Ever since we were in high school, he was always on the prowl for casual sex. He had once told me he hoped to have sex with at least one of every alien in the Federation; and, to be honest, he's probably halfway there by now.

"Congratulations," I said dryly, knowing I couldn't tip my hand too soon, or he just wouldn't answer me and make this conversation last longer than I wanted it to. Which, to be honest, it already had. "So were they in Pon Farr?"

"Nope, just looking to 'broaden our cultural horizons' as T'Plek said," Trevor replied. "I've been with Vulcans before, but this...you should've seen it."

"Even if you have a video, I won't," I said. "Anyway, look, I gotta go."

"No, wait!" Trevor exclaimed. "I'm not just calling to brag about getting laid, but it is pretty damn cool, you gotta ad--okay, I can tell you're getting annoyed. Look, seriously, I want to talk to you about getting a job."

Now I was interested in the conversation for real. Trevor and I were the same age: 23, and while I'd always been serious about pursuing a career, Trevor long ago said he wanted an easy life

with a small house, his basic transporter credits, and as many evenings out partying as possible. That's why most of Trevor's friends weren't also my friends, although, I must admit, I don't have too many friends in general. And it's not that I dislike people. Just not enough time.

"This is the first time I've heard you even think about getting a job," I said. "What's up?"

"I'm just...bored, I guess," he said. A common theme, and the statistics bore it out. As I'd learned in my Economics 101 course at the Academy, 80% of humans who state they do not want a career when they graduate high school end up pursuing one within five years. An easy life of partying, socializing, and hanging out gets old. Having a purpose never gets old.

"So you're finally going to take life seriously," I said with a genuinely happy smile on my face. I sat back in my chair. "Sure, I can help. Meet in London? Say for lunch?"

"I don't want to waste my transporter credits, so I'll take a shuttle. I might not get there until 1. That okay?"

"A bit late for lunch, but sure," I said. Since I get more transport credits than an ordinary Earth citizen (one of the perks of going to the Academy), I'd still be transporting into England.

Chapter 2

After hitting the gym and doing some volunteer robot maintenance at the desalination plant nearby in KL, I jumped on the transporter and beamed to Oxford Circus. I've always been a big fan of England, but not the weather, which is why I moved to Kuala Lumpur when I got into the Academy. My family is all still in New York City, except an aunt of mine who lives in Copernicus City: Lieutenant Sarah, the first in our family to be in Starfleet. I was to be the second.

In July, London is pleasant, with a damp room temperature feel about me and a slight chilly breeze that made me contemplate getting a coat. As I have done every Saturday for the last three years, I walked from Oxford Circus's transport station along Great Russell Street until I came to Bedford Square. A left, another left through Bedford Square Garden, until finally I came to the Jack Horner, a centuries-old pub currently managed by an Anglophile half-Trill half-human who called himself Simon (I have no idea if that's his real name, but I doubt it--he grew up on Trill, after all, and still had a Trill accent when he spoke English).

Simon and I had become good friends after I'd been visiting his pub for a few months, and now I was happy to stop by weekly. It was especially delightful that he knew my order: rocket salad with extra balsamic, toad in the hole, pint of bitter.

It was busy that day so I didn't get a chance to chat with Simon, but he did nod my way when I stepped in as if to say, "don't worry, Jason, I'll start your order." The beer was in front of me maybe three minutes later.

I was early. I'd tried to postpone my arrival, but my schedule was too fixed. I felt a bit out of sorts being here on a Friday instead of a Saturday, but I found that feeling fading as I sipped my beer.

So I opened up the *Missives* book and started reading. The first entry was from Ensign Kim, describing his experience with the Caretaker and his anger at Janeway at destroying the Caretaker without letting them go home first.

"I understand why she did it," Kim said in his log. "She protected the Ocampo, and she stayed to make sure the Kazon wouldn't destroy them after we left. She did the right thing, and she's a good captain and a good officer."

"But," Kim added, "she still left me far from my family and Libby, and part of me may never forgive her."

Although I was reading the log, you could feel the pain in his voice from the words. The poor guy was stuck 70,000 light years away, and he had a life here. They all did. While I'd never thought much about the Voyager story, quietly annoyed that it was such a beloved topic on Earth, I couldn't help but begin to feel some sympathy for the crew and a bit of curiosity about their story. Back then they couldn't know they'd get back in seven years instead of seventy, and the feeling of sadness and isolation must have been horrible.

My salad came. It was 1:03, and still no Trevor. No worries; salads are already cold.

Not only was Kim's log quite moving, but I was honestly impressed that both he and Janeway signed off on making these public.

"Jason, sup bro," I heard Trevor say, breaking my attention from the book. We fist bumped as he sat down.

"Have you ordered yet?" I asked.

"Yup, got a whiskey cola and a burger," he said and, impeccably, his drink arrived just then. "Cheers," he said, lifting his drink. I sipped, then tucked into my salad. "So what's up?" I said before taking my first bite.

"I want a job," he said simply. "The partying is fun--trust me, last night was a ridiculous amount of fun, Vulcans are crazy--like I don't believe all this logic bullshit, they can get into some freaky--"

"Focus, my friend," I said bemused. "You want a job."

"Ah, yeah. I just want something to do with my time, something that matters. I know that sounds kinda cheesy, but I just feel like I should do something of value with my life, since I'm lucky enough to be born on Earth."

Everyone on Earth is taught from a young age to feel gratitude for being born on Earth at this time in history, and it's hard not to. With the pandemics and wars and misery of the past, the need to toil for money to survive--the past is a ghastly place. And many parts of the galaxy are just as bad, if not worse, as Earth was four hundred years ago.

Some people didn't really feel this way, and of course there was a minority of conservatives who thought life on Earth is *worse* than it used to be. Trevor had never been one to think too much on the topic at all, pretty much just enjoying the ride. So to hear him express the party line all of a sudden surprised me.

"This is coming out of nowhere," I said. "But I'll help, sure. What do you want to do?"

"I don't know," he admitted. "I was thinking of getting an apprenticeship and learning a craft."

"Okay, let's go from there. What are you really interested in? Besides booze, drugs, and sex."

He laughed. "Mean. Not wrong. But still mean. Okay, what am I interested in?" He paused, looking into his glass as if trying to pierce through the opaque dark brown liquid with his eyes. "People. I'm interested in people."

"A lot you could do with that. Counseling, for instance," I said. "Why not counseling?"

"Yeah," he said, his voice trailing. "Why not counseling?"

Chapter 3

After lunch, Trevor and I walked to the British library together, where we parted ways. There was an exhibition on early printed books I was interested in, and which did not interest Trevor one bit. A couple of hours on my own and I decided to get home for some dinner and some studying--a Friday habit that was best to stick with, even if my Friday midday had been atypical.

That night, lying in bed, I turned to the *Missives* again. This time I was reading an entry from Tuvok--a long and, as one would expect, logical entry. But it was far from dry:

"Now that I am fully recovered, I am fully aware of my gratitude to Neelix," Tuvok had said. "Throughout my ordeal, Mr. Neelix nursed me and helped me have experiences that were fitting to my diminished capacity. None of this was ethically required of him. It was not his duty. His perception that I take a dim view of his emotional temperament did not dissuade him from providing his assistance. Despite Neelix neither being a citizen of the Federation nor a member of Starfleet, he demonstrated self-sacrifice, compassion, and a need to help those in need. He is a commendable person, worthy of commendation and respect."

Missives noted a pause--a long pause--in the log. Then Tuvok said, "I can now say Neelix is a friend."

He went on. "Of course I have been aware of Neelix's selfless behavior. In his counseling and protecting of Kes, Neelix showed himself to be committed to the care of those weaker than him. It is therefore no surprise that he would extend that charity to myself when I was weakened. I am told that when we were joined that counseling instinct had made us a better teacher, and that is something I have tried to incorporate into my own management tactics over the last four years."

Now wait a second. Joined? What the hell was that about?

The book's running commentary on the logs did not clarify that detail, which was quite odd; other offhand references to the drama on Voyager was carefully explained throughout the book. This was not.

That spurred me to keep reading, though. I finished the book that night, and no further explanation came. So I went to sleep.

When I woke up the next day, I remained preoccupied. My own curiosity was becoming a burden. As I measured my 23 grams of coffee and tamped the coffee into the machine, I kept wondering what Tuvok was talking about.

And that's when I decided to visit the Academy Library.

Chapter 4

While much of the Academy's collections were available worldwide, most modern records were kept on site for security reasons. So I jumped into a transporter and found myself tasting the salty air of the San Francisco bay. I walked across campus to the main library, sat in front of a terminal, and typed:

Tuvok Voyager records

Tuvok was third in command and chief security officer on a ship with a lot of security issues, so the results were absolutely massive. Fine.

Tuvok and Neelix Voyager records.

Significantly less results, with the top result being the records of the neuroleptic blast that caused Tuvok's memory loss. The second result merely said:

Tuvix - 49678

I admit I chuckled under my breath when I saw that. It looked like a joke--like someone had just smashed these two people's names together in a moment of silliness.

When I opened the record, I saw it was no joke.

Stardate 49678
NCC-74656 - Voyager
Location: Delta Quadrant (unnamed planet, identified), aboard ship
Status: Resolved
Security: Secret
Date to Declassification: Stardate 65000

Summary: Unidentified alien orchid from planet [unnamed] sparks transporter accident. Tuvok and Neelix merged into new single hybrid entity named "Tuvix".

Conclusion: Tuvix successfully de-merged. Tuvok and Neelix restored.

Discoveries: Xenobiology entry #P-F-1355182531
Medical entry #5233187651
Cartography entries: #221865754855 ; #22186575633

And that was it. Official records from starships are typically short, so nothing looked suspicious--and at the time I wasn't even thinking anyone had done anything wrong. But I was definitely curious--this Tuvix creature. Was he alive? What was he exactly? Had Tuvok and Neelix been fused together, like conjoined twins from centuries ago? What had happened?

That's when I knew I had to dig deeper.

My first plan was to contact my friend Jana, an ensign aboard the Starship Kariko. Kariko was fortunately stationed at Proxima Centauri, so a call wouldn't be hard. I pinged her immediately, and got a four word response: "Busy, will call later."

She called back in thirty-seven minutes.

"Jason, what's up?" she said, sounding surprisingly perky. It was 4pm GMT, and since ships follow GMT I'd expect her to sound less energetic.

"You're sounding good--I guess they aren't working you too hard," I said.

She snorted. "Hardly. It's my day off. We're still doing bioreclamation experiments around the clock, so there's plenty to do when I'm on the clock. Anyway, what's up?"

"I have an odd favor to ask," I said. "Was anyone on your ship on Voyager?"

"I'm surprised," Jana said, sounding genuinely surprised. "I always thought you hated celebrities."

"I do," I admitted, "but I'm digging into something. Call it a side project. I just want to ask a few questions--nothing I'm not supposed to know," I added hastily.

"Well, no one here does, but one of my coworkers used to date Kashimuro, who was on Voyager," she said. "They broke up pretty amicably, so I could probably get you in touch with him."

"Perfect!" I said, surprised at the enthusiasm in my voice.

"I can probably get a hold of him now, wait a minute," Jana said. Then the line went silent for a couple of minutes, after which she returned. "Jason, meet Sarkon."

"Hello," I said timidly. "How are you?"

"Great, thanks," Sarkon replied--he had a clear Betazoid accent, but he was speaking in English. "I heard you wanted to talk to Kashimuro?"

"Yes," I said, grateful that Sarkon had gotten to the point. "He was your boyfriend?"

"He was," Sarkon said, "We were together for a couple of years--we still stay in touch. What do you want to talk to him about?"

"There's this thing that happened on Voyager called Tuvix--I shouldn't go into detail technically, but you can look the record up yourself. Anyway, I just want to ask Kashimuro for a couple of points of clarification, as it relates to a project I'm doing. You see, I'm a senior at the Academy and a few months from graduating, and--"

"No need to explain yourself," Sarkon replied, although I didn't know whether he was saying that because he didn't care for the backstory or because he was reading my mind. Can Betazoids read minds over subspace communication? I was never clear on how that all worked. Anyway, he continued, "Not a problem. I'll reach out to Kashi and see if he's willing to talk. I'm sure he will," Sarkon said.

This was turning out great. "Thanks!" I said, again surprised at how thankful I was feeling. "Take care out there at Proxima," I added.

"Will do." End of call.

Chapter 5

Fortunately, Kashimuro was on Earth like many of the Voyager crew, and he was as nice as Sarkon had said. A quick database search told me Kashimuro was working on holographic technology at Daystrom Institute in Okinawa, so not only would he be able to contact me soon, but we were in close time zones, making communication even easier.

I hadn't expected Kashimuro to get back to me that evening, but he did. At a few minutes past 7p.m., after I'd had dinner and was studying, I got the call. He didn't use video, for which I was grateful.

"Hello, this is Kashimuro Nozawa," he said in a professional but friendly tone. "I heard you were looking to inquire about something?"

"Yes," I said, "Thank you for getting back to me, Mr. Nozawa."

"Oh, call me Kashi," he said.

"Great, thanks, Kashi," I replied. "So I'm a law student specializing in intergalactic law at the Academy--I graduate in November and I'm hoping to do work in diplomacy." I'd thought long and hard about how I could weave my curiosity about Tuvix into my professional background in a plausible way, and it hadn't been easy. But this was what I'd come up with: "I've been doing some research on legal precedents for consent to experimental medical procedures in different cultures, and noted that Neelix had had such a procedure during his time on Voyager, but we know nothing about Talaxian laws on this sort of thing."

"Ah, you mean when Seven of Nine brought him back to life?"

That caught me off guard. "No," I said, unable to hide the surprise in my voice. "What's that?"

"Pretty interesting," Kashi continued. "He died and was dead for almost a full day, but the Doctor revived him with some Borg tech--nanoprobes, maybe? I don't really know the details. But that's not what you're talking about?"

"No," I said, "I have to admit that story didn't come up in my research. I was actually talking about Tuvix."

There was a long pause. A very long pause. So long, in fact, that I wondered if the connection had been lost. But it hadn't.

"Oh," Kashi said in a tone so neutral that it felt anything but. "Well, what would you like to know?"

I admit, I was taken off guard. He obviously felt uncomfortable, but I had no idea why. "So the official record just says Tuvok and Neelix were merged into a hybrid entity called Tuvix--but I

don't really understand what that means. Were they attached to each other? Was Neelix still conscious and able to consent to medical procedures?"

Another long pause, though not as long as the last one.

"That's not a very easy question to answer," Kashi said quietly. "I mean, Tuvix was conscious for sure, and I can't say he consented per se..." his voice trailed off. "You know, maybe I shouldn't be talking about this--I think it's a classified matter."

"It's secret," I said, "and as a senior I have secret access. Here, let me send my security clearance confirmation," I typed as I said it, and I heard the notification on his end. "So I have the necessary clearance."

Another long pause. Now I felt the need to push the matter--this unease was weird, and there was no way I was going to let Kashi stonewall me.

"If you aren't comfortable talking to me about it, that's totally fine," I said swiftly. "I haven't informed Professor Hu about this project yet, but I can just get him to contact Admiral Janeway and get all of the details."

Kashi must have realized not answering me wasn't going to make this go away, because he came clean. "Tuvix was a person. Like a real, living, breathing person. Imagine Neelix and Tuvok, right, and you just merged them together and got a new person. That was Tuvix. He had Tuvok's logical mind and Neelix's enthusiasm and charisma. He was like an entirely new individual."

And that's when the fireworks went off in my head. An entirely new individual.

"Did you know him?" I asked.

"Know him? I loved the guy," Kashi said. "Everyone did. A lot of us even preferred him to Neelix and Tuvok, although we'd never admit it or say it out loud. And a lot of us were upset to see him go."

"See him go?"

"When Janeway separated Neelix and Tuvok," Kashi said. "A lot of us were upset about it, I mean the junior staff. The senior staff weren't so bothered, I guess because they'd been closer to Neelix and Tuvok than we were." He sighed. "It was really an awful situation for everyone, which is probably why they didn't talk about it in the anthology of our logs they just published--I don't know if you saw that."

"I did," I said. "But wait a moment. It was a medical procedure, separating the two. Why didn't the Doctor do it? Or a nurse?"

Another pause--a really long one this time.

"Because Tuvix didn't consent."

"What?" I said between gritted teeth, as my jaw had clenched on its own.

"He didn't want to be split up," Kashi said, sounding genuinely sad. "I wasn't there when it happened, but I heard he told the captain 'I don't want to die.' And the Doctor refused to do it because of the Hippocratic oath. So the captain did it."

"Wait, what?" I said again, stunned. "But if the Doctor refused to do it, surely Janeway knew it was immoral. She was literally forcing a medical--"

"Captain Janeway was a good captain and she is a good person," Kashi said. "She still messages me sometimes, asking how I'm doing. She even tried to set me up with one of her friend's daughters," he said, laughing. "I know not everyone on Voyager liked it, but she did what was right."

I didn't want to push the matter; Kashi was a nice guy and challenging him on this sensitive topic would have been unnecessarily rude. And mean. So I didn't push further.

"Of course," I said, hopefully in a genuinely neutral tone. "Thank you so much for your time, Kashi. I really appreciate it--it sounds like this event isn't really appropriate for my research project, but I appreciate your help."

"Of course, Jason," he replied. "Take care of yourself."

"You too."

Chapter 6

The next six months were dedicated to finishing my degree, and my family all came to San Francisco for my graduation. We had a big party, and at the party I met Lauren, whom you know was my girlfriend throughout most of my ordeal. No need to go into too much detail about that meeting; let's just say we liked each other, started dating, and within a year were living together in Guatemala, where she had a house on Lake Atitlan.

I started working for the Office of Diplomatic Affairs as a legal correspondent to the Ambassador General of Earth. I was extremely lucky to get such a good job out of the Academy, and I tried to make my gratitude known on the job every day. My boss, Patrick, was three levels below Ambassador Villeneuve herself, and Patrick and I became close friends rather quickly.

I hadn't been thinking about Tuvix that much, although the story did stick in my craw, I can't deny. And mostly I was curious why the story wasn't discussed more openly.

My job was pretty routine; requests for exchange and trade came into the Ambassador's office all the time from Federation worlds and worlds beyond the Federation, and it was my job to summarize those requests to Patrick, who would send them up to teams that would decide on how to respond. In some cases I'd respond with whatever they'd decided, but in most cases I never found out what happened to those requests.

One day a request from Bajor crossed my desk, asking that a team of xenobotanists could be permitted to stay on Earth for a year to study Earth plantlife. Very routine, and the kind of request that would usually get an approval in a day.

But there was one aspect about the request that made my eyes wide like saucers: when I read the formal request, I saw that they were to be hosted by The Doctor.

The Doctor from Voyager. The hologram. The first hologram to be granted personhood by Earth (a move the Federation has not yet supported, although I personally think they should).

The Doctor had moved to Borneo, not too far from my old home, where he was doing some research on the local flora and fauna--something he did in addition to his singing, acting, and writing. No one had embraced the celebrity of the Voyager story as much as The Doctor, and he'd definitely become the most famous person in Asia. Ironic, as he is more a combination of photons and force fields than human.

I had put aside my discomfort about the whole Tuvix situation, mostly by necessity. I knew there was no way for me to pursue the matter further, because pursuing it would mean sitting down with some of the most famous and prestigious people in the Federation. Janeway, Chakotay, and The Doctor hardly would have time to indulge the questions of a mere law clerk. I wasn't so naive as to think they would.

But this--this was different. This was an opportunity, and I felt an ethical imperative to take it.

"Computer, voice message to Patrick's inbox: Patrick, I just received a request from Bajor. Team of five scientists want to come stay on Borneo for a year. I normally wouldn't flag this for you, but it seems pretty obvious to get approved since they're a small group and they've got a local sponsor. If it does get approved, I'd like to ask a favor: can I be touchpoint on this case? I'm asking because I used to live near Borneo, and this seems like a great opportunity for me to meet up with some friends I still have there."

Not exactly the truth, but this seemed like the kind of innocent white lie you use in the workplace, like when an engineer tells a captain a problem will take 5 hours to fix when it really takes 3. I thought nothing of it.

Little did I realize this would be the first in a series of lies I'd tell to get to my end goal. And I regret none of them.

Patrick got back to me later that day with two notes: yes, it's approved, and, yes, I can be touchpoint. This means I'd be personally involved in approving their visas, offering support if they have any questions or concerns on their stay, and keeping the Bajoran Embassy aware of any problems or emergencies if they show up.

Perfect.

I wrote a message to the secretary of the Bajoran party: Tora Krees. "Hello Tora, my name is Jason and I am a Legal Correspondent to Ambassador General Villeneuve, who has personally approved your request for a one-year visa to Earth for your team. Please inform me of when your ship will arrive so that I may welcome you to Earth. Thank you, and we look forward to being your host."

Her reply was in my inbox the next morning; I read it with my morning coffee. "Thank you Mr. Li. We will be arriving on May 15th at 8:00 GMT at Singapore station, where we hope to beam to Borneo thereafter. Yours truthfully and walk with the prophets, Tora Krees."

Nice letter--short, to the point, and with a signature that combines both Earth and Bajoran cultures. I had a feeling I'd like Tora. Perhaps unfortunately, I was right.

On May 15th, I beamed to Singapore station and saw Tora and her team after they'd beamed down and had cleared their paperwork with border patrol. On the land side of the station, I shook Tora's and her team's hands one by one, saying "welcome to Earth" to each.

"Please come walk with me," I said as we went from the large lobby where new arrivals to Earth were walking in transit to their next destinations. I didn't know if travel on Bajor was anything like Earth, so I thought it best to explain just in case. "Earth has ten stations where off-planet arrivals are authorized: Singapore is one of the largest. After beaming to Earth and passing border control, travelers then can transit to the transporter rooms dedicated to whatever region they are looking to visit. As we are beaming to Borneo, which is just a thousand kilometers away, we'll be going to the local-regional transporter rooms: there are thirty at Singapore, all of which are dedicated to transporting parties to different parts of southeast Asia."

"Very interesting," said Koraal, one of the elderly doctors. Bajorans look very much like humans, so my guess that Koraal was in his late fifties was probably accurate; Tora, on the other hand, looked to be my age, but with lighter hair and skin. And, of course, she was female.

"Is transport like this on Bajor?" I asked, hoping my friendly tone communicated over the universal translator. I wasn't sure if Bajorans would take offense to the question.

If they do, Koraal didn't. "Not exactly. We don't get so many visitors, so we only have one such station in Ashalla. Intraplanetary travel is still done mostly by shuttlecraft."

I nodded. "The vast majority of travel on Earth is shuttlecraft. We need to limit transporter usage because of the high energy it takes, so all citizens and visitors are given credits: five roundtrip transports allotted per person per month, with 20 to 100 for Starfleet."

"That's quite the difference," Koraal noted.

"Well, Starfleet is all over Earth, so we tend to need to move around a lot," I said, adding, "as guests of The Doctor, you are all allotted 50 credits per month."

"Excellent!" Tora said. "There's a lot of Earth I would like to see."

"I would be happy to arrange a guided tour," I said, trying to sound as if I were addressing all of them and not Tora alone. "Anytime. I've been assigned to help make your visit here as enjoyable as possible, so please contact me anytime you need to for anything you might need. I'm here to serve," I said.

"Humans are truly wonderful," one of the scientists said. I had been told her name but, in all honesty, I forgot it.

"I'm sure after a year among us you might not be so sure of that," I said with a smile. They chuckled, apparently interpreting my statement as I wanted them. I was pleased to be getting along with them so easily, if not too surprised; Bajorans deserve their reputation as kind and friendly people.

We arrived at the transporters, seeing just four parties in a queue at Transporter Room 4, so we walked down to the corridor and stopped at the room's glass doors. In less than five minutes the four parties had been beamed to their destinations, and we were up.

"Borneo, The Doctor's residence," I said, beaming the security codes to the technician. He nodded, wordlessly.

"If you would all step on the platform, please," I said. "The Doctor's staff will be there to greet you, but please let me know if you need anything in the meantime."

"Of course," Koraal said. "Thank you for your help."

"Anytime--I mean it. Please do keep in touch," I said, meaning it. "Energize."

Chapter 7

I had to wait four days, and I admit those four days were agonizing. But it was Tora who messaged me.

“Hello Mr. Li. I remember your offer to arrange a tour. I would very much like to visit Italy, Switzerland, and southern France sometime this weekend, but I know little about the regions and was wondering if you could arrange an expert or at least chaperone to come with me? Thank you again for everything.”

I replied with a voice call.

“Hi, it’s Jason. I saw your message. I know a bit about Europe and would be happy to accompany you.”

“Thank you, that’d be wonderful!

“But the region is really quite big and there’s a lot to see. Is there anything in particular you want to see?”

“We went to New Orleans yesterday and saw the Christ Church Cathedral. The Doctor said it was based on the churches of Europe, so I’d love to see--”

“Say no more,” I said. “I know exactly where to go. Can you meet me at Singapore station? We can beam to Milan from there.”

She agreed.

We met in the morning and beamed directly to Milan, where I gave her a complete tour of Duomo di Milano and gave a lecture about the history of Catholicism on Earth, the colonization of America, and the myths around Christian architecture. I may not be an expert, but I think my mini lecture impressed Tora.

We left the cathedral and walked to a small restaurant that specialized in fried chicken and wine. Being as we were in Italy and she was Bajoran, I promptly ordered a bottle. “Cheers,” I said, and, after a sip, “I hope my lecture wasn’t too dull.”

“It is very strange to think that the Emissary’s culture has their own religion unrelated to the prophets, but it does make sense,” she said.

Oh, right. Sisko. That’s why they went to New Orleans. I’d completely forgotten about that.

“Yes, Captain Sisko was raised Catholic, I believe,” I said, although in all honesty I didn’t know, and I was sure she and most Bajorans knew more about Sisko than I did. “He is still in the Celestial Temple of the Prophets, isn’t he?” I mentally patted myself on the back for not calling it the wormhole.

“As far as we know,” she said matter of factly. I had never thought of it before, but I suddenly envied the Bajorans. Not only were they confident in their faith but they had proof that their religion was, to some extent, true; their gods, after all, lived 300 million kilometers away and could be visited at any time.

“I am saying this as a friend and not as a representative of the Ambassador of Earth,” I said, hoping the genuine feeling came through in my voice. “We humans really respect the Bajoran people—I can’t think of any alien race spoken of in friendlier terms, to be honest. I hope you join the Federation soon.”

“Me too,” she said.

“In any case, there’s a long future of happy and peaceful relations between our people.”

She laughed. “Now you’re definitely talking like a representative of the Ambassador of Earth.”

“Habit of the job, I guess,” I said, somewhat sheepishly.

“Your Earth is truly beautiful,” she said, looking outside the restaurant’s windows to the cobblestone streets outside. “How old did you say that church was?”

“About a thousand years old,” I replied. “Pretty new for Europe.”

“And for Bajor,” Tora added. “But truly grand even if it isn’t so old.”

“I’m glad you like it.”

As it was getting late in Borneo and it was early morning in Guatemala, we shook hands at the station and parted ways. I beamed back to my house on Atitlan, immediately hearing the lap of the water in the lake from the open living room window.

I knew what that meant.

“Lauren,” I called out to the kitchen. She turned around, her black curly hair bouncing around her round face as she did so.

“Jason, you’re back.”

I went to the kitchen and kissed her cheek. She’d already put coffee in the French Press. “I’m sorry I had to leave in the night, but you know I had that work thing.”

She waved her hand. “Don’t mention it. I guess you’re going to sleep now?”

Now I should explain: I loved Lauren. I truly did. I still do. She's a beautiful human being inside and out, and she was a loyal lover and friend throughout our relationship. She didn't deserve any of this. And even if she hates me, I'll never wish her anything but the most happiness imaginable.

"I'll wait until you go to work. I'm jealous of that coffee," I said as she poured it into her mug.

"I can replicate some decaf."

"Horrible thought," I said. "Replicated and decaffeinated? Should be illegal."

"Well, maybe one day you can prosecute me for it," she said teasingly as she caressed the mug in her hands.

"So you're going to work when you're done?"

"Yes," she said. "I'm going to drive up to Oaxaca. We're still doing a molecular analysis of the jungle." Like the Bajorans, Lauren was a biologist. "I should be back by tonight."

"Great," I said. "I'll be awake by then. We can have dinner slash breakfast."

"Only if you cook."

"Of course," I said, leaning over to kiss her on the forehead."

"Is that wine?" she asked, apparently smelling it on my breath.

"Yeah," I said through a yawn. "Tora wanted to go to Italy so we had to get some wine after I did the tour."

"Lucky you," she said.

"I can open a bottle for dinner," I said quickly.

"You better."

Chapter 8

Over the next month, I continued giving Tora tours. It almost became a routine and so, for me, almost comfortable. That's not to say I disliked Tora--I liked her very much--but I just did not relish battling the time zones and juggling meals and dates with my girlfriend with my duties as a Legal Correspondent.

No matter; many people have much worse jobs.

The way we did it was pretty simple: on Saturday and Sunday Tora and I met at 8am Borneo time and would walk around the tourist site of the day (Cannes, Florence, Bern, Tuscany, you get the idea), have lunch, go to another spot nearby for the afternoon, have a couple of glasses of wine, and part ways--her back to Borneo, me back to Guatemala.

The bad part about this was it meant I had to leave Lauren at 6pm on Saturday and Sunday nights, and come back the next day around 7 or 8 in the morning. Meaning she was spending weekend evenings alone, and sleeping alone, too.

I couldn't tell Tora about this and I didn't really want to; it wasn't her fault, and her schedule with The Doctor was so packed that she didn't have time otherwise. And I was proud of Earth; I genuinely wanted to show it off.

I also liked Tora. She had a crazy story, as did most Bajorans. She was 21 years old, so she was two when the occupation ended; her father had been a collaborator, so he was executed when Bajor got its freedom. Her mother had handed him over to the Bajoran rebels when the Cardassians left, having always been opposed to his treachery. Thus Tora had grown up to hate her father, love her people, and see loyalty as the greatest virtue a human being can have.

Her mother started a business selling animal feed to farmers in the Eastern Province, and she had a knack for it; she became quite wealthy, earning Tora a seat in an elite private school that made it a cinch for Tora to get into the University of Bajor, where she got her degree in xenobiology in two years. Tora had a desire to explore the galaxy, and her degree was how she planned to do that.

I learned her back story in bits and pieces as we traveled together, and I must admit the ancient European backdrop combined with the intense and dramatic stories that came so naturally to Bajorans because of their planet's brutal past made for a very romantic atmosphere. I was beginning to see Tora as someone I could be friends with for a very long time.

Friends, yes, friends. I never wanted more.

Of course, you could say I was using her. After all, this above-and-beyond service was my way of getting into the good graces of the Bajoran team so that, eventually, they'd invite me to the Doctor's house whenever he was going to have one of his fabled house parties. That was definitely part of why I was there, but it wasn't the only reason. Even if that wasn't on the cards, I would have remained friends with Tora. If I'd had the choice.

It took a total of seven weeks of these weekend trips until finally Tora messaged me at a rather awkward moment; the com rang literally fifteen seconds after Lauren and I had finished having sex.

Hearing the ring, I quickly tried to catch my breath by taking a big gulp of water and turning a fan on, putting it next to the bed, and sitting upright against my pillows. Seeing my attempt at zen made Lauren giggle.

“She’s gonna know,” she said.

“No she won’t!” I hissed, com signal still buzzing. I tapped. “Jason here.”

“Have I caught you at a bad time? It’s Tora,” she said. Lauren swallowed a laugh.

“Not at all, how are you?”

“Excellent, thank you again--I really had fun in Lisbon last week. But this weekend I wanted to propose something different.”

I knew it.

“The Doctor is throwing what he calls a ‘soiree’, and he’s asked the Ambassador to come. I thought it’d be nice if you and your girlfriend could come as well.”

Lauren’s eyes widened. She loved parties, she loved meeting people, and she loved the Voyager story. A chance to meet The Doctor? If she had to quit to make it happen, she would.

“That sounds awesome,” I said, worried that my voice sounded more relieved than elated. “We’ll make sure to be there.”

“Friday 5pm Borneo time,” she replied. “We’ll be having cocktails first and The Doctor will be serving food. We might even have a Dobo table, if I can convince Koraal to let me replicate one,” she said.

I chuckled. “Lauren would love that. Definitely, we’ll be there.”

“See you then!”

“She sounds nice,” Lauren said--this had been the first time she’d heard Tora speak.

“Oh she is,” I said. “I can tell you two will get along well.”

Chapter 9

Lauren and I took a shuttle to Borneo; while it was a long trip, Lauren said she preferred the hour journey to keep her transporter credits. Which was fine by me--I spent the time reading up on Voyager.

Beyond the *Missives*, a lot of books have been written about Voyager, some by former crew, some by experts, others by talking heads. They all had one thing in common: no mention of Tuvix.

But a lot had been written about The Doctor. He was an incredibly vain figure, it seemed, but also a genuinely caring and upstanding person. He had to be; his ethical subroutines required it. But he also had interests in art, particularly European opera, and that was going to be my in: I'd spent the last month going all around Europe, so striking up a conversation on this topic would be easy.

When we arrived, I immediately realized my plan was just a bit faulty. There were over two hundred people there, with more beaming in every few minutes. The house was a sprawling mansion; his land credits could not have been sufficient to afford this kind of palace, which told me something else was going on behind the scenes.

I saw the Doctor a couple of minutes after we arrived, holographic glass of champagne in his hand, talking to the Ambassador--my boss's boss's boss's boss, who probably didn't know I existed. And that was a situation I wanted to keep going.

"Jason!" I heard a familiar voice from behind me. It was Tora.

I turned around, she smiled and gave me a hug. "Thanks again for the invite," I said, then gestured. "This is Lauren, my girlfriend."

Another hug. "I've heard so much about you," she said to Lauren after their embrace. "Jason really loves you quite a lot."

"I'm sure he paid you to say that," she said lightly. We all laughed.

"So let me give you a tour--it's my turn to be guide," she said as she walked us into the house from the front garden and up the spiral staircase in the center of the lobby. The house was incredibly tacky; it looked like a mansion from 19th century Boston, horribly out of place in Borneo.

"The Doctor got approval to set up this as his research lab and home," Lauren said. That explained the big size: this was all Starfleet property. "I don't know how he got approval to design the whole thing too, but this is all to his specs."

"Quite an amazing hologram," I said wryly.

"I know--with peculiar tastes."

"How's the work going?" Lauren asked.

“Quite good, actually--I’ve been stunned at Earth’s biodiversity,” she said. “You’re a biologist too, aren’t you? Jason told me.”

“I am,” Lauren replied.

“We need to talk!” Tora said with genuine giddiness in her voice.

“You guys can talk biology later,” I said. “Not with me around.”

Tora laughed. “My boyfriend was like that too,” she said. “Got so bored hearing me talk about plants that he forbade it as a dinner conversation topic.”

“Fortunately, Jason’s too smart to try to forbid me from doing anything,” Lauren said.

Yes, they were getting along fine. This was all great.

“Okay, you two have fun,” I said, as I looked over and saw The Doctor walking alone through the lobby downstairs. “I’m going to go do some networking.” I slipped away before they could respond.

I zipped down the stairs as fast as I could and walked to the doorway The Doctor had just gone through--they were swinging saloon-style doors, and as I opened them I saw a massive kitchen, like what would be in a restaurant, with a multitude of cooks working. The Doctor was barking orders.

Definitely not a chance to get him. But if i just waited outside--

“Jason.”

I didn’t recognize the voice, but I recognized the face when I turned. It was Koraal. “Greetings, sir,” I said, extending my hand.

He took it. “It is a pleasure to see you again. I see you took Tora’s invitation.”

“Yes, sir, it’s really quite an honor, and I’ve always wanted to see Borneo.”

“It’s a lovely place,” he said. “You definitely should see a bit of it before you live.

“Indeed,” I said. And at that point I saw The Doctor quickly slam open the saloon doors, walk straight past them and into the front garden.

“Do you know where the wine is?” I asked.

“Oh, outside.”

"Excuse me, then," I said, again picking up my stride as I tried to catch up with The Doctor.

I was outside, but too late--he was already talking to someone else, this time an extremely beautiful woman--a human possibly from the Indian subcontinent.

Damn.

I didn't know if Koraal was watching me or if he cared, but I went to the bar and got a glass of red wine. Sip, pucker mouth, swallow. It was replicated, it was synthehol, and it was disgusting.

No matter. I've got the cocktail party artillery: drink in hand, I can now walk around looking as if I'm mingling, and so I started to walk towards The Doctor.

"The best sunsets in Borneo are unquestionably in the wet season," I heard him tell the beautiful Indian. "You see, in the wet season if you're at the right elevation and the rain has just stopped, the reds and purples in the sky cascade across all the drops of water on the flowers. Many avoid the wet season in Southeast Asia. I embrace it."

What was this? Was he...was he hitting on this woman? I mean, of course holograms can have sex (I shudder to think of the disgusting sexual things holograms have been used for, trillions of times across thousands of light years), but do they like sex? Do they desire sex? And is it creepy that he's hitting on this woman who looks to be half his age? Or is it creepy because, technically speaking, The Doctor is still a teenager?

My head was starting to hurt going through these thoughts, and the bad wine wasn't helping either.

Better to just try to butt into the conversation.

"I can agree," I said, unsure if The Doctor was annoyed that I was talking to him or annoyed that I was interrupting his attempt at courtship. Either way, his face was an open book: he was annoyed.

Still, I pressed on. "I lived in Malaysia for most of my life, and the sunset in the wet season is exquisite, especially if you get a cool breeze at the same time."

"I was just telling The Doctor I'd never seen an Earth monsoon," the Indian replied. "I lived on Mars my entire life--I only moved to Earth last month."

"Well, as I work for the Ambassador of Earth, let me officially welcome you to Earth," I said with a short nod, to which she smiled. The Doctor's frown deepened. "My name is Jason."

"I am Saritha, nice to meet you."

I turned to The Doctor. "And thank you for throwing this party," I said. "I've never been to Borneo, and it's a great honor."

That mollified him, somewhat. "Yes, I like to open my doors to whoever can come," he replied, the tone clearly having a twinge of contempt. I did not know if he was bad at hiding his feelings or wanted me to feel inferior; either way, I definitely did not feel great about myself at that moment.

"If you will excuse me," Saritha said, "I see Dr. Nordstrom."

Bye, Saritha.

"So, Doctor," I said, turning to The Doctor before he had a chance to escape my grasp. "I was wondering if you're planning on doing an Opera anytime soon--I have only heard recordings of your work, but I'd love to see you in concert."

Whatever contempt he had for me, whatever rage he had for interrupting his flirting, was gone. He smiled. "Ah, a music fan are you?"

"I like good music."

"Explains your interest in my opera," he said dryly, but he clearly was in no rush to end our talk. "I have in fact been contemplating a performance in the near future--but my work hasn't given me the time, sadly."

"Quite sad. But, you know, what I'd love to see is for you to perform an original opera."

That took him off guard. "Original?" he asked, surprised.

"Sure," I continued. "You've written some great holonovels, and you have some great experiences from your time on Voyager. Why not write an Opera about Voyager?"

"That's not a bad idea," he said, looking genuinely interested. Vain The Doctor very clearly was. "But so many things happened--I'm not sure what I'd write about."

The lump in my throat felt like it was going to choke me. "What about Tuvix?"

He looked me dead in the eyes.

"Why Tuvix?"

"It seems like such a great drama," I continued, still unbearably nervous, hoping my voice didn't waiver. "A captain forced to choose the life of two good friends or one newly created being--"

"It was a hard choice," The Doctor said immediately. "I do not know if she made the right choice or not, and I fear thinking about it too much would screw up my programming."

"So you weren't part of it?" I asked, even if I already knew the answer.

"When I found out how we could separate them, I didn't know how much of an individual Tuvix had become," The Doctor said. I noticed he'd made the wine glass in his hand disappear. "I didn't have my mobile emitter, and not many people were in sickbay those few weeks. Of course there was Kes, but Kes didn't want to talk about Tuvix, so I didn't know he'd developed a life." He seemed frozen for a moment, a look of pain on his face. "If I had known, I wouldn't have kept going with my research, and I would not have told the Captain about it."

This was big. The Doctor clearly felt some responsibility for Tuvix's death, and he clearly saw it as a murder. And The Doctor was not the type for subterfuge or guile; he wore his emotions on his sleeve, and he was clearly telling the truth.

If anyone was Tuvix's murderer, it was not The Doctor.

"Doctor, I wonder if you could do me a favor."

Chapter 10

I had honestly thought the party was a complete success. I'd made progress with The Doctor, and Lauren had had a good time. We didn't talk much throughout the evening, but I did see her chatting with several people at the party.

When we got home, I quickly discovered how wrong I was.

"You should have told me," Lauren said with a frown. She didn't seem angry--more disappointed, as if I had let her down.

"Told you what?" I was genuinely confused.

"Think about it from my perspective," she continued. "For the last two months I've been alone every weekend while you've been globetrotting on the most romantic vacations possible with another woman."

"Romantic?"

"Florence, Venice, Paris," she continued. "You should have warned me just how beautiful Tora was. I'm not accusing you of infidelity, but you didn't prepare me at all. I feel like a fool."

"You know she's Bajoran," I said, feeling a pang of guilt at my own racism. The stereotype that all Bajoran women are beautiful and all men handsome was a bit naff, but in my limited experience it had seemed true.

"Yes, but I didn't know she was so young...or flirtatious."

"I don't think she's flirtatious at all--"

"Give me a break, Jason," she said curtly. "She was flirting with everyone at the party, even me."

I sat down on the couch and looked outside--the lake was extremely still that night, glowing in the sunlight. "She's never flirted with me, I swear."

"If you want me to trust you, you have to be honest with me, and this is not honesty."

That worried me. Lauren and I had been dating for a while now, and we'd lived together for almost six months. I genuinely loved her and had come to assume we would stay together for many years, if not the rest of our lives. Her wit, charm, and intelligence were all captivating, and I had no desire to lose her. Especially over some silly spat of jealousy over another woman whom I had no interest in and who had no feelings for me. This had to be nipped in the bud.

"Lauren, I promise you, my work with Tora has been just that--work. Correspondents of the Ambassador are legally obligated to improve diplomatic relations with--"

"Don't give me that crap," she said flippantly. "There's a galactic crisis with billions of refugees from the Romulan Empire, and you're busy eating gelato with a pretty young girl at the steps of the Trevi Fountain?" When she put it that way, I felt equal parts silly and stupid. And I also felt that I was doing Lauren a disservice.

She had to know the truth.

So I did something I should not have done. I did something illegal. And my lawyer will hate that I am admitting this, but you already know it is true and I refuse to lie when my cause is just. Sure, I told her about Tuvix; I told a non-Starfleet officer secret information. I had her read the record I'd saved illegally on my personal padd. I betrayed my oath, my loyalty to Starfleet, and everything I am supposed to believe in. At the time I did not expect this to get me into trouble--and, in a way, it didn't, as my current circumstances are the result of many, many more grievous sins. You could say they all started with this one.

But no matter what Starfleet says about loyalty, that loyalty must be earned--constantly earned by an institution that must prove to each of its members that it is worthy of that loyalty. If Starfleet fails to do the right thing, it deserves to be betrayed.

So I betrayed it.

"I haven't been telling you everything, Lauren, and I'm sorry. Sit down. Let me tell you the full truth. And I'm not sure if you'll be relieved or angry--you'll probably just think I'm crazy--but you need to know everything."

She sat down.

"Firstly, I have no interest in Tora," I said immediately. "I do like her as a person, as she's quite smart and funny and has a fascinating life story--I didn't know Bajor still had a capitalist society! Imagine having to work to eat. But that does not mean I want to have sex with her or ever did. I love you and only you. But," I continued without pause, "you may be wondering why I am spending so much time as a personal guide, especially when this is such a banal task that an intern could do--or better yet, send her off to one of the many tour services for off-world tourists. I have wanted to get close to Tora for tonight: to get to meet The Doctor."

"But why? You don't care about celebrities."

"I don't," I replied, "but I do care about someone who died many years ago. You see, when Voyager was in the Delta Quadrant there was a transporter anomaly that resulted in a new and wholly unique individual being created: his name was Tuvix. He lived for several weeks aboard Voyager and was a beloved crew member. But he had been created by fusing two crew members together--"

"Tuvix, oh I get it. Tuvok and Neelix?"

"Exactly."

"That's just plain cute," she said, a brief smile belying her previous jealousy.

"Right, so Tuvok and Neelix died on the transporter platform, but Tuvix was born. Then weeks later when The Doctor found a way to reverse the--"

"So they brought Neelix and Tuvok back--"

"By killing Tuvix, yes," I said. "Tuvix didn't consent to the procedure. At least that's what The Doctor told me. And I don't know what the other crew members had to say about it--if anyone tried to protect Tuvix or not. But I have reason to believe that, both legally and morally, Admiral Janeway murdered a sentient being in cold blood and has not been brought to justice for that."

"That's...weird," was all Lauren could muster after a pause.

"Yes, I know it's weird, but you have to think about it: what if one day someone showed up and said to you, 'Lauren, you're actually a combination of two people--I don't know, Laurel and Jen."

And now we're going to split you into those two people because that's what we want and you have no say over the matter."

"That's horrific," she said.

"Exactly."

"But," Lauren replied immediately, "Janeway is beloved. She's set the Borg back more than anyone in the Federation, and by all accounts she worked tirelessly to bring Voyager home."

"I don't dispute any of that," I said, "but it doesn't excuse this act of homicide if, in fact, it went down the way I think it did. And The Doctor seemed to confirm that to me, at least in part."

"Still," she continued, "why should you meddle in this? Why not go to security--"

"An entry-level law clerk accuses one of the most decorated admirals in Starfleet of being a murderer?" I laughed. "You realize how much that will blow back on me."

She nodded. "You'd need more evidence."

"And that's why I need you to be patient with me," I said. "I'm going to need to take some more trips--I need to talk to more of the Voyager crew to see what happened. Was he pinned down, kicking and screaming? Was there an attempt at a mutiny? The record is sparse on details, and there is a lot that might have happened with regards to this case. Some of that background could help build a viable case that I could then produce and bring ahead of the Attorneys General Office."

"I see," she said, but I could tell there was a bit of doubt in her voice. And I could tell she was looking at me differently--in a way, this seemed worse than jealousy. She might not think I was crazy, not quite yet, but she also didn't seem eager to go along with my flight of fancy. And what she said next made it clear she did not approve of my quest at all.

"If you pursue this, you could still be putting your career at risk. Wasting time on a frivolous pursuit, leveraging the ambassador office resources for this--you could be putting yourself in danger."

"Small price to pay to avenge the cold blooded murder of an innocent man," I said steely.

She had nothing to say to that, but the mood had definitely shifted in the house. She was no longer worried about infidelity--at least not to another woman. But she was beginning to think I was no longer the same man she had fallen in love with.

And, of course, she was right.

Chapter 11

The Doctor told me Tom Paris had opened a bar in Marseille that, frustratingly, he named Lyon. Paris's Lyon in Marseille sounded stupid enough that it must've been intentional. He and B'elanna lived in Marseille, The Doctor said; she still worked in Starfleet, but Paris left as soon as they'd reached Earth (it was debatable if he had even been in Starfleet to begin with). Now he was more of a stay-at-home father, far from the spacecraft he so famously had flown so well that it got him out of jail.

Unlike The Doctor, both Tom and B'Elanna kept a low profile, which is why it wasn't common knowledge that he was running a bar in the south of France. The bar itself, I quickly discovered when I visited it, was tiny; a pool table and about twenty seats, the place looked like it was never full. And Tom liked it like that.

I saw him playing cards with an elderly Frenchman at the bar. Both were drinking tea, despite it being 7p.m. local time. I'd just beamed outside and walked in, and both Tom and the man seemed surprised.

"Bienvenue mon ami, que désire-tu?" he asked me as I sat at the bar.

"Oh I'm sorry, I don't speak French. I'd love a coffee," I replied; it was morning Guatemala time, and I was due in the office within the hour.

Tom nodded, got to preparing it. "Doing a tour of the city?" he asked as he made the coffee.

"Not exactly." I wasn't nervous this time, not like I was with The Doctor. Tom had gotten a bit heavier than in his Voyager days, but he had the same boyish blue eyes and classically handsome face out of one of those twentieth-century movies I knew he was such a fan of. I knew what Tom was like, and I knew he was beloved for his rough-around-the-edges ways. But to me he wasn't a beloved rascal. He was an accessory to murder.

"I'm here to see you, actually," I said as he put the coffee in front of me. "My name is Jason Li. I'm doing some research and wanted to ask you about someone you used to know."

"Well, I'll try to help you if I can. Who're you interested in?"

"Tuvix."

Every time that man's name got mentioned, the air got sucked out of the room. This was no exception. A long pause, then Tom quietly said:

"I haven't heard that name in a long time."

"Well, he's been dead for a long time," I said. I knew this was a miscalculation; I'd shown him where I stood, and it was opposite of him. Tom's back stiffened and his tone changed completely.

"Tuvok and Neelix were friends of mine, are still friends of mine," he said. "We loved Tuvix as well, but two lives were saved the day Janeway saved them."

"You mean, when Janeway killed Tuvix."

"Look," Tom said, raising his voice. He could have kicked me out of the bar, but clearly he was too angry to remember that was an option. "Janeway didn't kill anybody. She had to choose whether to let two crewmembers die or not, and she saved them. She showed all of us that day that she would do whatever it took to keep us alive and safe--and she did that for years afterwards, doing everything she could to get us back home. I owe her my life a thousand times over, and so do Tuvok and Neelix. They don't regret what Janeway did for a second."

"Do they remember their time as Tuvix?"

Tom frowned. "No," he said quietly, as if making a confession. That made the old man, who had been ignoring us, look up. I don't know if he understood English or had a universal translator; in any case, he was invested in our conversation now. "They didn't remember being Tuvix, we had to tell them what had happened."

"But Tuvix could talk, feel, do things, be productive," I said. "Sounds like he was an entirely separate person--he wasn't Tuvok or Neelix. He was his own person. And Janeway killed--"

"Listen, buddy," Tom said, his voice raised. "I don't know who you are, what you're doing here, or why you're doing this, but I think it's time for you to leave."

"Yeah, I agree," I said, standing up.

"But let me tell you something, buddy," I said, mockingly. "What Janeway did that day was murder. And you were on the bridge. When Tuvix pleaded for his life, you didn't help. Did you protest to Janeway? Did you try to stop her?"

"Get out," Tom said.

"Just answer me!" I yelled. "Did you try?"

"GET OUT OF MY BAR!" He yelled back.

"ANSWER ME!" I screamed at the top of my lungs.

“Okay fine I didn’t!” he yelled again, fury turning his eyes red. “I just sat there as security carried him off the bridge, is that what you want to hear?”

“Is that the truth?”

“Get out of my bar,” he said.

I turned, walked to the front door, and I was about to walk out. But then I turned around. Tom was already back to his tea and his game of cards.

How quickly he returned to his wonderful idyllic life in the French countryside--a life Tuvix never could have.

“She killed Tuvix and you’re an accessory to murder.”

I slammed the door behind me, unable to make out what Tom yelled at me as I left.

Chapter 12

That was easily the turning point, when my exploration of the Tuvix issue had gone from morbid curiosity to a crusade. This man had been murdered by a conspiracy, and another conspiracy was now keeping his murderer and the accessories to his murder from justice.

The law is very clear on murder. All Starfleet members, like all Federation citizens, are bound by the Federation Uniform Code of Justice. Article 5, section 1-3:

1. Acts of murder are to be considered a class A felony punishable by a period of incarceration up to life, regardless of the jurisdiction in which the murder was committed, wherein;
2. “Murder” is defined as the act by which the life of a sentient being, humanoid or otherwise, is intentionally brought to an end through a willful action on the part of the accused, wherein;
3. Any act of defense or self-defense that causes the ending of a sentient being’s life, in which a then-living being is at risk of death if the act is not committed, will not be considered an act of criminal murder.

The law makes it absolutely clear: if you end the life of a sentient being and it isn’t done in defense of another sentient being that is alive and at risk of being killed, you are committing murder. And Tuvok and Neelix were most definitely *not* alive when Tuvix was. The fact that they have no memory of the event proves it, but even if they did; Tuvix was a living entity who did not want to become Tuvok and Neelix, thereby proving he had personhood above and beyond that of Tuvok and Neelix.

Janeway brought back the dead, for sure, but she did so by killing a feeling, thinking sentient being.

So why the hell wasn't she in jail?

To answer that question, I knew I had to talk to more Voyager crew, but I also knew my approach with Tom wasn't going to work. Luckily, the Doctor hadn't just told me about Tom's bar; he'd also given me Kim's personal com ID. This meant I could reach out to Kim and hopefully get a response, whereas if I just tried his public com I'd get lost in a stream of thousands of fanboy messages.

"Li to Kim," I said after hitting my combadge.

"Ensign Kim here," it spoke back. I was shocked to get someone immediately.

"Oh, hello, yes, this is Jason Li of the Earth ambassador office. I was wondering if I could speak to Captain Harry Kim."

"Oh, sure," the woman on the other end said. "Harry!"

A pause. "Hello?"

"Hello, is this Captain Kim? My name is Jason, I work for the Ambassador of Earth's office, and I was wondering if I could meet with you over a case I'm working on."

"The Ambassador? Well, sure, are you in SF?"

"I'm based in Guatemala but can come by."

"Sounds good--maybe we could meet for lunch, 1pm?"

Why do I keep running into people who want to eat lunch so late? "Yes, that'll work."

"Great! See you then."

I got to San Francisco at noon and walked to the cafe: Cosimo's. I got there a lot earlier than I expected, which gave me time to read up on my lunch date.

Kim came from an overachieving family with high expectations and impressive accomplishments; his cousin was the ensign that spoke to me on the com, indicating Kim was still close to them. Kim married shortly after returning to Earth and now had two children; he'd rapidly risen to his captain position but hadn't taken a ship yet, saying in interviews that he wasn't ready to go back to space. After what he went through the last time, I can't say I blamed him.

The longer I waited, the more I got nervous. Not just because I was meeting a major celebrity who far outranks me--that was becoming a burden, a surprising one since I'd never been one to care about famous people--until, that is, I learned of Tuvix. But I'd messed up with Paris, and it was likely he would reach out to Captain Kim about my snooping, which meant this meeting could be awkward if not dangerous for me. After all, Tom and Harry had been friends for nearly 20 years, and if what Harry said in interviews was true, they kept in touch almost daily, keeping each other abreast of what was happening with their families. It was possible that Tom had called Harry to tell him about the crazy human who showed up in his bar yelling about Tuvix.

Possible, but fortunately it hadn't happened. Or if it did, Kim hid it well.

"You must be Ensign Li," I heard Kim say. I looked up from my padd and saw him standing there, in uniform, his four pips reflecting the lights inside the cafe.

I stood to attention. I wasn't used to being called by my title; the diplomatic corps, of which I'd been a part of for a while, was possibly the most informal branch of Starfleet outside of engineering and shipbuilding; being stationed in a civilian office, working with the Ambassador's civilian staff made it even more so, so that we didn't use titles most of the time. I suppose it was a way of offsetting the much more formal tone we had to set when meeting dignitaries.

"Hello, Captain, thank you for meeting me," I said.

"At ease," Kim said with a smile that did indeed put me at ease. He sat down; I followed. "I suggest you get their paninis. They're very good."

The waiter came immediately, and I followed Kim's suggestion: a mozzarella and beef bacon panini and pumpkin soup. Kim got a barbecue pork panini with extra fries and a Vulcan mocha, extra sweet.

"So, The Doctor told me you were doing some research on Voyager," he said. His body language was relaxed, at ease; this was a confident captain with a lot of experience talking to nervous younger officers. It was a man with an accomplished career and nothing to prove, who did not feel threatened at all. Definitely Paris had not mentioned me to Kim. And if The Doctor had told Kim I wanted to know about Tuvix, Kim didn't seem to care at all.

"Yes, sir," I replied. "It is something of a side project I am doing of my own accord--it isn't officially sanctioned by the ambassador."

"Sounds intriguing," Kim replied, "and maybe even a little controversial."

"That it may be," I added, increasingly unnerved at Kim's calm. His food and drink came, and he immediately tucked in. "I am hoping to help set precedent for future controversies following technical malfunctions happening between Federation and non-Federation citizens that, I hope,

will smoothen out possible points of tension between peoples in the future.” I started to worry I was rambling; I could feel the word salad coming out of my throat like so much vomit, as if I were trying to fill time with meaningless phonemes that would stop Kim from thinking too much about what I was really interested in.

Again, if Kim took such a dim view of me, he did not show it. “Well I am always happy to help interspecies relations, especially because sometimes when there isn’t a precedent, bad things can happen.” He seemed to wince, as if a painful memory flashed into his mind.

I of course knew what it was, as it was one of the stories highlighted and detailed in the *Missives*. He had fallen in love with an alien that had no formal relation to the Federation (how could they?) and whose race was extremely hostile to outsiders--his logs from the incident were painful reading, extremely impassioned and a testament to Kim’s romantic spirit. It was very personal, and I wondered if publishing that was a bit embarrassing for him--or his wife.

“Thank you,” I said, feeling both guilty and grateful--guilty for misleading Kim, grateful for some sympathy in my quest. Even if the sympathy was for something I wasn’t actually trying to do.

My food arrived.

“It’s a bit awkward,” I continued, “because it’s a pretty sensitive topic. I wanted to ask you about Tuvix.”

Kim put his sandwich down, wiped his mouth, swallowed hard. A strong reaction, and it was genuine; he most definitely had not been told of what I was digging into.

“How do you know about Tuvix?”

“I found the official record in my research,” I said quickly. “It was a bit cryptic, so I asked The Doctor if he could explain it a bit. That’s when I realized it could be a case study on medical assistance given to non-Federation allies.”

Kim nodded. “I can see that,” he said slowly, so slowly I could tell he was thinking it over. He could not see that, which was fine; in all honesty, there was nothing to see. “It’s not an easy topic for us.”

He did not go back to his sandwich; nor did I mine.

“I was in sickbay after the captain got Tuvix from the bridge; when they came you could feel the tension in the room the instant they walked through the door. I knew Tuvix had hesitated to be split back into Neelix and Tuvok, but honestly in that moment I thought he had changed his mind. He didn’t say a word to any of us--he just stood there, stoically.”

“So you didn’t know he’d been forced?”

"He was with security, so I probably should've been more clued up," Kim said. I was surprised at how quickly and openly he was talking about this--and with a fair amount of criticism pointed at Janeway. This was not the loyal, furious ex-crewmember Paris seemed to be. "I was a young, naive ensign back then--probably more naive than you are now."

"Thank you, sir," I said. "I'm probably more naive than you think I am. But when did you find out Tuvix was forced into it?"

"Maybe a couple hours later," Kim continued. "Tuvok returned to the bridge immediately, despite Janeway's insistence that he take some rest. Then Paris ended his shift and told me how the bridge applauded when they saw Tuvok back. Seeing the familiar Vulcan had instantly cleared the air after Tuvix had left."

"So the bridge--"

"Tuvix was on the bridge when Janeway collected him and marched him to sickbay. Paris told me afterwards, saying that they were really upset about the whole thing. They all felt guilty, like they had killed a man." Kim smiled, however it was tainted by a hint of melancholy. "That feeling began to fade as soon as Tuvok got back, and everyone felt like life had gotten back to normal, most of all Kes."

Right--the Ocampan. "No one doubted Janeway?"

"No one," Kim said, firmly. "She was the captain and she made a choice to save two lives. It was the right decision, no matter how painful that transition was."

I noticed Kim picked up his sandwich and started eating again.

"If you don't mind my asking, sir--"

"Not at all," Kim said. "I honestly haven't talked about Tuvix in over ten years, but I admit now I kinda do still miss him."

"After Tuvok and Neelix were restored," I said, adding in my mind, *because Tuvix had been killed*, "did you ever talk to them about the experience?"

"I talked to Neelix," Harry said. "Tuvok was never too approachable, and while I respected the man, I was terrified of him, like most of the staff. But Neelix talked to anyone and everyone--a bit too much, really."

"What did he have to say about Tuvix?"

“Neelix’s response to the whole event had three stages. At first in sickbay, he was relieved. I remember he got up, hugged Kes, and then said, ‘I thought we were dead.’ I said, ‘You don’t remember Tuvix?’ Neelix said, ‘Tuvix--what?’ Tuvok said, ‘The last thing I can remember, we were beaming back to the ship, but there was a problem with the pattern buffer.’”

“So they remembered up to beaming back to the ship--nothing after?” I interrupted.

“Exactly,” Kim said. “I was about to tell them what had happened, but The Doctor stopped me, and suggested both Neelix and Tuvok get some rest. I think the Captain had already left the room by then.”

“Why?”

“She looked really upset,” Kim said, “which was when I started to think, Tuvix didn’t want to be broken up. But I didn’t dwell on that for long, because Kes was obviously so delighted to have Neelix back--it just didn’t seem worth thinking about Tuvix anymore.”

Tuvix had been betrayed by everyone on Voyager, it seemed.

“That’s when Neelix and Kes left, I think to go to the mess hall, and I went back to my post. When Tom and I were relieved, he asked me to join him for a drink on the holodeck. So we went, and that’s when he told me about the scene with Tuvix on the bridge. He was clearly trying to get it out of his mind.”

“What did he tell you?” I asked quietly.

“Not everything,” Kim said. “Just that Janeway had come to get Tuvix, and Tuvix had refused to go. Paris kept saying, ‘it was hard to watch, but Janeway saved Tuvok and Neelix.’ He must’ve said it to me three or four times over a bottle of wine, which he pretty much polished off himself.”

“Sounds like things hadn’t really gotten back to normal for Paris.”

“Exactly,” Kim agreed. “It had been hard to watch, I’m sure--Paris told me Tuvix asked all of them to help him, and he didn’t know what to do. ‘What was I supposed to do?’ Paris said. ‘I liked the guy, but orders are orders, and it was all to save two men with friends. Tuvok has kids and a wife. Janeway saved Tuvok and Neelix.’”

“Did you ever talk to Janeway about it?”

“Yes, once--years later,” Kim said. “In her ready room, when we were facing another crisis. She confided in me that she’d made many difficult decisions on Voyager, many that still haunted her. She mentioned Tuvix.”

This surprised me--and it seemed to run counter to Paris's mantra that Janeway unquestionably had, indeed, done the right thing.

"May I ask you what she said?"

Kim thought for a moment, but apparently decided he could share. "She told me she had made a promise to Tuvok's family to bring him back safely, and she would do anything and everything to that end--not just for Tuvok, but for all of her crew. She really was a mother to all of us," Kim said. "She needed me to know that she would sacrifice anything for us. And in the end, that's what she did."

I nodded--I knew the story, as crazy as time travel and alternative universes were, the story itself was sensational, and only served to make the mythology of Voyager even more compelling to Earth.

"There is a reason why Admiral Janeway is so, well, admired," I said, lying through my teeth. "I imagine Voyager was the closest any ship's crew have ever been in Starfleet."

"Oh for sure," Kim said. "We didn't care who was Maquis or Starfleet a year into the journey, and by the time we got back, we didn't even think of ourselves as a Starfleet ship. More like we were a family who all happened to be in Starfleet. I talk to my ex-crewmates every day. Tom is still my best friend."

Fortunately, I'd been too insignificant of a story to tell Harry. Maybe Paris had a parade of maniacs show up like me? His low profile made sense.

"I absolutely see how this story could be really useful for setting a precedent for Federation law," I said, still happily lying. "Janeway's decision could be seen as a way to establish a 'the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few, or the one' standard in delivering medical care in the field."

"I hadn't thought of that," Kim said--and why should he? I was spewing nonsense. "But a really good point. So what are you going to do next?"

A good question. Obviously my next steps were to talk to more Voyager crew. The situation was worse than I had assumed; Janeway had taken Tuvix by force, using security crewmembers to enforce an illegal order resulting in homicide. Security should have objected, but they hadn't broken the law enforcing her order. Arguably, though, the senior staff on the bridge *had* broken the law by not voicing an objection--legal precedent existed for crew members to log protests before executing a captain's illegal order (like, in this case, an actual execution). They could be charged with misdemeanor mutiny against the Federation charter--an offense carrying a possible incarceration of ninety days and a mandatory demotion of at least one rank.

Obviously, this was a pretty rarely enforced law as Starfleet captains don't go around giving illegal orders all too often. But it was on the books, and it was a well-known rule--which suggested that the senior staff had an incentive to cover up Janeway's crime beyond just protecting Janeway. They were protecting themselves, too.

Was that too cynical of an interpretation? After all, each of Voyager's senior staff had, at one point or another, risked much more than a measly demotion during their time onboard. It wasn't just offensive to suggest Starfleet crew would be so politically self-serving; it was pretty unlikely.

Not that humanity had evolved beyond such selfish motives--of course not. The so-called post-progression ideology, so popular on Earth, was one I never ascribed to. The idea that we had evolved past our barbaric history, like what caused the three world wars, was biological nonsense and easily disproved--just take a trip to Turkana IV. What really separated us from our barbaric past wasn't some more enlightened spirit--it was the very cheap energy that gave us replicators, warp speed, and defense systems that made Earth the post-scarcity utopia humanity had been striving for for centuries, and only recently achieved. Take away our power, and we'd be as capitalist as Ferengi, as bloodthirsty as Klingons, and as duplicitous as the worst Cardassian.

I often got into heated arguments over this very topic with Lauren. She was very post-progressive, so much so that she always voted for PPG politicians and had read two of Jean-Luc Picard's books. It was a testament to how good of a person Lauren was that she never took these arguments personally. It is not everyone who can live and sleep with someone who has the polar opposite political views as you and still get along. And yes I am boasting about myself, too--but Lauren was even more tactful than I when these topics came up. Sure, I respected her view, even if it was wrong, but sometimes the naivete that came out of her mouth was too much for me to endure. Luckily, Lauren didn't resort to the typical accusations for us techno-relativists--she never once called me a reductivist brute or subconsciously violent, as we often are called. And for that I was grateful.

Maybe my politics are why I could care about Tuvix. But the more I uncovered the story behind this dead man's fate, the more it seemed to confirm my own politics. Voyager, like a colony separated from the Federation, had had to conserve its resources and bend the rules. Janeway unquestionably bent the rules, deciding Tuvix's fate and overriding his own wishes. Maybe she did it so she could have two crewmembers on a ship that couldn't afford to have just one. Maybe she did it because of her personal friendship to Tuvok. Whatever it was, it was hard to avoid the conclusion that she had failed to transcend her own selfish desires and respect strange and new lifeforms, as we are taught to do when joining the Academy.

"Captain Kim, I have to thank you so much for visiting me. I'm sure you get a lot of calls from a lot of fans, so I don't want you to think I don't appreciate what you've done for me."

“Not a problem,” he said. “The Doctor told me you were working on a very important project that I had to help with, and I can see he was right.” We got up, he shook my hand. “Please let me know if you need my help again.”

And with that, we left the cafe and I beamed back to Guatemala.

Chapter 13

That Friday, Tora messaged me to say she had to cancel our trip to Andorra, as they were working overtime on an experiment. The timing was a bit too fitting, coming just days after Lauren’s blowup at me. Lauren and Tora had spent quite a bit of time at the party alone together--maybe Tora got the sense that Lauren felt threatened? Or maybe Lauren dropped the hint that Tora had been using up a lot of my time?

No matter what had happened, I was honestly relieved. Tora had served her purpose; I’d gotten to The Doctor, I’d gotten the next steps, and now if I needed to talk to The Doctor again, I was certain he would take my calls. Great--progress was made.

Lauren was delighted that I had the entire weekend with her, and at the time I thought our relationship was saved. We spent the weekend at a holocenter in Guatemala City, enacting a modified version of Kahless and Lukara at Qam-Chee, but modified the program to look like an ancient Greek battle. This way we compromised between my own interests in Earth history and Lauren’s interest in Klingon culture.

It was the first weekend since I’d started developing my case against Janeway that I really enjoyed myself. The entire time I didn’t think about Tuvix once, and my love for Lauren just felt all the stronger. And I could tell she, too, loved me more, understanding now that I wasn’t drifting away from her and towards a gorgeous Bajoran; I only had eyes for her.

Well, if we’re talking about romance, that is.

The weekend passed, and then it was time to go back to work.

Shortly after I woke up on Monday and told the coffee machine to prepare me a latte, I got a call from Patrick. He did not usually call me before I showed up to work--and it was indeed thirty minutes before my shift started, so this call definitely caught me off guard.

What he said caught me off guard even more.

"I've got good news and bad news. The good news is you're being promoted, Lieutenant."

I was stunned. My work lately has been the kind of easy work most unambitious people choose, wineing and dining guests and going to parties. The harder work of refugee resettlements is

what gets you promotions, but giving a young scientist tours of Europe? This is the kind of work that makes 50 year-old ensigns, not 25 year-old lieutenants.

"I have to admit I'm surprised," I said. "I didn't think my work was worth a promotion."

"Well, it isn't," Patrick said matter-of-factly, and it stung to hear him say that even if I knew it were true. I didn't have much time to wallow in self pity, because he continued. "It's more of a consolation prize for the bad news: you're getting reassigned."

That sounded not good. "To where?"

"The USS Xinjiang."

I did not know the ship, but the name stung. To hear the place where my ancestors were nearly made extinct in the Slow Genocide of the 21st Century was jarring, to say the least. My family had taught us well of the millions who died there.

"It's a humanitarian mission, part of one of the armadas to the Romulan Neutral Zone. You'll be helping to process refugee requests."

That made sense.

That also made my life a lot more complicated. As far as I knew, no one from Voyager was assigned on the Romulan front or even nearby, and the assignment meant I'd be far from any Voyager crew for months, if not a year (I didn't know if these were emergency orders; if they weren't, it'd mean I could demand a transfer back to Earth in six months--then I could get back to the business of setting things right for Tuvix).

Then there was Lauren; she knew Starfleet officers are reassigned all the time, and after the nova in the Romulan empire, the chances of a legal clerk being assigned offworld skyrocketed. It was something I dreaded; I'd joined Starfleet because it was the greatest force for justice in the known galaxy, but I did not want to leave Earth. I'd been to the Moon a few times as a kid on vacation; I did not like space. And so I had always considered the risk of being assigned offworld as low, and told Lauren as much when we started dating.

But I was naive. Maybe Captain Kim was right.

In the last few months, growing refugee requests from the Romulan empire had hit the Federation, and now it was estimated that up to 70 billion of the 100 billion humanoids of the empire who survived the nova might ask for refugee status. The empire was in tatters, its government gone, and warlords cropping up to hoard resources. With trade routes unprotected, it was harder to ensure everyone had access to the energy and technology needed to maintain life throughout the empire.

The Federation had been helping to provide supplies, but it just wasn't enough. Multiple civil wars were inevitable, the Tal Shiar was already declaring itself the legitimate government--and planning an even more totalitarian regime than even Romulans would tolerate. With warlords equally interested in power ready to fight the Tal Shiar into extinction, ordinary Romulans were caught in the crosshairs.

This had put a lot of pressure on the Vulcans, who themselves had put pressure on the Federation. 70 billion refugees was more than the Federation could handle, of course; that was almost as much as the population of the Federation already. But we were living in a time of peace thanks to our win over the Dominion and friendly relations with the Cardassians, which meant there was a lot of space and resources the Federation could use to slow the gush of refugees into the Federation while also providing technological support when it could.

But the administrative hurdles here were enormous; there were still millions of refugees who needed to be admitted into the Federation immediately, as they lived on battlefronts amongst the skirmishes the warlords were indulging in. They did not care if civilians were hurt, and some were slowly beginning to realize enslaving and ransoming those civilians could become a lucrative business.

With a new crime syndicate that made Orions look quaint bubbling to the surface, the Federation had decided to step in more aggressively, get as many Romulan refugees into the Federation as quickly as possible, and train the ablest of them to fight the warlords. With any luck, these refugee-turned-militias could both contain the warlords and stay out of the Federation's territory.

Public opinion on the move was all over the place. This transcended party politics, with many worried about being overrun by Romulans, and many more arguing that this was a test to Federation ideals that we could not afford to fail.

I was in the latter camp, which is why I was not as upset about the assignment as I'd thought.

Still, Lauren would be upset--we had been together nearly a year at this point, and we hadn't been apart for all that time, except my trips to Europe. Six months apart breaks relationships--and this could easily break things with Lauren.

All of this ran through my brain in a blur after Patrick told me the news. Then I snapped out of it and replied back: "Understood, sir. I can come to the office early."

"Good idea, Jason," he replied. "You'll need to be orientated by the liaison office, then you'll be sent on your way."

I grabbed my coffee, took a sip. "Thanks, Patrick, it's been an honor and a pleasure working with you."

He laughed. "Don't be so dramatic. It's a non-emergency posting." Good, six months and I can get back. I suddenly felt my shoulder drop; I hadn't realized how the news had made my entire body tense up. "If you want to come back when it's over, I'll save your desk for you."

"Like I said, it's been a pleasure."

We said our goodbyes and I finished my coffee before the official transfer notice showed up on my LCARS screen.

NOTIFICATION OF TRANSFER
TO: JASON LI, LIEUTENANT
SERIAL NUMBER: 5513255X88

Jason Li is to report immediately to Lieutenant Commander Velrik for orientation on new assignment to the USS Xinjiang, Captain Andrew Gaberman. Reporting to Lieutenant Mark Price, Esquire.

Primary duties: Refugee application processing.

END OF NOTIFICATION

So that was it. I did not know Mark Price--apparently a lawyer. I recognized Gaberman, though, even if I'd never met him before.

In one of his interviews to the Federation News Network, Captain Kim told the story of how he first met Tom Paris at Deep Space Nine, saying that he'd almost got duped by a Ferengi who'd been offended because Gaberman, a classmate, had warned Kim to not trust Ferengis.

To make sure my memory wasn't playing tricks on me, I did a quick personnel search and found that, indeed, Kim and Gaberman both graduated in 2371. And both had been staff of the student newspaper.

When I realized I hadn't dreamed up the connection, I felt a tingling on the tips of my fingers and in my feet. It took me a while to realize I was hyperventilating.

To this day, I have no evidence that Kim got me transferred. And to be honest, I lean towards it just being a wild coincidence. Kim didn't seem bothered by me at all, and getting a friend on the front lines to take a random ensign would be hard to do, captain's privilege or none. But the coincidence felt...meaningful.

Now I know that coincidence was what helped me get closer to bringing Janeway to justice for her crimes, but at the time I saw it as the exact opposite: I was going to the front lines of a very important humanitarian mission where I could help get justice for many living beings, a more noble cause than getting justice for one dead man.

So I felt a weight lifted from my shoulders, and the hyperventilating vanished. In its place, tranquility. I saw this as an opportunity for me to give up on Tuvix. I could focus instead on the Romulans in need, on protecting the Federation and, more importantly, protecting the Federation's ideals from humanity's darker instincts. It was a noble use of a life--and after six months I could come back to Lauren's loving arms, if she truly did love me and could wait for me.

Everything's fine. Everything was going to be fine.

Chapter 14

Lieutenant Commander Velrik was a young-looking vulcan who acted like a vulcan. He saluted me with a neutral face after I reported for duty, and sat me down in a conference room with a dozen other lieutenants. We were in the security wing of Starfleet HQ, where I'd never been allowed to go before; I was a bit disappointed to see that it seemed largely made up of conference rooms.

He then opened up a holographic display and began telling us of our mission. On it I saw the thousands of stars that made up the neutral zone with the Romulan empire; that region was helpfully shaded in a light violet. Small insignia for the Federation's ships were dotted across--and, shockingly, inside--that region.

I'd known it intellectually before, but seeing it on a map like this in front of me in a formal orientation meeting really made me accept the truth: the Romulan empire really was dead, and the Federation was in the neutral zone for the first time ever.

"Your ship is part of the Omicron Armada in Section 27-J of the Neutral Zone," Velrik said, and the computer highlighted and zoomed into that area in response. I could see about 20 Federation insignia--as well as red "X's" over several star systems nearby. "Omicron Armada consists of three flanks: yours is the final flank, offering support services. The first flank serves to defend you and the second flank, who is in charge of transporting asylum seekers. You will likely not see combat. The region has had no battles for over three months, so it is likely that you won't see any battles during your time."

"Are they hoping to keep us for more than six months?" I asked, knowing full well this made me look like a slacker. I was pretty sure I heard a snicker in the room, but I couldn't see where it originated.

The look on Velrik's face seemed to answer my thoughts: *yes, you are clearly indeed a slacker.* "No, all law clerks are expected to return after six months, as the hours will be prolonged. You will have 6 12-hour work shifts per week, with all ships' internal chronometers set to Earth days."

Half of my day at work, and just one day a week off? A bit harsh even for emergency conditions, which told me things were bad. “Understood, sir.”

“Your primary duties will be twofold. First, you will review interview footage and application requests from refugee camps currently residing on Epsilon Legato III, IV, and V.”

“There are three Class M planets there?” another lieutenant, a young human man, asked. I didn’t recognize him.

“Yes, fortunately,” Velrik said. “Currently 800 million refugees are awaiting a response from the Federation.”

My eyes bulged. “800 million?” a Trill lieutenant asked.

“At Epsilon Legato,” he continued, implying that there were many more elsewhere--I’d rather not know about that, so I didn’t ask. I could only thank the stars I’d been born a human on Earth.

“Our target is to process 600 million applications in the next six months, with 200 million already processed.”

“How many clerks are on this project?” the Trill followed up.

“6,273, leaving 95,648 refugees to be inspected per clerk, or 620 per day, or 51.67 per hour,” he continued. “If current processing averages of 63 per hour are maintained, we will finish this project early.” The way he stressed “early” made me think he did not expect me to be up to the task. And, to be honest, after spending two months of my career doing little of importance, I agreed with him.

“You will all be reporting to Lieutenant Mark Price,” Velrik replied. “He will be your immediate superior officer. A weekly debriefing of your progress is expected by each Friday, with times detailed on each of your padds and set by the ship’s internal chronometer.”

Was he patronizing us? What other clock would we--well, this is why so few vulcans have friends.

Velrik rose, we followed.

“Acknowledged, sir!” we said in unison.

“Dismissed.”

I looked at my padd and saw that I would be joining the USS Endeavor, where I’d meet up with other support staff who were going with me to the Xinjiang.

I also saw that Endeavor was a Galaxy class ship--at least I can enjoy the couple days I'll have in transit.

On my way out of the room, Velrik stopped me.

"Do not forget this, lieutenant," he said, handing me a small box. It was my pip. I'd almost forgotten that I hadn't gotten it yet. Not much of a ceremony for me; that was probably for the best.

Chapter 15

"I just want you to know, I'm going to stay faithful to you and I love you."

The sudden urge to run to the bathroom disappeared--I was still lightheaded, but hearing those words was an instant relief. I knew then that I truly loved Lauren, that she was far too good of a lover than I deserved, and that I owed it to her to be dedicated to her.

I'd dreaded coming back from HQ, which is why I took the shuttle instead of beaming back. I spent the hour preparing myself for her to say she couldn't wait six months for me--my pessimism was paid off handsomely with relief.

I didn't tell her I'd expected her to dump me--instead I grabbed and kissed her. "Thank you," I whispered into her ear, surprised that I was near tears. So I hugged her again, hoping the pressure of her body against mine would keep them from coming out.

It worked. Then she looked me in the eyes again and said, "I will write to you everyday. You don't need to write back; I guess you'll have 10-hour shifts?"

"12," I said immediately. "And six-day weeks."

"Wow," she said, her mouth briefly stuck in a perfect "O" shape. "That is unusual, isn't it?"

"Starfleet regulations allow for up to 15-hour shifts for humans in wartime, 14 in peacetime. But 12 hasn't been used since the Dominion War, as far as I've been told."

"What's the reason?"

I hadn't been told the reason was secret, so I told her. "Asylum seekers. Romulan space is falling apart and there are billions who either need Federation protection now or need to be armed to protect themselves from the chaos out there. Our armada is supposed to clear 800 million applications before I get back."

"That's a ridiculous amount of people," Lauren said. "That's almost as much as the population of the Americas."

I nodded. "It's more than 10% of Federation member worlds."

"I am proud of you," she said. "You're really doing something important for the Federation--and for Earth."

I was genuinely touched to hear her say that. And it made me think that maybe my lifelong goal of seeking justice and making the galaxy a more righteous place didn't need to hinge on righting the death of a man who had died years ago. It was like Tuvix, which had grown to admittedly become an obsession of mine, was fading from view. For months now I had spent hours reading every bit I could about Voyager, about criminal precedent in transporter accidents, about Janeway herself. And all of a sudden, with the thought of helping millions if not billions of Romulans, it all seemed just not worth the energy.

"Just one more thing, Lauren." She looked at me, puzzled. "What's our policy on cheating and holograms?"

She threw a pillow at me. I deserved it.

Chapter 16

The Endeavor was as luxurious as any Galaxy class starship, and while I didn't have any time to see the holodeck, I did have a good time in tenforward getting to know some of my new colleagues. Derrick was a human from Portland who had graduated two years before me; he was a pilot and was joining the Xinjiang in the engineering crew; he'd been to space countless times and was chuffed to be back after being stuck working at UFP headquarters supporting the shipbuilding resource allocation council. Then there was Tax, an unjoined Trill who had also been stationed on Earth for the last five years, working at the United Federation of Planets as a diplomatic attaché. He had a love for Earth martial arts although he was the thinnest and most unathletic person I'd probably ever met. Finally, Ji-Soo, Sarah, and Tom were all human like myself; unlike me, they mostly kept to themselves.

I had no interest in that. This was my first official trip off Earth and, as much as I did not like being away from home, I very much did like the opportunity to meet as many of the officers and enlisted people as I could. Derrick and Tax agreed, which is why we spent most of our time in tenforward, chatting with as many people as we could about life on the ship.

I learned a lot about my soon-to-be shipmates, but it was Derrick whom I spent most of the time with. I don't want to say it was because we were both human--the stereotype that Earthers prefer the company of humans exists for a reason, but I do try to befriend as many people as I can. Still, Derrick had a lot to say about piloting and the history of Starfleet ships that was genuinely fascinating to me, a surprise since I'd never found science all that interesting. But Derrick told me of some crazy stories, such as the time Voyager had gone to Warp 10 (once

thought a theoretical impossibility); that story wasn't one that made it to all of the books, articles, and interviews about Voyager, and learning this extra bit about my obsession was a delight.

And it also made me realize I was, in fact, moving away from Voyager and Tuvix in my mind, intellectually and emotionally. Derrick had as many questions for me about the future of asylum seekers to the Federation and what this all meant for the quadrant. I was a lowly clerk, but he clearly saw me as more of an expert than he. And so we shared knowledge: I on law and history, he on science and technology.

That's not to say we paired off and ignored the others. For the two days on the Endeavor, we engaged Tax as much as possible (although Tax definitely retired to his quarters much earlier than Derrick and me); Tax had been accepted to the Academy at 15 and started classes a month after his 16th birthday, a fact that he did not boast about and seemed to blush when Derrick mentioned it in jest (the two had been assigned together for a year already and seemed to know each other well). I figured that likely accounted for his shyness; while Tax was certainly friendly, and willing to answer questions when sent his way, he did not ask nor give too many details. I wanted to ask why Tax chose not to be joined (or was it a choice? Few Trill are given the honor, I suppose), but did not want to embarrass him, so I refrained.

The morning of our departure, I awoke to find Ji-Soo, Sarah, and Tom having breakfast together at tenforward, with five padds on the table and a lot of talk that I couldn't overhear. They hadn't been quick to welcome me to their table, so I hesitated to join them; but as I didn't know anyone else in the room, I was about to make my way to them from the bank of replicators when I heard a familiar voice behind me.

"Morning, Jason. Excited to see me pilot?" I turned, and there was Derrick, smiling ear to ear. He was clearly excited not just to fly, but for us to see him fly.

"I doubt you'll impress me in a shuttlecraft." We were about forty-five minutes away from the departure point, where the Endeavor was going to drop out of warp, let us disembark via a shuttlecraft that we'd then fly the remaining 1.5 parsecs to the Omicron Armada. The Endeavor was headed elsewhere--but their mission was above my security clearance, so I had no idea where.

"You'd be surprised," Derrick said with a cocky smile. I wasn't sure if he was joking, but at the back of my mind I was getting nervous. Every once in a while I remembered that I was on a starship in the middle of space, with a thin sheet of duranium separating me from a painful, horrific death. Whenever I remembered, I pushed the thought to the back of my mind.

My stream of consciousness must have clouded my face, because Derrick went from cocksure trickster to sympathetic friend. "Don't worry, I'm not going to do anything crazy to impress you."

"Thanks," I said, hoping the relief didn't come through too much in my quavering voice. I knew I was a coward by Starfleet standards when it came to spaceflight; while I wasn't ashamed of this fact, I didn't exactly want to advertise it, either. "Just getting us there alive will impress me."

"You're an easy customer," he said, then turned to the replicator. "Hash browns, three eggs, five rashers of American bacon," he said. I'd quickly learned Derrick liked to eat a lot--he also exercised a lot too, which was why he was a towering and powerful figure. I'd never been intimidated by tall men; having been average height my whole life, height had never been a concern of mine. But I'd always been thin and uninterested in being anything but, so Derrick's musculature was a point of envy and, I admit, admiration. He promised to teach me weightlifting at some point, a promise I at the time hoped he'd break.

"Shall we sit with Ji-Soo and the rest?" I asked. He nodded, and we proceeded to join them.

The group was quiet before we arrived, but as we got there Tom gave us a nod and a "morning." And with that, we sat together in a mostly quiet and uneventful breakfast. That suited me well; my pork congee was delicious, being one of the few foods that replicates well.

The call came onto all of our communicators at once. "Xinjiang party report to the Apollo in Shuttlebay 3," we heard the commander say. I was surprised that we got a personal note from such a high ranking officer on the ship, and I admit it tickled my ego. It shouldn't have. We got up at once, took our trays to the replicators, and left for the shuttlebay.

I knew little about Galaxy-class ships, so I was surprised when we got to the shuttlebay to see how cramped it was. We exited the turbolift together on Deck 13, with Derrick leading the way--both because he knew the layout of the ship better than the rest of us and because he was about to be, as soon as we stepped foot on the shuttle, our commanding officer. I was already practicing calling him "sir" in my head, even though I probably would have nothing to do on the ship when we got there.

When the shuttlebay doors opened, we were immediately faced with a wall of barrels and other containers. A hard right and another left to get past them, and we saw the rest of the bay, which was cramped as far as I could tell. Going through the maze created by all of the containers there, we finally got to the back of the shuttlebay where the Apollo was waiting, next to another shuttlecraft. "I had no idea shuttlebays were so tiny," I said.

"They aren't," Derrick replied. "Not all of them. The main shuttlebay is a lot larger--and less full of cargo. We're just not important enough to get a sendoff there," he added.

That was true. I don't know what I'd expected, but I thought at least one senior officer would be there to see us off. There was only a technician behind the glass who opened the doors to the bay after we got into the ship, said "Apollo, you are cleared for departure" over the intercom, and closed the doors behind us. My ego was thoroughly unticked.

Looking out at the stars from this small ship for some reason felt less terrifying--being in a vehicle whose dimensions I was more experienced with, my subconscious possibly interpreted our trip as if I were on a transcontinental shuttlecraft back on Earth at night; the fear of the vacuum of space didn't cross my mind.

Then we went to warp.

This was only the second time I'd experienced such a thing, the first being on the Endeavor. It was weird in how much of a *non*-experience it was. The stars blurred and we seemed to zoom past them, but no engine sound, change in inertia, or rise in pressure inside the cabin meant it was a purely visual phenomenon. Derrick had told me you can feel going to warp when you're more experienced with it, but I wasn't sure if he was fibbing.

Our shuttlecraft was certified to go Warp 9 maximum, and Derrick set a Warp 8 cruising speed--which even I knew was standard operating procedures, meaning we'd arrive in just over a day.

The first sixteen hours were uneventful. Derrick contacted the Xinjiang on subspace and confirmed their position was where we expected; Ji-Soo ran a diagnostic on the ship which came up clean, and the rest stayed either at their seats or in a bunk in the back. I noticed an immediate change in mood from our two days on the Endeavor. While that felt like a vacation, this felt like a business trip; everyone was prepping for the work they were about to be doing, except Derrick and Ji-Soo, who were already working.

I was no exception. I called up the reports from the legal attachés that were managing the refugee asylum project at the Omicron Armada, including their training materials and background information. The legal details are perhaps too boring to go into, even for a fellow lawyer, but let me just say there was a lot. I was surprised at how standard the process already was; the legal theory and administration that had been put in place over the last few decades had prepared the Federation for a wave of migrants, although no one had expected the sheer quantity of people that we were now facing.

Exactly what my job was supposed to be and how to do it was clearly laid out in the documents Lieutenant Price had prepared for us clerks. That was a relief, but I can't say a shock; Starfleet was the most professional and well organized institution in the known galaxy, which was why so many people wanted to work for it, even if they came from Federation societies that were post-money. Starfleet attracted people who wanted to do good jobs, so it wasn't surprising that Price had done a good job himself.

I was reading about terrorist screening protocols when I heard the sound of an alert from the front of the shuttle. I was in my bunk with the screen door ajar just barely, so I didn't hear any response to the alert. Still, an alert on its own made me nervous--that was definitely not supposed to happen.

"Unidentified vessel closing in heading 210 mark 5," Ji-soo was saying, now sitting at her station next to Derrick at the head of the vessel. Tom was at a support con closer to the back of the ship--while I couldn't see Ji-Soo or Derrick's panel, I could see Tom had switched to battle mode.

That was terrifying.

"Opening a channel," Ji-Soo continued.

"This is the USS Apollo Shuttle," said Derrick confidently as he continued to steer. His voice sounded strong and authoritative, which made me even more nervous. "Please identify yourself."

No response.

"Can you get a positive ID on that ship?" Derrick called out.

"Negative," Tom said.

"Distance to the Xinjiang?"

"Still 2.3 light years," Ji-Soo replied.

"Hail them, inform them of our situation, and request fighter support to meet us at maximum warp."

"Acknowledged," she said.

At maximum warp at this distance, it'd take them over 6 hours to get here--even I knew that math. Surviving a gunfight for six hours wasn't impossible, depending on how heavily armed our friend was. But a six-hour fight would be both exhausting and taxing on the ship.

It quickly became apparent that we had no choice.

"I believe it is a modified Jem'Hadar fighter," Tom said suddenly. "I am not quite sure, but the ion trail it is leaving behind is a close match, but if it is, it's a modified engine."

"Theories?" Derrick snapped.

Theories? I wanted to know how far that damn ship was from us.

"A modified fighter would indicate it isn't a Jem'Hadar but someone who found some space debris," Ji-Soo replied. "That would indicate either a freelancer or a pirate, so we can assume a one-on-one fight."

“Agreed,” Tom said. “In either case they’d have a show of force to minimize the chances of a fight.” As he said it I realized how much that made sense. Just one ship meant we had a fighting chance; several and we’d have to surrender immediately, giving them whatever cargo or resources they wanted from us.

But that didn’t rule out the possibility that this was a desperate loner looking for resources with no choice but to fight for them. Nor did it rule out the possibility of it being just some rogue homicidal maniac who liked killing random ships for fun. There wasn’t much of that, but it wasn’t unheard of. I knew the case law.

One ship, I quickly realized as my pulse quickened and my extremities tingled, meant a greater chance of death. I could feel the panic attack welling.

Then Ji-Soo said something that snapped me out of it.

“They’re hailing us. Audio only.”

“Open a channel,” Derrick said.

“This is Fenris Ranger Shizuki, requesting your immediate cooperation,” the voice said--a female and, by the name of it, a human. “We do not want to destroy your ship, but we will.”

We?

“This is Lieutenant Derrick, acting captain of the transport craft Apollo. We are on a peaceful mission--”

“Lies will not save you,” Shizuki responded immediately. “Identify yourself.”

I could hear the exasperated and annoyed tone in Derrick’s voice. That somehow put my mind at ease.

“I just told you,” he said slowly, condescendingly. “I am Derrick of the United Federation of Planets. Who are the ‘Rangers’?”

Suddenly, the Jem’hadar fighter shot a phaser beam across the hull, lighting up the starboard side windows and just barely missing us by maybe 10 meters. I quickly glanced over to Tom’s panel and was relieved to see shields at maximum, power at 100%. Whew.

“We know you are working for Sukral and you are transporting illegal Borg technology,” Shizuki continued in a tone very clearly laden with anger. She reminded me of Lauren at that moment. “We will not let you leave.”

“Cut communication,” Derrick said. Ji-Soo did. I was waiting for Shizuki to attack, but she didn’t. However, her ship had now aligned itself with ours, and was staring straight at us. “Thoughts?”

“She thinks we’re Romulan,” Tom said, “so we need to prove we aren’t and avoid this entire fight.”

Derrick nodded. “Open a channel, onscreen.”

Ji-Soo did, and we saw Shizuki--a human perhaps in her mid-30s, whose very angry face was a mismatch to her very petite figure. It was unnerving to see a human sitting on a Jem’hadar bridge, made even weirder by the fact that the chair she was sitting on was Starfleet. Next to her and facing away from the camera was a Klingon.

“Nice trick,” Shizuki said, apparently not believing we were human.

“If you don’t believe us, beam onto our ship, or I can beam onto yours,” Derrick said, now more annoyed than anything.

“And lower our shields? Hardly--nice try, though. You will accompany us to our rendezvous where we will hand you over to the Ranger council. They will mete out justice.”

“Who are the rangers?” Derrick asked.

“Now I know you’re just buying time,” Shizuki said. “What an absurd question.” She ended the call.

And that’s when the first phaser hit--our starboard nacelle. I could feel the impact as the ship teetered back and forth.

“Superficial hit, shields holding,” Tom said. “Clearly a warning shot.”

“I honestly don’t know what to do,” Derrick said suddenly. Not really what you wanted your commanding officer to say--and not something I expected.

Ji-Soo turned to him. “We just need to postpone this for a few hours. When the Omicron fighters come they can clear this all up. It’s clearly a misunderstanding of some sorts--whoever the Rangers are, they seem to be on the Federation’s side.”

A naive conclusion, I thought.

“Agreed,” Tom said. “But how?”

He asked the right question at the right time, because Shizuki lit us up again. This time another phaser to our hull. “Shields down to 95%,” Tom said.

Not a hard hit, which oddly calmed me. And the phaser fire meant she didn't want to destroy us completely. Possibly because she thought we were Romulans smuggling Borg technology.

"Listen," I said immediately. Everyone in the cabin turned to me. "I know this isn't my job, but I have experience with criminal minds--and whoever the rangers are, they are criminals."

"Sorry, Jason, but--" Derrick began, but Tom cut him off.

"Derrick, let's listen to him--sir," he added belatedly.

Derrick gestured. He played an egomaniac, but I knew he really wasn't one. I nodded gratitude to Tom.

"I think the rangers, however many there are, are some kind of vigilante group, maybe like the Maquis," I continued. "And vigilantes tend to shoot first, ask questions later--or never. They also see everyone else as potential enemies and liars, because they themselves will lie to whomever and make enemies more willingly than make friends. No matter what we say to her, she's going to find a way to think we are lying, trying to deceive her, etc. And she probably thinks we're trying to buy time until backup arrives--any minute now her paranoia will spike and she'll strike us again, but with more force."

As if I'd jinxed us, another phaser strike--this one straight to our engines. "Shields still holding at 70%," Tom said. Then another phaser strike--they weren't waiting.

"Fire photon torpedoes, target their weapons system," Derrick said immediately, his tone gone flat. Humans were not supposed to fire on other humans. This was not what our civilization had worked so hard to become. This wasn't 1939.

But we had no choice, and Derrick made the right call with the information in front of him.

What happened next was chaotic, and I'd rather not relive the details too much, so let me just tell you the outcome of this battle. Our first strike didn't hit their weapons system--or if it did, their weapons were still functional. It did cut out their shields and cause a hull breach, which would have ended the fight right there if, at the same time, her ship hadn't fired phasers back at us that knocked out our shields and caused our ship to spin a full 360 degrees.

Instinctually, I held on to a handlebar on the wall next to me, so when the ship rolled around at 200km/hr my legs hit the ceiling and caused me to slide on the side of the ship and onto the ground, so only my left leg was broken in three places. Tom, Derrick, and Ji-Soo were not so lucky--they were all thrown about the cabin and died instantly.

I didn't know it immediately, but since Sarah and Tax had been in their enclosed bunk, the whirling of the ship just caused bad headaches for them both but no other major injuries. Thankfully, because otherwise we probably would have died.

When the ship's inertial dampers adjusted to the turning and I was on the ground, pure adrenaline took over. I knew that my three crewmates including our pilot were dead, but there was no time to feel anything about that fact. Nor was there time to feel pain from my broken bones. Instead I had to crawl to the pilot's station and get us out of this situation.

"Computer!" I yelled as I crawled, "attack formation epsilon!"

It immediately began a preprogrammed attack formation that was probably extremely easy to predict and counterattack--I only had the most rudimentary understanding of space battle theory from a course I did not do very well in over three years ago. But it apparently was enough, perhaps because the Jem'hadar ship's jerryrigged technology was not robust enough to survive much of a fight. Which, I later understood, was a symptom of the Rangers' bravery and stupidity.

"Sarah, Tax! Get out here! Help!" I screamed to the back cabin, but they were already on their way to the front. I hadn't gotten to the pilot's chair by the time Sarah was there, taking the helm while I was still laying on the ground. That's when I started to feel the pain in my legs.

I was facing the floor but I still heard the sound of someone beaming into the cabin--and I also heard the sound of a phaser. I turned and saw Shizuki was in our ship now and on the ground, unconscious. Tax was standing above her, phaser in hand.

"Can you help?" I rasped. "My leg hurts."

Chapter 17

Fortunately they were clean breaks so the osteogenic stimulator took less than a minute to fix them, after which a hypospray took the inflammation and the pain away. I got to my feet and sat in Tom's old chair before Shizuki regained consciousness, affording me some dignity.

My heart was still racing so I couldn't think too much about it, but the horror was starting to hit me--my friend had died, and Ji-Soo and Tom were gone too before I had a chance to get to know them. This was not the kind of first space mission you were supposed to have.

"Shields regenerating, long-range scanners show no known enemy ships, warp engines remain fully functional." Then I swallowed. "Enemy ship has been destroyed." The Klingon, and whoever else had been on that ship, were dead.

"Resuming course to Xinjiang, maximum warp," Sarah said. Now we'd be there ahead of schedule--and with bad news, dead bodies, and a murderer to deliver as well.

“Are you okay to drag her behind the force field?” Tax asked. I nodded. I helped pick up the still unconscious murderer and place her behind the main cabin. We stepped back, and Tax raised the force field that now separated Shizuki from us and the back cabin. It also kept us from accessing the back cabin as well, but since we only had about six hours to get to the Xinjiang, that didn’t really matter.

Shizuki awoke about an hour later.

“My god,” was the first thing she said.

I turned and saw her--she was now looking at us from behind the force field.

“Now you see we weren’t lying--we’re human,” I said bitterly.

Shizuki looked down. “Our intel was impeccable,” she muttered.

Quickly, she told us the story. Another human ranger had visited Shizuki’s team on Vashti, a planet in the Qiris sector that the rangers were using as one of their bases, and told them that a shuttlecraft of our name, registry, and description had been taken over by a Romulan warlord by the name of Sukral, who had acquired a cache of Borg technology he was transporting to his base, where Sukral planned to use it to begin assimilating and reprogramming Tal Shiar fighters to follow his commands.

It was a ghastly plan--if it had been true.

Shizuki told us she had seen the human ranger herself--in a bitter irony, he was also named Derrick. I fought back tears at that detail.

“Did you do a DNA test on Derrick?”

“No,” she said. “My boss, T’Mek, said that he knew Derrick and that he was a trusted source. T’Mek is a brilliant Vulcan, so I had no reason to doubt him for one second.”

“So brilliant,” I said dryly, “that he was fooled by some plastic surgery and someone who spoke very good English.”

Shizuki didn’t respond, but she looked deeply ashamed.

“It’s not that hard of a trick,” I continued, “and can be just as effective as a Changeling. Many criminals use plastic surgery to look like other aliens, and it’s something that’s been used by intelligence officers for centuries. Over the last century, the Tal Shiar has had an estimated 20,000 spies in the Federation who’ve had some surgery to look like humans.” I’d never expected my History of Military Intelligence class to be so useful. “It’s why Starfleet has DNA

screening as part of its HR protocol on space assignments. I assume you rangers have no such thing.”

Again, no response. If Shizuki hadn't just killed my colleagues, I would've felt the need for mercy. As it was, I wanted her to feel as much loathing for herself as I felt for her.

“You see, just because Vulcans are logical doesn't mean they're smart,” I continued. “That's a mistake a lot of humans make. Hell, Vulcans make it even more often. T'Mek clearly didn't think to confirm he was talking to who he thought he was, and he got duped by one of the best spy agencies in galactic history.”

Shizuki knew to say nothing.

“And now my friends are dead as a result, and you're on your way to prison.” Now my lawyer instincts kicked in. “The murder of three on-duty Starfleet officers will likely result in sixty-years in a high-security prison, which is no fun place to be. Are you originally from Japan?”

“No,” she said. “I was born on Proxima Colony.”

“Ah, well, you are likely to see your ancestors' homeworld soon--you will most likely be in a Pacific Island cell where you will face rehabilitation and justice. Sixty years is a long time.”

I paused for dramatic effect. My lawyer muscle flexing gave my heart some relief. Was I being sadistic? Perhaps, but persisting with Shizuki was the only way I could avenge the death of these three young and courageous beings. It also had the welcome side effect of possibly eliciting information of value.

“Considerations will be made for cooperation, of course. As a primary witness, my testimony on your cooperativeness will set the tone for how the prosecutor will treat you. So I'd suggest you start telling me more about the rangers.”

“You really don't know who we are?” she replied in an offended tone, telling me she replied more out of pride than out of a desire to save her own skin.

“I do not. We're new to the neighborhood.”

“The Federation's resources are strapped,” Shizuki said. “I'm sure you're aware of this. As a result a lot of Romulan gangs have started taking advantage of the situation and attacking innocent civilian worlds; my husband and I were on such a world. So when we were saved by the rangers, we joined them. At the time they were just getting formed, a group of ex-Maquis and some Federation who didn't want to wait around for the bureaucracy to clear us saving our lives and livelihoods.”

That made sense, and it hurt me. I was a proud Earther, human, and Federation citizen. I knew we were imperfect, and the disgraceful way we treated those stuck in the middle of us, the Cardassians, and the Dominion was an example of that imperfection. But I firmly believed by gaining more resources, having more ships, and being bigger, we could get closer to perfection. The supernova of the Romulan sun had happened too fast and had caused too big of a strain on the Federation's post-war resources. We needed more time to rebuild before we could fulfill our destiny as a beacon of light for the galaxy.

"The rangers are protecting the unprotected, the weak, the victims of history and cruel forces of evil in the universe: the Borg, the Romulans, the Orions," she said bitterly. "We do it because you won't--not until you've exhausted every other option."

I don't know if she knew she was quoting Churchill; he was an obscure figure from Earth history. But the reference did bite, and I suddenly felt nauseous as my hatred for this murderer of my friends intertwined with my sympathy for her very understandable position.

But her error also proved that her means did not justify her ends, nor get her to achieve it. She'd been duped and made a stupid mistake that caused innocents to die, because she did not have the infrastructure, the protocols, and the professionalism of Starfleet to ensure bad mistakes like this were not made.

I turned my back to Shizuki, honestly mostly because I didn't know what to say next. We rode in silence for a few hours, and it wasn't until much later that I learned how much this conversation changed Tax's and Sarah's perception of me (we were all in the cramped shuttlecraft, so of course they could hear every word--and they listened). Tax was a diplomat and Sarah an engineer; neither were used to the sometimes cynical tactics of the lawyer, and seeing them play out made both uncomfortable, even when the target was a murderer.

We reached the Xinjiang about 8 hours ahead of schedule, but when we announced our arrival and got cleared for docking there was no question as to why. Our request for security to meet us at the bay also did not elicit questions--but three guards were there to take Shizuki off our hands when we arrived.

Technically I was not the most senior of the survivors, but Tax seemed uncomfortable explaining our situation when Lieutenant Commander Shapiro came on board.

"Reporting for duty, sir," I said. "Unfortunately Lieutenants Sung, Tamil, and Robertson were killed in the line of duty. They fought honorably to save our lives."

"Take her to the brig," Shapiro said to the security guards as he eyed the handcuffed Shizuki. He turned his attention to me, "I'm sorry your tour starts off on such a bad foot, but we thank you for your courage. Please come with me for a full debriefing."

We all began to follow him, but he stopped, turned around, and said, "just you, lieutenant," he said, looking at me. "Tax, Sarah, you'll be debriefed separately."

Separate debriefings as a security protocol made sense, even if it did sting a little. The chances of us being culpable for what had happened was non-zero, and the procedure was standard. But when it happens to you, it still hurts.

I followed Shapiro as he took me to Deck 3, where he led me into his personal office. A small, cramped room with a big window facing the stars, I was surprised to see Shapiro was a book collector. As in actual, physical books made of paper and cardboard. I did not know if they were replicated and it definitely wasn't appropriate to ask.

Shapiro, like me, was part of the legal corps and had a love of language, so the books made sense.

"Tell me everything that happened," he said simply, exhaling with a twinge of disappointment in his voice as he sat down. I wasn't sure if the disappointment was aimed at me, but I felt like a target.

I proceeded to tell him what I've told you, and probably in just as many words.

"That is honestly not too surprising, but it is worrying," he said. When he saw my face he immediately said, "relax--you're not a suspect." I was relieved to hear that, but also ashamed that my self-interest was so apparent. I was not acting or thinking like a Starfleet officer should--while that was often the case, I didn't like it when it was so nakedly apparent.

"We've known about the rangers for a while now," he continued. "They haven't attacked Starfleet yet even if we see them as vigilantes outside the law, which is why none have been arrested or convicted or anything yet. So this is a bit of an anomaly."

How lucky for Ji-Soo, Tom, and Derrick.

"It seems the Tal Shiar is changing tactics in an attempt to get us to start attacking the rangers," he continued. "You see, they've been a growing thorn in the side of just about all of the Romulan groups, but the Tal Shiar above all. The rangers' strategy so far has been to attack the Tal Shiar just when the other Romulan factions are doing the same. That way they have a war on all fronts, they'll fall first, then the rangers can start targeting the various warlords. It's a good strategy. Coffee?"

"No thank you," I said.

"Coffee, extra strong," Shapiro barked to the replicator. He took the cup, sat down again. "But good strategy isn't enough if your enemy is more cunning than you are, which is clearly the case here. The Tal Shiar technically outgun the rangers, but they lack military strategic skill, which is why they've lost the skirmishes they've had. But the Tal Shiar is cleverer than the rangers, and

they can use that to fight without wasting energy or resources on torpedoes. And now that's what they're going to start doing."

"If you don't mind, sir," I said timidly, unsure of whether Shapiro wanted to think aloud or wanted me to contribute. He looked up at me enigmatically while sipping his coffee, causing my uncertainty to grow. I powered through. "If the Tal Shiar is intent on creating a rift between us and the rangers, one way to do it is to infiltrate their ranks. Another is to infiltrate ours."

He nodded. "I am aware of this," he said. I felt sheepish; had I said the obvious? "Our humanitarian effort to offer asylum to as many Romulans as we can has just gotten a lot harder. The last thing we want to do is open the floodgates to millions of Tal Shiar operatives to come live on Earth, Vulcan, Betazed." He paused. "We've got a real problem here."

I grimaced. The quest for power amongst the evil and power-hungry always meant the weakest would suffer the most. Now Romulan asylum seekers who have no home, no power, and no resources will suddenly face an even more uphill battle to get a new home and a new life. If the Tal Shiar could just give up their quest to be in control, billions and billions would have a better life.

And, on a more selfish note, it also meant I'd probably be here for more than six months.

This was, incidentally, the moment when Tuvix completely left my mind. It had been an intense day, and the ramifications of what I had just been through hit me hard. I realized that I needed to focus my energy on not just the living, but the living who were at the mercy of a cruel and self-interested bureaucracy that ultimately didn't care much about the best interests of the innocent.

In my mind, those billions of homeless Romulans were like billions of Tuvixes, facing a cruel, singleminded, and uncaring Janeway--but in this case, that Janeway was the complex galactic politics keeping those Romulans from safety.

"I am eager to serve however I can," I said. And I meant every word.

Chapter 18

The changes to the intake procedure were immediate, and suddenly resources dedicated to processing refugees quadrupled. It also meant a new policy, wherein the vast majority of Romulan refugees would be rehoused on uninhabited (or low inhabited) M-class planets in the Neutral Zone.

Suddenly Omicron Armada was in the job of patrolling Rangers first, defending against encroaching Romulans second, and processing refugee applications third.

That meant our target had gone down--now we were expected to allow just six million Romulans into the Federation during my six-month period, even though the amount of clerks working on the project had quadrupled.

But the job changed. Now I was to spend more time interviewing flagged applications and providing opinions on whether these asylum seekers were Tal Shiar or not.

Was I qualified to give such an opinion? Of course not. Maybe I'd been trained to be a shrewd and cynical lawyer, but that didn't mean I was anywhere near ready to understand the subterfuge of your average Tal Shiar spy, let alone identify it. But Starfleet lacked the resources to do any better and, to their credit, the Federation still wanted to let in millions of Romulans.

I could not bring myself to have a political viewpoint on this particular issue, especially not when I was on the front lines. I had to take each Romulan I talked to as an individual, sticking to the facts on the ground to guide my decision making.

The job suited me well. For the next four months I spent my days going through asylum applications, interviewing applicants, and submitting recommendations. It was impossible for me to know who was telling the truth and who wasn't; lie detectors don't work on Romulans and I was smart enough to know my intellect was not equipped to combat a Tal Shiar operative intent on hiding the truth. So I stuck to the merits of each case as they appeared--I would recommend asylum be granted to applicants who were in the most need.

Determining who was in the most need wasn't easy, though. Most stories were pitiful and depressing--it made me wonder just what humanity would look like if Earth were destroyed and the humans who could escape the disaster or were offworld at the time suddenly had to plead for mercy and charity to other worlds. Even if the Federation held, which it probably would without humanity, humans may not get much sympathy, and paradise would be lost in more ways than one.

It was a sobering thought and really made the post-progression movement on Earth seem quaint. Humanity hadn't evolved at all; humanity was lucky that Earth happened to be where it was in the galaxy.

I quickly sympathized with the refugees that I talked to, and I tried to console them as best as I could during the interviews. The most painful were the children--they all seemed keenly aware of what was happening, and I could see a lifetime of trauma developing in front of me.

I was granted leave in the second month of my stay, during which time I was transported to Starbase 47, where Shizuki was on trial for her murder of my colleagues. The official charges were terrorism and three counts of murder, with a possible maximum sentence of 75 years in a high security prison. I was supposed to appear in the middle of the trial, and I was the prosecution's star witness.

Halfway on my way to Starbase 47, I was hailed. There were only two of us on the ship--the pilot and myself--so the hail showed up on my panel and my heart immediately skipped a beat.

"Onscreen," Phlanx said.

A Vulcan admiral appeared. "Shuttlecraft Xinjiang Epsilon, please be informed you are no longer required at Starbase 47. Please turn around and return to your ship."

Phlanx turned to me, surprised. I shrugged.

"Acknowledged," Phlanx said. I looked at my panel--security codes cleared. This was an authentic order.

Phlanx turned the ship around and immediately closed the channel. "Guess we're going back."

I was more confused than annoyed, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't at all annoyed. So I called the admiral back. He appeared on screen.

"Sir, this is Jason Li of the Xinjiang. May I ask why we're being recalled?"

"The trial has been canceled," the admiral said plainly. "You are no longer needed."

"Canceled? Why?"

"Shizuki has been returned to the rangers in exchange for three captured Starfleet officers. The charges have been dropped."

I was stunned. The admiral apparently saw the shock on my face, and then he said, "if that will be all, lieutenant." He ended the transmission.

I was not angry at first. Possibly the shock was so great that I couldn't orient myself to rage, so the fury had to build slowly over the trip back. I hadn't met Phlanx before this trip and he had obviously never met Derek, Ji-Soo, or Tom, so it felt both pointless and inappropriate to talk to him about this. I sent a quick text message to Tax and Sarah, asking them both to join me for dinner in my quarters. Best to talk about this in private.

We came back at 1600, giving me enough time to process 14 asylum applications before dinner. One application was a family of three that looked suspicious, so I'd made an interview request; I'd talk to them tomorrow morning. The rest were all approvals, a rare streak. I hoped they'd all find a happy and meaningful new life in the Federation.

That hope postponed my rage, but it did not erase it. But an outburst would help no one, so when Tax and Sarah showed up that evening, I tried my best to stay calm.

"Thanks for coming, guys," I said when they both arrived--they must have met beforehand, since they arrived simultaneously. "I need to talk to you about Shizuki; she was let go."

"That's why you're back so fast," Tax said, nodding.

"Sorry," I said, remembering my manners. "Want a drink?"

Tax took an Earth beer and Sarah a glass of sherry, while I took a glass of water. "Alcohol and synthohol aren't a good idea right now," I said. "I'm too furious."

"Okay, tell us everything," Sarah said in a soothing tone. She clearly could tell how I was feeling, and that told me to try to contain my emotions. To be a Vulcan for a few moments.

"There isn't much to tell, honestly--we were halfway to starbase when we got a message from an admiral, I don't know his name, telling us the trial was canceled. When I asked he told me there was a hostage exchange. A three-for-one deal."

"That sounds like a pretty good deal for us," Tax replied.

"Not a good deal for Ji-Soo, Tom, and Derrick," I snapped back.

"No, of course not, but imprisoning Shizuki wouldn't help them or their families," Sarah said, showing the insufferable pragmatism of so many Starfleets outside of the legal corps. "There is a chaotic situation in this sector that is getting worse, and getting our people back is a pretty big victory."

"Not just that," Tax continued, "but the families of those returned hostages will certainly feel extremely grateful. Starfleet definitely made the right decision."

I couldn't believe how the two of them were turning against me. In the last couple months we had been a close group, socializing often, made compatriots under the shadow of our fallen comrades' death. And in that time I had seen both of them embody Starfleet's ideals for better or worse.

And this was definitely one of the "worse" times.

"They should have told us a negotiation was going on," I continued, trying to reason with them. "At the very least they should have braced us for this. I hope they had the decency to tell the families."

Sarah nodded. "I can see where you're coming from, Jason," she said, "but such a negotiation was probably pretty sensitive, and letting it slip out to anyone who didn't need to know was most likely a security risk."

“Fair, I can accept that,” I continued, “but they dropped the charges as well. They could’ve returned her and kept the charges open, so when all this is over they can rearrest her. Now she can go back to Proxima Colony, get a house, have a whole life in the Federation if she wanted.”

“I doubt she wants that,” Tax said, “and I’m pretty sure she’ll break the law again pretty soon.”

“And I hope you’re right that this will all be over, but I think there’s no end in sight to this mess,” Sarah added. “The rangers have gotten a lot of resources in the last few months, and I wouldn’t be surprised to see them declare themselves a sovereign nation outside of the Federation.”

“From the studies I’ve seen, 70% of the rangers are Federation citizens--I can’t imagine them giving that up so easily,” I said.

“Jason, I’ve been on the front line with them. I’ve fought against them and with them. They are not happy with the Federation at all, and if anything that’s their most unifying feature. They’re more like Klingons than humans: they care about honor and victory, and they think we have no honor and cannot win this battle.”

“What battle?” Tax asked. “There’s no war here.”

“Well, in a way there is,” I replied. “A war to end the desperation and displacement of the Romulans, but beyond the metaphor there’s ultimately a cold war to gain control of Qiris.”

Sarah nodded. “And the rangers are most likely going to win.”

Now Tax and I both looked at her, startled.

“Don’t get me wrong,” she continued, “I want us to win and I think we are right--we are doing as much as we can to bring peace to this sector, but it’s just too big. We’re talking about 100 billion sentient beings across dozens of planets and species. The Federation isn’t big enough to manage this--the only way we could is if they all joined the Federation, and that’s not going to happen. Not with the slavery and the exploitation and the...” her voice trailed off. “The horrors.”

I nodded. This was why my job was so important.

“I don’t understand why the whole galaxy doesn’t just join the Federation,” Tax said. Internally I chuckled at his naivete; Tax was cute sometimes.

“We’re doing all that we can to bring in as many people into the Federation that want to come,” I said.

“Are you serious?” Sarah said.

Was I being as naive as Tax? I couldn't believe it at the time; of course, now I know I was. "What do you mean?"

"The Federation doesn't want refugees," she said bitterly. "You can see now that the civilian government is straying from the ideals that established the Federation, and I only hope we get a new president who fixes things."

Sarah was one of those Picard fans--she had talked many times about how much she wanted him to run for office, or at least recommend someone who was as moral as he was. I have always felt politics and friendship shouldn't mix, so kept mum when the topic came up. But I made an exception that night, possibly because I was still reeling from Shizuki's freedom.

"Why do you think the Federation is straying?" I replied, and I cringe to think back on it. Even then I was still stupid enough to believe in the Federation, but I shouldn't have. Janeway evading justice and becoming a top-ranking admiral was proof enough, and even though I didn't know of the conspiracy around her at the time, I still knew enough to know that the Federation made mistakes. But back then I didn't know the problem was endemic, woven into the fabric of the Federation.

"Do you know how many asylum applications are approved?" she snapped back at me. Honestly, I didn't, and I am embarrassed to admit that to you now. I spent my waking hours going through applications, passing off recommendations to my superiors, and I did not follow up on how many of my recommendations were taken up. I assumed all of them--again, I was naive.

"How many?" I asked.

"Four percent."

I refused to believe her, and I told her as much.

"Ask Price," she replied. "I know because Boral told me." Boral was a Bolian and a friend of Sarah's. I liked Boral well enough, but she was a bit too talkative for my taste, so I didn't socialize with her much. The times I had interacted with her, she seemed honest enough, but she was prone to gossip and had a thirst for drama. People like that can be tempted to bend the truth if it makes life saucier, so I had to wonder if Boral had exaggerated to Sarah.

I made a mental note to check out how many of my recommendations had been approved.

"Then why are you still in Starfleet?" I asked.

"Because the Federation will not change if people with principles abandon it," she replied. "The Dominion War has seriously handicapped the Federation's ability to follow its guiding principles,

which I totally understand. And it's my place in history to rebuild what we lost in the war so that we can get back to being a beacon of light for the galaxy to follow."

A sensible idealism--that was what made her Starfleet.

"Plus," Tax added, "what else would we do with our lives?"

In the corner of every citizen of every post-money society was that existential angst. It was what made Vulcans cling to logic, Klingons to honor, Bolians to friendship, Denobulans to sex. A pet theory that I've held my entire life, and still hold in fact, is that humanity has become a growing caricature of itself because too many people live lives that are the opposite of quiet desperation: loud comfort. It's what has made Earth a planet of tour guides, gardeners, and athletes--we're wallowing in hobbies because, unlike our ancestors, we have no need for toil. And, yes, I fully include myself in that category.

Maybe money wasn't so bad of a thing. Hunger makes food taste better.

I did not share this theory with many--those I did were people I considered close friends. I had articulated this idea to Tax and Sarah one time, when we were having a party in the holodeck. Perhaps fortunately, I was so drunk at the time I probably made no sense, and they were so drunk they probably didn't remember anything I'd said at all.

"Let's eat," I said. Everyone was eager to change the subject.

As we began eating, Tax was the first to talk. A quite unusual move for the introverted Trill. "Captain Gaberman ordered us to rendezvous with a Klingon fleet--we go to warp at 2300," he said.

"I heard about that," Sarah replied. "Providing support for a new offensive, isn't it?"

"Right," he replied.

I knew nothing of this--I appreciated them because they kept me in the loop, not easy when you're in the legal corps. "What's going on?"

"They're going after a Tal Shiar-controlled battalion that is heading to leave the sector, possibly to attack Deep Space 5."

"That's pretty bold--are they sure of the intel?" I asked, genuinely doubtful.

"They are," Sarah said.

"But why us? We're supposed to be picking up more applicants. Isn't there a Reman ship set to arrive tomorrow? I was told we'd have a new round of asylum seekers," I said.

Tax shrugged. "I don't know--I guess they're going to have to wait, or maybe they'll be assigned to another ship in the armada."

I checked my padd--bad manners at dinner, but Tax and Sarah were pretty forgiving about it. "No reassignment orders that I can see," I said.

"See what I mean?" Sarah said. "They don't care about those refugees."

I had to admit: it was a damning piece of information. I wanted to say there might be more to the story, but it seemed like a lame response.

We continued eating in silence.

Chapter 19

Before I went to sleep I wrote off a quick text message to Price. Fortunately, Mark was an affable boss, so I both felt comfortable asking him for the data and was sure he'd give me a swift and honest answer.

To: Lieutenant Mark Price
Subject: Approval rate follow-up
Hello sir,

I was doing some analytics and noted that I had recommended 60% of all applications. That got me wondering: is this a high recommendation rate? And how many of those recommended applications got approved?

Best wishes,
Jason

The number was true--I had recommended more than half of all applications, but my approval rate was a lot lower than I had expected when I first started. But many of the asylum seekers had stains on their record; the Romulan Star Empire had been a brutal place full of heinous misdeeds.

When I woke up a message from Price was already awaiting me. That made me nervous--no one can feel comfortable waking up after your boss.

To: Lieutenant Jason Li
Subject: Re: Approval rate follow-up

Your 60% is pretty standard. So far I'm seeing a 2% approval rate for your recommendations, but it's 4% across the board. No reason to worry--well within normal parameters. -Mark

I almost dropped the padd. What the hell was the point of being out here? Why was I wasting my time and these refugees' time with these applications and interviews? Was it all just theater?

Sarah was right. And I had to face a family of three in twenty minutes, knowing full well that they weren't likely to get the asylum they needed so desperately.

The father, Venrik, was a handsome man in his mid-30s, slender and tall, and his wife, T'Rel, was equally attractive. But they both looked very tired, clearly exasperated at the hell they'd been enduring. Their son, Vosik, was three years old.

"Jolan tru," I said as warmly and with as much welcome in my voice as I could. I'd done this over a thousand times by now, and I thought I was pretty good at it. Still, they looked nervous--few of them didn't. "I hope you're doing okay today. Would you like anything? Water?"

"We're fine," Venrik said in that even tone so many refugees had. He clearly didn't want to offend me by saying the wrong thing, but he also clearly was scared that he didn't know what would offend me. Almost none of these people had met a human before, and they had been raised to think we were monsters. It was no surprise that being in this position, powerless and at the mercy of an Earther, was horrifying to them.

I sat down at the table opposite of them and gently put my padd down. I looked at them, tried to relax my posture, and put both of my hands on the table. In my experience this helped garner a smidgen of trust, but at the end of the day it was an uphill battle I'd never win. I'd come to accept that.

"I want to say something off the record," I continued, following the script I'd developed over the last few months. "I know the Romulan government said a lot of horrible things about humanity over the years, and I won't try to say we're perfect and they're wrong, but I want you to know I see you as an equal--a sentient being who deserves as many rights and respect as I do. And I'm going to treat you as fairly as I can. I'll take everything you say in good faith, and I can only ask that you do the same with me."

Again the response was a common one: he looked surprised and very off guard. T'Rel spoke, and the way Venrik looked at her made me think they'd rehearsed for this and her contribution was not part of the program.

"Romulans do not believe their government; they obey it," she said. "Few of us believe the propaganda, but you have to understand that this is all very scary for us."

I'd heard something like this hundreds of times, and I'd come to believe it. Romulan society was based on subterfuge, lies, and dishonesty. For a Romulan, the notion of being honest and straightforward was akin to mindlessly babbling your stream of consciousness to anyone who would listen. Being honest was being childish, something to be ashamed of.

Thus Romulan society had developed multiple layers of strike and counterstrike at every level, from the multiple nodes of administration in its government to the odd ways that Romulans

structured their businesses and families. A couple was historically unusual in Romulan society, as many believed three people were needed to ensure disputes were resolved fairly without any need to bring matters to the House. That practice, I'd been told, was fading before the supernova, but I was always careful not to inquire about a Third to any Romulan couple I interviewed. For some, their loved one had died and it was not a subject they wanted to discuss--nor did they want outsiders to know the pain they felt.

I guess you could say I started playing the Romulan game of subterfuge. But I was never any good at it.

Nor did I want to be. "That's honestly understandable, and a lot of Romulans have said that to me before," I replied. "I am sure it's really true." It was a Romulan taboo to acknowledge the complex web of lies and mistruths in their society, but I thought it was good to break that taboo to introduce them to humanity's love of honesty and to encourage them to start considering the value of honesty.

It rarely worked.

"My records indicate that you owned a restaurant," I continued, picking up my padd. "On Romulus?"

"Yes," Venrik said, looking now more comfortable that they could start acting according to their prepared script. "We were on a transport vessel on our way to Rendel to meet with a potential new supplier of lavienda."

I had no idea what lavienda was, nor what Rendel was. I saw the ship's registry and the destination--it was about 15 parsecs away from Romulus. "Tell me about Rendel, I don't know it," I replied.

"Rendel joined the Empire over two centuries ago," Venrik said. I couldn't help but smirk at the euphemism--in other words, the Romulans conquered them. "It comprises about 30% Rendelians, a humanoid race similar to the Kelpians, but without the threat ganglia. There are about 50% Romulans and 20% empire citizens of other races," he said. Very prepared, even with memorized statistics--again, this was not unusual.

"And why would you need a supplier so far away?" I asked.

"Lavienda is expensive on Romulus because it is not native to the planet and so its roots have a tough time with our soil," he continued. "Getting it from its native world was always more desirable, but my wife and I didn't have enough credits to acquire a suspension tank to hold them." As he spoke I looked up lavienda--a spice similar to saffron in temperament (although it tasted very different, and could not be sensed by human taste buds although several humanoid species found it something between savory and umami), it had a short half-life that meant it needed to be transported and stored in suspension tanks that would keep its freshness and

potency. Commonly used in Romulan breads and, for the very wealthy, as a condiment on meats.

“How expensive was the average dish at your restaurant?” I asked.

“Three credits,” he replied.

So fast food. “Why would such a restaurant need lavienda?” I replied.

“It is used sparingly in okna,” he replied. I knew okna--a Romulan bread. I’d had it a few times; it was good. “We served okna with soup, and it was our most popular dish. We were hoping we could start making more dishes with lavienda and start charging more.”

The mechanics of capitalism were often confusing to me, being that I’d spent my life in a post-capitalist society and had no desire to experience capitalism. “Why would you want to start charging more?”

The question clearly surprised and confused Venrik. “Why, so we’d have more money, of course.”

“But you’d be spending more on the lavienda,” I replied.

“Yes, but you can get a higher margin on a higher priced product,” he said. I looked up “higher margin” on my padd--quickly read about profit margin. It made sense.

“How long had you owned the restaurant?” I asked.

“It’s been in my wife’s family for two generations,” Venrik replied.

“And if it was a business trip, why take your son?”

“My son hadn’t been born yet,” he replied. I looked at the records--it appeared he was indeed born after. So that made sense.

I was satisfied; these were innocent, hardworking people with a humble business on Romulus who were lucky enough to be offworld when their sun went nova--but unlucky enough to now be homeless and friendless. I suddenly felt guilty at my questioning of him; I often did. But, the rational side of me quickly came up to my own defense: there was no other way around this. I was doing what was best, for the best, for everyone.

“Thank you for the information and for your time,” I said, now going to my script. “I am satisfied with your story and I will approve your application.” I looked up at them, and I saw the relief in their eyes. It was as if I’d cured them of a terminal disease. Tears were forming in Venrik’s eyes.

Which made tears start to form in my eyes.

How could I think I was doing what was best for everyone? I was a bit actor in a really bad play--a cruel performance set up by a Federation looking to save face, not lives. They'd likely be sent back to Vashti, stuck in a cramped camp and forced to sustain themselves on rations and live in a hut, constantly at the mercy of the Rangers, who were morally dubious at best.

At that moment I decided to stop playing my part. I would go off script.

"I need to tell you something, Venrik," I said. I write that I said it, but at the time it did not feel like I was saying it. It was an out of body experience, as if some external force had taken over my mouth and vocal chords. Of course I wouldn't say that as a defense at my trial, but not because it wasn't true; rather, because I didn't need to. I did absolutely nothing wrong.

"I want you to get refugee status and become a part of the Federation. You would make our society a better place, all three of you. I want Vosik to see Earth's beautiful blue skies." The boy, who had been extremely quiet and well behaved the entire time, turned and looked at me when I said his name. "But I want you to know the truth. Only 4% of applicants actually get asylum. I hope you're a part of that 4%, and I'll do everything I can to make that happen, but it's ultimately not up to me. And I am sorry for that."

This was to become my new script. I said it to every single asylum applicant I approved after I said it to that family. All of them. The responses were varied--some got furious, others stayed quiet, others still got desperate, began pleading, started crying. I saw the spectrum of Romulan emotions and moments of extreme candor that they probably were too embarrassed to think about afterwards. For them, they'd acted like children.

To me, they'd acted like souls in need of saving who had no savior.

Chapter 20

It took just four days for the riots to start. News of the low acceptance rate had been successfully hidden from the Romulans, possibly because few in Starfleet knew, and those that did either didn't want to tell the Romulans or were too scared to. I wasn't scared, though, because I knew the law. I'd done nothing wrong, no matter what anyone would accuse me of.

When the news spread and the Romulans found out we weren't really interested in helping them, a riot broke out on Vashti where they took hostage a group of Federation attaches at their base. No one was killed (although many Romulans were injured), and the attaches were returned in one piece--but the damage had been done.

No, I do not feel guilty. And I do not feel like I did the wrong thing. Those people had a right to know they were not being helped, and the Federation had an obligation to be honest with the

Romulan people. I may have been the man who leaked the information that caused the riots, but the fault lay with the Federation itself.

I sleep well at night.

The rioters' demand that more refugees be approved ultimately caused an investigation to find out how this information had gotten out, and when Captain Gaberman held a staff meeting, Price was there. I don't know if Price said it was me in the meeting or shortly thereafter, but I know he ratted me out pretty much immediately, because that evening two security officers and the head of security came to my quarters.

"Lieutenant Li," said Lieutenant Commander Guitarez after I opened the door. "You are under arrest."

I was shocked and incredulous. I'd done nothing wrong or illegal, and I hadn't made the connection between me leaking the stats and the arrest. "On what charge?"

"Leaking classified information."

That was a court martial offense and, according to the Federation's legal code, punishable by a maximum five-year prison sentence. The thought of five years in jail was pretty terrifying, I will admit, but as a lawyer I was comfortable enough with the law and the justice system to not be too scared. Furthermore, I knew I hadn't leaked any classified information, so there was no way this was going to end up in a trial. Or so I thought.

"What information?" I replied, genuinely hoping to get this resolved quickly. I hadn't leaked anything, not that I knew of, and so I thought this was a simple misunderstanding that I'd be able to clear up pretty quickly with a meeting with the captain.

"I don't know," Guitarez said, frustratingly. So I went with him to the brig, got in my cell and waited.

Captain Gaberman didn't pay me a visit until the next morning, after my breakfast of lukewarm water, a bagel, and butter.

"Good morning, lieutenant," he said behind gritted teeth. He was clearly furious, standing over me from behind the forcefield, his arms crossed. I rose to my feet. "At ease," he said.

"I'm at ease on my feet," I replied. I refused to be bullied, even if that meant I wouldn't be released immediately. I might anger the captain, causing him to wait a little longer to drop the charges, but I was fine with that--my dignity was worth another night in jail.

“As you wish. You have been charged with putting your crewmembers and fellow Federation citizens’ lives at risk. The evidence is irrefutable. So tell me, why shouldn’t we throw the book at you?”

“I have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about,” I said, honestly.

He didn’t believe me. “You have encouraged a riot by telling Romulans they most likely won’t get refugee status and we are making fun of them by letting them apply,” he said.

Then I realized: they were going to try to get me for leaking the 4% number. But this was nonsense, and I knew it was nonsense. So I went into lawyer mode. “That’s an entirely false statement,” I replied. “I have informed applicants of the statistical fact that 4% of applicants are approved. At no point in any interview have I encouraged or condoned a single act of violence, nor have I said anyone is making fun of anyone.”

My lawyer position didn’t sit well with Gaberman. That was putting it mildly. He was furious.

“You have told the Romulans classified information!” he snapped back. “Not only is that a violation of your uniform and everything Starfleet stands for, it is unfathomably dangerous. You might have cost the lives of millions of people.”

This melodramatic grandstanding was nauseating. I’d been in many courtrooms and I’d seen many rhetorical tricks, and I didn’t take kindly to anyone who abused them, whether a lawyer or a captain.

“That’s ridiculous on several levels,” I said, deciding to hold back on my counterargument for now. “But to the salient matter: you’ve accused me of leaking classified information. What exactly did I leak that was classified?”

“Don’t be cute,” he said. “You told them that 4% of applicants were accepted. You knew they’d react.”

“Where and when was this information classified?” I replied calmly.

Gaberman lost control. “How dare you, you bastard!” he shouted at me. Then he left the room.

When he left, I admit I regretted my tactic. Maybe some contrition or a more negotiable tone would have softened him up and helped him realize that I’d done nothing illegal. According to Starfleet regulations, information is implicitly open unless there is an explicit assertion that it is classified. That is why classification status is mentioned on every single memo and record. Messages between officers are all open as well, unless the words “classified” or “secret” appear anywhere in the message.

I felt slightly gaslit, and since I couldn't access a computer or padd in the cell, I thought back to Price's message. The more I thought back to it, the more certain I was that Price hadn't said "classified" or "secret". If he had, I would not have told any of the Romulans. Maybe if it had, I would have quit Starfleet in disgust. In that brig, I was already starting to feel that disgust.

Being a prisoner is not fun. I was stuck in that brig for three days until I was transported to Starbase 23, where I was then placed in a slightly bigger cell and, for the first time, had access to a computer. The computer was a relief: now at least I could check the message. My access was severely limited; no entertainment database, no news, just some nonfiction books and legal references. I had to request access to send messages, which I knew was rarely given. But that wasn't a problem, as I didn't need to send anyone any message.

On day 6 I was given my court date and asked if I wanted an attorney. Of course I did. I was assigned a half-Vulcan, half-human named Mitchell.

Mitchell was about twice my age and exponentially smarter than I was. He had specialized in criminal law and practiced it for over two decades. He was also very human. Having been raised in Kansas City, Mitchell preferred his human over his Vulcan side. That was a relief; meeting him not only broke up the monotony of incarceration, but it also made me realize just how innocent I was.

"This is a pretty odd case," he said at our first meeting. "Apparently the accusation rests on the argument that there was an implicit classification of your superior's message."

I nodded. "There's no legal precedent for implicit classification in Starfleet."

Mitchell agreed. "I asked the prosecutor why she was pursuing the case, since the message wasn't classified. She said they were going to make a precedent with this case."

"That's ridiculous," I said.

Mitchell laughed. "You don't have to tell me that! I didn't want to show her my hand, so I didn't respond, but it seems pretty obvious what our strategy needs to be. We need to argue that regulations clearly state messages aren't classified unless explicitly marked as such, and if they want to change the rules they need to do that--they can't just lock you up because they decided the old rulebook is no good."

I sighed, genuinely relieved. "That's the approach I thought you would take. I'm just grateful we live in a society that respects the rule of law."

"Yeah, good thing this isn't Cardassia," Mitchell said. "But I wouldn't relax just quite yet. The judge may go rogue. I don't want to scare you, but you need to be prepared for anything."

Prudent, and it did make me a bit nervous. "Do you really think there's a chance?"

“Well, let’s see,” he said. “If the judge really wanted you to hurt, he could find you guilty, force you to appeal, and cause you to end up in jail for a couple of months while we go through that process.”

I wasn’t so naive as to think judges didn’t do such things when they personally disliked a defendant, but I kept myself calm with the fact that judges who did this were a tiny minority--and they typically didn’t hold their positions for very long. The system defended against such vigilantism.

Over the next few days as we met and discussed the case, we inevitably came back to this topic, so when I learned the day before the trial that it was to be a tribunal, with three judges, I was relieved. One rogue judge was rare, but two was nearly impossible.

I was brought into the chamber handcuffed and out of uniform; my lawyer had insisted this was inappropriate, but the warden refused. That irritated me; most wardens knew their job was not to prejudice the judge, but some felt a right to have a hand in justice.

And, I admit, it made me a lot more nervous when the trial began. I knew the statistics; out-of-uniform defendants were four times more likely to be found guilty at trial (although I didn’t know if the numbers were different at tribunals versus trials; I later learned they aren’t). But that wasn’t the only thing that made me nervous. It was an open trial.

When I entered the chamber, I immediately saw the faces of over a hundred people in the audience. I wasn’t prepared for this; I had expected a closed trial, if only because my case wasn’t important enough to warrant anyone’s attention. Apparently I was wrong, and I later learned that the case had become a notorious and newsworthy event back on Earth.

The first thought I had when I saw that crowd was that Lauren must know, and she’ll probably leave me over this.

So when I sat at the defense table, I felt like I had already lost. Mitchell leaned over and whispered, “I’m sorry--they didn’t tell me this would be an open trial either. But don’t worry. That’s good for us.” Lawyers always tell their clients it’s good for them, whatever it was, and Mitchell must have known that I knew that. Still, what else was he to do?

“Commence the trial of Lieutenant Jason Li,” barked the large admiral who was at the center of the judge panel. His name was Keith Jenner, and I’d never heard of him before. All of the judges were human; all were admirals, and all looked like they hated me.

Admirals and an open court--my case was apparently a much bigger deal than I thought.

I won’t bore you with all of the details of my case--it’s been well documented and, if you’ve done your research, you’ve probably gone through the entire thing. Needless to say, Price and

Gaberman testified against me. I was grateful Tax and Sarah weren't there; I later was finally able to see the messages from both of them to the court, and it warmed my heart that both fully supported me and refused to testify (Price had asked both of them).

On my side there was just me, and my testimony was quite short. Mitchell asked me if the document was marked classified or secret. I said no, it absolutely wasn't. He provided the message as evidence.

The prosecution's case took six hours in total; my side took ten minutes.

In his closing remarks, Mitchell said what he told me in the cell: it was not the court's function to change Starfleet rules, and according to those rules I hadn't leaked classified information. "It doesn't matter if my client's disclosure of the 4% statistic resulted in a million deaths or a billion; according to the letter of the law, he has done nothing illegal. You may think he's betrayed his superior officer's trust, you may think he shouldn't have told the refugees that statistic. Personally, I think he has done the right thing and told people in need that their needs aren't being met. Has that resulted in Romulan animosity? Unquestionably. But the fault lies in the Federation's refugee policy and not with my client."

I still am in awe at Mitchell's closing remarks, because they squarely put the guilt on the judges themselves in a daring argument that I would have been too terrified to make. It could so easily backlash, causing the judges to act hastily out of anger and resentment. But it was an open case, and had they done so, the press would've hounded the three of them for years. Mitchell knew this, so he was forcing the judges to overcorrect and stick as strictly to the letter of the law as possible. If they failed, even one iota, it would look bad for them.

We adjourned that afternoon and Mitchell put in an immediate injunction for a next-day decision. This was another tricky move, but Mitchell's instincts were right. Perhaps the judges had made their decision or not, but in forcing the trial to finish as quickly as possible, he was making sure that the news cycle didn't move on from my case, keeping scrutiny on the judges as much as possible.

The tribunal's judgment was hastily written, but coming from Jenner's towering presence, it felt as official as it truly was.

"It is undeniable that Lieutenant Li's actions have resulted in misery and have truly harmed not just the Federation, but the Romulan people," Jenner began. "It is also undeniable that we do not know the true extent of the damage, as it will likely take months for the anarchy he has unleashed to unfold. We must wait to see what will happen to our brave men and women on the front lines. And for that reason, this tribunal feels it is of the utmost urgency that Starfleet better take care of its information, better protect its citizens, and work ever more diligently so that agents of chaos like this young individual are rendered powerless."

As he spoke, I felt the anxiety give way to rage. This tribunal was flirting with fascism and using scare tactics. They clearly had no desire for an open society in which people feel free to have happy, meaningful lives. And for what reason? We'd beat the Dominion, the Borg had retreated, the Klingons were allies, and now the Romulans were a shadow of what they'd been. Basic rights had been sacrificed in the Federation before, all too recently as well, but we could afford to be charitable now, not authoritarian. And yet these admirals were arguing the opposite--and why? Because they wanted power?

I was enraged and I continue to be enraged at what happened that day.

"It is this tribunal's opinion that Starfleet regulations will need to be modified, and we encourage Captain Gaberman to enact whatever steps are necessary to insure that leaks of highly dangerous information like that which this lieutenant so brazenly spread, with no conscious and no sense of responsibility, are not allowed again. But," Jenner continued, his tone switching from anger to resignation, "the defense is absolutely correct that, on a purely technical level, Li has acted within the law, however flawed that law may be. And thus we, the tribunal, find Lieutenant Li not guilty."

It's weird feeling relief, joy, and rage all at once. I cannot say I've ever had that sensation before, besides at that moment. There were cheers in the courtroom which was the first hint that many in the Federation agreed with me (I have memorized the polls; a weighted average shows 73% believe I was right to tell the Romulans). Mitchell shook my shoulder and gave me congratulations, but I wasn't listening--I just stared at Jenner, hoping he saw the anger on my face.

He stared back.

As I was leaving the courtroom, I caught Gaberman's gaze. "You're expected on duty at 0600 on Thursday; ensure you have beamed onto the Xinjiang by then."

So there was the awkwardness of me still being assigned to the Xinjiang after this fiasco. It also meant I'd have to see Price again, and report to him. I'd record the entire event, just for my own safety, and I had to expect it to be awkward if not outrightly abusive.

Then I realized: they hadn't put in reassignment orders because they were sure I'd be found guilty and stripped of command. They were probably already working on getting the reassignment underway, but until it went through they were stuck with me. That meant at least another day or two on the Xinjiang, possibly longer.

Great.

I spent the night alone thinking about my future. I beamed back to the Xinjiang and went to my quarters. Fortunately no one who saw me in the hallways tried to talk to me, but enough people

stared at me for me to know I was a persona non grata on the ship. I turned off my com and locked the door; I'd talk to Tax and Sarah, but I needed time alone.

My career wasn't exactly ruined, but it had definitely been hobbled. I was of two minds about this. On the one hand, something I'd worked so hard for was marred by this tragedy, but on the other hand I had done what I always wanted to do--fought for justice. And maybe that wasn't always rewarded.

But if Starfleet didn't reward justice, was Starfleet a just place?

No system is perfect, not even the Federation's. I'd always known that, but I'd always thought that we were about as close as was humanly possible to a perfect system, we just needed technological progress. Now I knew that wasn't the case.

So how unjust was the Federation, really? And what could I do about it?

Mind you, at this point I had completely forgotten about Tuvix, so these musings didn't even take into consideration how the Federation harbored and promoted a cold-blooded killer. Had I thought of it, I probably would have realized at that moment just how black the Federation's heart is, and resigned on the spot.

Instead, I thought, what we had was a scarred and scared Federation that had gone way too far into a mode of fear and uncertainty following the Dominion war. It had been a brutal war, and I understood its effects. I'd been too young and too sheltered on Earth to really understand on a deep level just how bad things were. I knew Betazed was briefly occupied, but I didn't really understand what that meant. It meant that, for the generation before me, there was a sense of anxiety and uncertainty that clouded everything. My generation was much luckier; we had the security of peace and the opportunity to rebuild.

So I came to the conclusion that I needed to work on rebuilding the Federation. That could mean many things, but since the admirals so clearly signaled a path forward that led to totalitarianism, I would need to do what I could to counter that.

On that note, a new and unexpected dimension of this story gave me an incredible opportunity. I didn't know that my case had been front-page news on Earth, and that I had become a household name during my brief imprisonment. Of course, that could fade; fame usually does. But it gave me some cache in the short term that, if I acted quickly enough, I could turn into a political career.

There was precedent for it. So, I decided that night, I'd follow the path that made sense towards that end. I wouldn't leave Starfleet, as that would hurt my image and hinder my goal. I'd continue, but I'd also release a newsletter and audio subscription where I'd discuss the need for an open society. I already had an audience waiting for me, and maybe I could build on that. Get enough notoriety and I could run for political office--maybe Earth Attorney General (Federation

Attorney General would be pushing it--I wasn't so arrogant as to dream that big). And there I could start to fight the authoritarian fire that Jenner and his ilk were so clearly trying to light.

That was my thought when I slept that night, and I was satisfied with it.

I awoke to a rumbling. Red lights near the ceiling told me a red alert had been called.

I opened the shipwide communication channel on my padd.

"Attention all decks: all hands to battlestations. We have engaged in battle."

As a law clerk I had no battlestation, and technically I was supposed to stay in my quarters. And with my recent brush with the authorities, I had been given a lesson on how important it was to obey the rules, even the unspoken ones. Which is probably why I refused to stay in my cabin.

Instead, I went to the brig.

Why the brig? For one, they had an open channel to the bridge so I could hear everything that was going on and, in all honesty, I wanted the guard to see me on the other side of the force field.

When I arrived, the guard on duty was a Degran I'd never met before. He recognized me.

"Please don't mind me," I said. Since I outranked him, he couldn't tell me to leave, so he just nodded and returned to his console.

"Hard aft, attack pattern gamma two one one," I heard Gaberman say on the com. I had no idea what that meant. "Target their engines and keep firing."

"Shields are holding," I heard someone say--no idea who.

Then the ship shook again--badly. I fell to the ground. When I got up, I saw the Degran was on the floor and not moving. I rushed to him.

"Shields down to 30%!" that same person exclaimed. What hit us? That was a massive drop.

"All torpedo bays, fire!" Gaberman yelled.

I hit my com badge. "Li to sickbay, emergency transport. I have a wounded crewman here."

"Acknowledged." Immediately, the Degran dematerialized.

Someone on the bridge suddenly said: "lead ship has a plasma leak--it's going to blow."

“Beam whoever is on board to the brig.”

Another matter stream, and suddenly behind the force field a woman appeared.

It was Seven of Nine.

Chapter 21

It all came back to me, immediately, when I saw her face. And I felt ashamed.

Not only had I forgotten about Tuvix, but for months now I'd been telling myself that I'd done so for the greater good--for the Romulans alive who needed my help.

What absurd expediency. And what hypocrisy. Just as I was enraged at the judges' call for more restrictive rules to wallpaper over their paranoia, I too had used sophistry to wallpaper over my laziness. I could have spent my time working for Tuvix and those refugees. But I hadn't.

“Who are you?” she barked at me, breaking my daydream.

What happened next happened quickly, but don't think I didn't plan it, I didn't mean to do it, or I acted rashly. And yes, I know that I am admitting to premeditated treason. I do not care. I have justice on my side and you do not.

I jumped to the console, turned off the internal sensors and cameras, and deleted footage for the last twenty minutes. That could easily look like battle damage, no problem. Then I set an alarm on my padd that would be triggered if anyone was within 5 meters of the front door. That would buy me time in case anyone was about to come in without there being a logged event that would show up on an investigation. Yes, I was covering my tracks because I was about to do something very illegal.

“I really don't want to tell you my name,” I said. “Are you with the rangers?”

“So what if I am?” she demanded.

I looked at the console. “Three of your ships are caught in tractor beams. I can get you back on one of them.”

She looked surprised. “Why would you help me?”

“I'll offer you a very simple deal,” I told her. “I'll get you off this ship, in exchange for one thing: you promise to tell Chakotay to talk to me.”

She looked genuinely surprised, even confused, at what I'd said. “Why?” she asked.

"It has to do with a man named Tuvix."

"Tuvix?" she repeated. "I do not recognize that name."

"He has a man created by a transporter accident with Neelix and Tuvok. They were combined," I continued. "I have reason to believe Janeway acted illegally in this case and have been investigating it ever since."

"Whatever Janeway did, it was the right thing to do," Seven said, echoing the relentless loyalty to this woman I'd seen from other former crewmembers. I was not surprised.

"Maybe, but I need to speak to Chakotay. You can make that easier."

"To what end?"

Her persistence annoyed me. "To bring Janeway to justice!" I snapped. "She killed a man in cold blood and I will see to it that she pays for her crimes."

Seven held my gaze, emotionless Borg-like expression unchanging. "You will fail."

To be honest, that scared me. She was an imposing figure. Not Borg anymore, but it was honestly hard not to imagine Seven somehow injecting me with nanoprobes and turning me into a drone then and there, even if a force field separated us. I am not tough, I am not brave; I'm a law clerk. I was clearly out of my depth.

So I swallowed, looked down, and said, "I probably will. But I have to try."

That, surprisingly, seemed to soften her, and her tone shifted from Borg to something much more... maternal. "I understand. I can tell Chakotay to talk to you."

Was it that easy?

"I trust you," I said. And I did; everything I knew about Seven of Nine, both from her time on Voyager and afterwards, told me that she had embodied the Federation values of honor and integrity to a much greater extent than her former shipmates, least of all her former captain that she loved so dear.

At the very least, she was no Jenner.

"I'll lower the force field and let you beam back to your ship," I said. "You can put in the coordinates and access the site-to-site transporter from here. Then you'll need to break out of our tractor beam--I'm sorry, but I can't help with--"

"Not a problem," she said immediately. "That will be very easy to manage."

“Okay, let’s get to it,” I said, then immediately lowered the force field. My tactics weren’t perfect; she could have killed me if she wanted to, as I had no phaser and no means to protect myself. But if everything I’d read about Seven was true, she would not hurt me.

She came to me and I instinctually backed off. She was the same height as me, but she felt much taller. And she was unquestionably much tougher.

She turned to the console, started pushing buttons, and said, “thank you. I feel your priorities are misguided, but I can tell you are a genuinely good person. Which is why I am going to do this to you.”

And that’s when I blacked out.

Chapter 22

I awoke in sickbay in the slight haze of some kind of sedative, and a nurse immediately came to my side.

“He’s awake!” she called out.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Seven of Nine broke free and knocked you unconscious,” she said. “You’re lucky she didn’t kill you.”

No luck at all--Seven wasn’t a killer. She wasn’t even the type of person who could harm the innocent. That was obvious. Then I realized what she did--she’d knocked me out to make it look like I hadn’t colluded with her at all. Smart.

“Yes, vigilantes are terrifying,” I said. “My head doesn’t hurt anymore, but I am quite tired--”

“Yes, you need to rest,” the nurse said. And so I did.

I hadn’t forgotten that I’d just broken the law. Unlike the leaking garbage, this time my offense was real: treason, not a small crime at all. In a moment of panic I remembered the alarm on my padd, which, if anyone saw it, could lead them to connect the dots that I’d colluded with Seven on her escape.

I was grateful that Seven had hit me, because I needed to avoid scrutiny if I could. At the same time, I knew that even the slightest hint of a chance that I could be found at fault would have Gaberman siccing attack dogs on me as fast as he could.

“Nurse, do you happen to have my padd?”

She nodded, took it from a tray nearby and handed it to me. "It was with you when we found you."

I took it, looked at the system log, saw no one had opened it since I did. Good. I quickly deleted the alarm subroutine and purged it from the records. I might even recycle the padd when I got back to my quarters, just for good measure.

I tried to relax--there was nothing more I could do.

Two days later, I was given orders reassigning me back to Earth. I was to act as support to the General Prosecutor on some of the Fenris rangers we'd arrested in the Qiris Sector; they'd all face trial at Starfleet Headquarters, a highly symbolic decision to make it clear that the rangers were not allies to the Federation. That, I knew, was an important decision that I ultimately agreed with; if the Romulans felt the rangers were an extension of the Federation, they'd be furious, furious enough to try to start a war that they had no chance of winning.

So the rangers would face justice in a politically useful suite of trials for the hundreds of captured men and women of the Fenris group. And they deserved it--some of them had done heinous things. All of them faced the same charge: inciting acts of violence and terrorism in a demilitarized zone. The penalty? Five years imprisonment.

From a legal perspective, this was less of an open-and-shut case as you'd expect. The DMZ was such thanks to a longstanding treaty with the Romulan Star Empire, but that empire no longer existed, making it easy for the defense to call into question the validity of these charges. A silly loophole, for sure, but one that had significant legal weight behind it.

That would require us to retry them as domestic terrorists in Federation space--a different charge with the same penalty, but that charge would mean the Federation was asserting the Neutral Zone was Federation territory. The Romulans were no longer a coherent government, so they couldn't stand to contest that claim, but it would infuriate the Klingons, who would see it as a land grab that could put their own empire at risk. Not to mention the Orions, Ferengi, and Cardassians all looking similarly critically at such a specious claim, possibly resulting in the Federation isolating itself and facing a war on multiple fronts.

The General Prosecutor had been working with the Federation General Ambassador and the Ambassadors of Earth, Vulcan, Bajor, and Klingon on this, and they'd agreed that if they lost this case they'd just let the vigilantes go. That was the most likely outcome of this case, which in turn would make the ex-DMZ a *de facto* lawless area that the Rangers could feasibly roam with impunity. Billions of lives in that region could suffer as a result.

To my mind, the only way to stop this was if someone with a strong moral backbone rose to power among the rangers--someone like Seven of Nine. I'd never thought the Maquis was evil--after all, you could have good organizations living outside of Federation law (especially, as

the case of Tuvix showed, the Federation often failed to live up to its ideals). Maybe the Rangers would be the next generation of Maquis? And maybe they'd give those billions of lives a better life.

Intergalactic politics are hard.

Anyhow, my task for the moment was to ensure the filings in 73 cases assigned to me went smoothly and each went according to schedule. The General Prosecutor and his senior staff would be in the courtroom for the cases themselves--I just had to make sure everyone was in the right courtroom at the right time and the right evidence was where it was supposed to be. Well, it wasn't just my responsibility; there were 47 of us clerks working on these cases.

My career was shaping up to be a very weird one. From romantic getaways with a beautiful Bajoran to facing death on a battleship patrolling the neutral zone--and now to a job of very dull administrative tasks for a bunch of lawsuits that were probably going to fail. All within two years of leaving the academy. It was my fault, I fully admit; had I not angered Gaberman and incited a mini-rebellion, I probably would have been promoted at the end of my six-month period in the DMZ. As it was, Gaberman pushed me out of my post early, I was disliked by a fair share of Starfleet, and HR was happy to put me in an incredibly boring and low profile position.

Of course, punitive reassignments like this were against the rules, which is why I planned to lodge a formal complaint as soon as I could. Well, that was the plan at first. I spent much of the trip back to Earth drafting it.

A reassignment would not change the fact that I had a lot of enemies now, and the political hot potato that I suddenly was meant I'd have plenty of enemies no matter where I went.

A man in such a situation should do what I had planned to do before meeting Seven: start a political career and work at steering the Federation back to its destined path to greatness. And if I hadn't met Seven, that's exactly what I would have done.

I'd been back to Earth just two days, barely over my jetlag and gravity sickness before I got the call from Chakotay. I was stunned--not that Seven of Nine had pulled through, but that he would be contacting me before I could reach him.

"Jason, Chakotay here. Seven told me you've been looking for me."

My heart skipped a beat. My com went off while I was having breakfast with Lauren, and when she heard who it was she did not look happy. I mouthed, "sorry," and went into our home office and shut the door.

"Chakotay, I wasn't expecting you to contact me. Thank you for--"

"No need to thank me, Seven told me you wanted to learn more about Tuvix."

Everyone so far had tiptoed around this man's name and his story so much that Chakotay's to-the-point way of addressing the matter really caught me off guard.

But this was in no way as scary as being in a room alone with Seven. I could handle it.

"Yes, would it be possible for us to meet? I'm trying to understand this story as best I can."

"Let me send you coordinates in Argentina," he said. "Beam in this evening and we can talk."

Perfect.

Chapter 23

"You're quite the rabble rouser, aren't you?"

It was the first thing Chakotay said after I beamed to his coordinates in Argentina. I'd expected it to be his home or nearby; in fact, I'd beamed into a steakhouse full of families and couples happily eating.

Life was so easy on Earth and so hard elsewhere.

I was about to respond, but Chakotay beat me to it. "Let's grab a table. Are you hungry?"

"Sure," I said. I'd never been to Argentina before, but their steak was a centuries-old cuisine that I was eager to try. Before manufactured beef was invented, the Argentinian countryside was devastated to make room for cow pastures; now the rainforest was back and steaks were lab grown, but otherwise the tradition stayed intact.

"Why am I a rabble rouser?" I said in a tone that was hopefully jocular. If Chakotay took offense, he didn't show it.

"Well, first there's the whole Romulan thing and now you're asking about Tuvix? Just what are you up to?"

The waiter came, took our orders. I waited for him to leave before I replied.

"I am a lawyer," I said plainly, honestly. "I care about justice more than anything, and I seek it wherever I go."

"Well that's certainly admirable--everyone can agree with that," Chakotay said. "But what does that have to do with Tuvix?"

He looked genuine as he asked it, as if he could not possibly fathom that there was anything wrong with how things had unfolded for the man, or that anyone could see it that way.

Was Chakotay an idiot? Was he a monster? I found myself quickly loathing the man. While I regretted yelling at Tom Paris, who was likely a misguided good person, I was now wondering if Chakotay was like the admirals at my trial--simply unaware of their own cruel instincts.

"If you don't mind, I'd like to answer your question with a question. Would you mind telling me what happened with Tuvix?"

"Well that's pretty easy to answer," Chakotay said. "There was a transporter accident. Neelix and Tuvok were merged. Then we found a way to unmerge them."

"That's it?" I asked incredulously.

"That's it."

"How did he get unmerged? I mean, can you tell me the story of how it unfolded?"

"Let me see," Chakotay said, sitting back in his chair. He took his glass of water, took a deep sip, looked to the ceiling. I genuinely think he'd forgotten about it and needed time to remember Tuvix's final moments.

I started to lean more towards monster than idiot.

"I was on the bridge," he said slowly as the memories percolated. "Janeway was there too, of course, and she came up and told Tuvix they'd found a way to get him back to normal. Then they went to sickbay, I think, and--" he trailed off.

"Wait a minute," he said, opening his padd. "I can just show you. I've got access to the records."

This surprised me. I knew Chakotay would have Voyager log access, but I hadn't thought of the logs of that moment. I knew bridges were constantly monitored for security purposes, but I'd somehow forgotten this during my investigation as I was focusing so much on just getting to the people involved. But why bother when there's a record?

So he showed me what happened.

It was jarring seeing Tuvix in a video--he did not look like how I'd expected. He looked better. I'd assumed a kind face; his was kinder. I expected dignity behind his eyes; he was more dignified.

And however much bravery I had expected him to show in his final moments was nothing compared to what he did on that bridge.

I saw the man resign himself to his fate and step into that turbolift, marching to an execution he did not deserve. I cannot say I would be as steely in such a situation. The carpet would be soaked with my urine and tears.

But not Tuvix. The man did not live long, but he lived well. And he died well--something I cannot say for Janeway.

Or, for that matter, her senior officers. I didn't realize no one stood in Janeway's way or even voiced a complaint. But when Tuvix pleaded for their support, when he asked them to pay back his friendship with the small act of saying he does not deserve to die, they turned their back on him.

It was horrific, like watching old footage of the callous murders of the Eugenics Wars or the post-atomic horror.

"Each of you is going to have to live with this, and I'm sorry for that. For you are all good, good people. My colleagues, my friends. I forgive you."

When he said this, I started crying. No, I am not embarrassed about it, and if anyone in the restaurant looked at me, I did not care. I didn't see anyone or anything except that screen.

"What's wrong with you?" Chakotay asked, his tone more gruff and antagonistic than what you'd expect from a decent human being faced with someone experiencing grief. I was horrified on so many levels all at once. He clearly did not realize he had been an accessory to murder--or if he did, he didn't care. And he lacked the common decency to try to console a human being in his presence. Plus, he seemed genuinely not to understand that I was sad for the death of another sentient human being. It was like he was a sociopath.

Why the hell did Seven ever date this man?

I knew Chakotay's background, about his absconding from Starfleet and his work with the Maquis. Now I wondered if he went to fight to defend people from the Cardassians, or if he went so that he could kill.

And if Chakotay was that sadistic, what else about him was a carefully manufactured lie? Was Chakotay really a Native American? Could his ethnicity be an invention used to manipulate other people?

Who was the monster I was sitting next to?

My realization that the rot went deeper than Janeway meant I had to change my tactics. I was no longer interviewing witnesses to a crime; I was witnessing co-conspirators. They had all killed Tuvix, all of them.

And I would make them pay.

"I'm sorry," I said, deciding truth was no longer an option nor a moral imperative with this monster. "My mother just died last week, and the video reminded me of that."

"Oh."

Yes, he really did say that. No attempt to console me, no words of sympathy, not even the bare minimum "I'm sorry for your loss" that basic manners require. I knew from all that I'd read from Voyager that Chakotay was a charming man who charmed a lot of people (even the hard-to-impress ex-Borg, herself one of the most desirable women of any quadrant thanks to her beauty and intelligence), so it was obvious that he was intentionally turning the charm off with me.

Maybe he really *did* know that he had been an accessory to murder and that I was on the warpath for justice. And for that reason was not turning on the charm. I was an enemy.

But...that's not a very sociopathic *modus operandi*. If he knew that, wouldn't he then try to charm me to get me *off* his (and Voyager's) tracks? And why would he even show me that video?

His demeanour and his personality weren't fitting, and frankly none of this made any sense at all. Which made me wonder if perhaps *that* was the goal--get me disoriented so I couldn't think critically.

There was only one way to figure things out. At the moment I thought what I was about to say was a huge gamble, but it was worth taking. Of course, I now know it was a big mistake.

"The footage you've just shown me is clear evidence of a crime," I said evenly, my lawyer mode helping cool my nerves and get control of my emotions again. Yes, I was still sad, but now I had a job to do. "Janeway committed an act of murder and, according to Starfleet regulations, subordinates are obligated to intervene when their superior commits a felony. That doesn't apply to you, as you were not technically Starfleet at the time, but your inaction is undoubtedly an act of misdemeanor accessory to a murder, which probably won't get you jailtime but you will certainly be found guilty of." I didn't wait for him to respond. "As an officer in General Prosecutor's office, I will make sure this evidence is subpoenaed and you are arrested and put on trial."

Chakotay laughed--a genuine laugh, I could easily tell. He wasn't trying to intimidate me; he was genuinely amused. Then I realized what he'd been doing all this time--he'd had no strategy with me at all. To him I was like a bug, harmless and miniscule, worth entertaining up to a point, but that point was over.

"You really are a rabble rouser," Chakotay said calmly. "Look, it's obvious this was nothing even close to murder and it's even more obvious that you just like causing trouble for honest, decent,

good people. You should take a look in the mirror--if you think you're a good person, you are not."

He stood up. "I don't think it's wise for me to entertain your delusions any further. You don't deserve my time. In fact, you don't deserve the time of anyone who was on Voyager. They were and are all heroes. You are nothing."

And I was alone, half-eaten steak in front of me.

Chapter 24

I took a shuttle back to Guatemala, figuring I'd use the time alone to think about my next steps. What I'd said was only partly true; I could get a complaint filed to the GP's office, but it wouldn't become an actual charge unless I was in the office to make sure it got vetted and followed through. If I didn't, it'd be considered the lowest priority in the office and wouldn't get investigated for years, if ever.

And that was the paradox. If I filed the complaint, I'd be considered an interested party and could not do anything with the investigation itself--conflict of interest rules clearly made that impossible. I needed an accomplice; someone to file the complaint, so then I could make formal requests for records, which I could then use to get actual charges filed.

That was the point where I realized just how lucky I was. Gaberman had tried to get me in a dull dead-end job as punishment. Little did he realize that dull dead-end job was actually a tool I could use to right a historical wrong. Maybe when this was all done and Janeway was in jail, I could write him a thank you note?

That thought made me smile.

But one step at a time. My position meant I could get a case going, but only after someone else got it started. That was the hard part.

If I got someone to make the complaint, the rest would fall into place; that video alone was evidence enough, and on-the-record statements from a few officers who were on the bridge, possibly even the Doctor himself, would be enough, pretty much as long as they said that Janeway solely decided as captain that Tuvix would undergo the procedure. That was enough; that and the video of Tuvix resisting were evidence of misconduct leading to homicide.

So I needed an accomplice.

But who? The Doctor and Kim weren't an option; both had something to lose, and neither seemed eager to pursue the matter. Lauren probably wouldn't do it if I asked, and I can't blame her for that; angering admirals is a terrifying prospect for anyone, in Starfleet or out. Not that that was even an option; related parties, lovers, friends of an investigator filing a complaint

meant having to recuse oneself, and I wouldn't be able to choose who got the case. If it was someone I couldn't influence, again it'd be shelved. Plus, the chances of me actually being able to influence someone at the office into going through with the investigation were nil, since that would technically be misconduct and a fireable offense for both of us.

I definitely needed an accomplice.

That's when I realized I needed a new tack: the junior staff. I first contacted Ayala, an ex-Marquis who worked security on Voyager. He ignored my message. So I went through the manifest and started sending messages to everyone whose name I saw.

Two weeks went by after I sent those mass messages, and no response. This was insane. I messaged a total of 87 people, and not a single one got back to me.

I had no proof, but it seemed pretty obvious to me that Chakotay had told everyone to not talk to me and that I was snooping in their "family's" business. (It's a well known fact that the Voyager crew sees itself as a family, and now I was starting to see them as one too--a mafia family).

That was annoying, to be sure, but it also made me even more confident that I was doing the right thing. Innocent people have nothing to hide, and this conspiracy to shut me out was as close to an admission of guilt as you could get.

However, this also put me at a standstill. If I couldn't talk to any more Voyager crew, I couldn't get a sympathetic junior staffer to file the complaint I needed. And I needed that to actually see this thing through.

What about family? Neelix was still in the Delta Quadrant and uncontactable, and even if I could reach him, I couldn't see any way to convince any of them. And while I could theoretically get to Vulcan and talk to Tuvok, none of them would have a motive to file a complaint either.

Even as I thought that to myself, I realized it was not true.

If I could appeal to Tuvok's logical side, surely he would file the complaint himself. Logically, Janeway's action fell under the technical definition of murder, and it would be unethical and a violation of Tuvok's oath to protect the ideals of the Federation to stop her from facing justice. Tuvok once told Tom Paris he would help to get Paris convicted if he'd committed the murder he was once accused of (spoiler: he wasn't), so even if he weren't a Vulcan I knew Tuvok would turn Janeway in for her crime--it was keeping with who he was as a person.

But, I couldn't help but realize in a painful moment, then why hasn't Tuvok made a complaint yet?

I had to console myself with the theory that Tuvok, who had no memory of his time as Tuvix, also had never been informed of Tuvix's last moments, his lack of consent, and Janeway's

responsibility. Vulcans did not routinely gossip, and there would be no logical reason to ask too many questions about Tuvix after the fact. Maybe--just maybe--he didn't know what happened. Maybe subconsciously he didn't really want to know, either. Who would want this burden, especially knowing their existence was thanks to an act of cold blooded murder?

I arrived at the house in Guatemala. Lauren was there.

I immediately went to my computer console and looked at flights to Vulcan. There were a lot, as always, and not much vacancy for the next three weeks. I did see one open chair on one ship to Vulcan a week from next Friday; other than that, I'd have to wait nearly a month to get to Tuvok.

I would have to reserve the seat fast. Obviously, interstellar personal transport from Earth is rationed; we may be a post-scarcity society, but that didn't mean things like warp-capable ships were available at the snap of your fingers. All flights had to be scheduled in person at one of the ten interstellar stations, but since it was nighttime in Guatemala the Americas station was closed.

I immediately beamed to Singapore, where it was morning, and rushed to the reservation counters to make my request.

"I'm sorry, that seat has been filled," the clerk said. I can't say I was surprised--interstellar travel is hard to find, and humans love filling their time with trips to other planets. Vulcan was one of the busiest hubs for civilian travel; and now, thanks to some sex tourist on his way to Risa, I'd have to wait three weeks.

So be it.

"I'll take the next available seat, anytime, any craft," I said.

And that's how I ended up on a Rigelian freighter to Vulcan.

Chapter 25

Rigelians are known for their multiple biological sexes and rationality, which makes them an enlightened species if not that much fun. For this reason I expected the trip to Vulcan to be dull. This might be unfair and possibly speciesist, especially since I had never met a Rigelian before. But it was the naive assumption I had before I jumped on that ship. And I was fine with that; after all, my journey was a serious one, and I'd just spent three weeks anxiously waiting to get back to the important business of avenging the death of an innocent man.

In reality, Rigelians are a lot more fun than their enlightened philosophy and Vulcan-like reputation would lead you to believe. Perhaps the stupefying complex gender politics in Rigelian culture is why they are gregarious and warmhearted. Whatever the reason, I remain glad that I met Sielox.

Sielox was a Rigelian *dostrand* (one of their genders) who was assigned as my party's escort for the trip. There were twenty of us hitching a ride, and Sielox's job was to make sure we stayed out of secured areas and didn't try to abscond any of their cargo--not that Earthers were in the habit of stealing things. Still, protocol is protocol, and I was glad of that, because it's how I got to meet my new friend.

"This is the first time I've met a celebrity" I heard her say behind me. I was in the mess hall having lunch. I turned around and there she was, standing behind me, tray in hand with some kind of dish with blue tubers on it. It looked good, if strange.

"I'm hardly that," I said as she sat down. "Thank you for giving us the tour earlier," I added, with genuine gratitude in my voice.

"Not at all," Sielox said. "Your first time on a Rigelian ship?"

"My first time with Rigelians," I replied. "Humans have a deep respect for your culture, but I admit I'm a pretty sheltered Earther."

"No need to respect us!" she laughed. "But it is a kind thought."

"Can I ask what you are eating?" I asked.

"Tapserat," she replied, cutting a small piece and putting it on the side of my plate. "Please have some."

I did. The taste is hard to describe; if you imagine a mixture of truffle, garlic, and bacon mixed with sweet potato and a hint of black coffee. It was delicious. "What's in it?"

She laughed. "Tapserat!" she said. "That's all it is; boiled tapserat." She could see the confusion on my face, and I could see in her eyes that she was relishing my confusion. "It is a fruit grown on Rigel V, and it's one of our stable dishes."

"Oh," I said, a bit embarrassed. I felt like a dumb bumpkin, and for good reason. Not knowing tapserat is like not knowing gagah or that Vulcans have pointed ears.

"No need to be shy," she said, smiling in encouragement. I think she realized I was ashamed at my provincial ignorance of foreign cultures, and she was suddenly very eager to put me at ease. "There's a lot about human culture I didn't know either. I had pasta for the first time last week--it was amazing!"

Calling "pasta" amazing was discordant to say the least; what pasta, what sauce, what meat? Pasta by itself is nothing all that extraordinary--and her odd comment made me realize, in a way, we're all provincial. The universe was too diverse to be able to keep up with it all.

"You know we have five genders, right?" she asked.

I was now comfortable enough with her to admit my own ignorance. She definitely had charisma. "I thought it was four."

"The fifth is pretty rare," she said, "so a lot of people make that mistake. But technically five. Do you know which I am?"

I laughed. "I don't even know their names!" I admitted, which made us both laugh.

"I am *dostrand*, and in English we're usually given female pronouns," she continued. That made sense, I thought; she did not look entirely feminine, but she didn't look masculine either, and if I had to choose one side of the spectrum for her, feminine is where I'd put her. But I could also see how some dostrands would use another pronoun.

Alien physiology was fascinating, but it could also be a bit exhausting at times.

"I really appreciate knowing that. It is hard with Rigelians, I have to admit. Are you offended if we use the wrong pronoun when referring to you?"

"No, never," she said. "Rigelians have better things to occupy their time with than finding ways to be upset at minor cultural differences. Besides, most Rigelians don't know any human languages and the universal translator gets the pronouns right every time."

I wondered just how many awkward clashes of culture were avoided thanks to the universal translator? Clearly one of the greatest inventions in Federation history.

"Well, I am a 'he' if you didn't already realize," I said.

She smiled. "Don't worry--you might find our genders hard, but for us your male/female is pretty easy."

"Boring, even?"

"I didn't want to say it," she said lightly. "But, maybe."

"I wish male/female relations were boring," I replied.

"Ah yes, your romance dramas are quite fun. I saw a few human holonovels on Earth."

"They're not popular on Rigel?"

“Not particularly,” she said, “but I might change that. I’ve brought some with me that I’m hoping to market back home. There are a few Rigelians will like.”

“You’re an ambassador of Earth culture--I should thank you.”

“Rather I should thank you for the hospitality. Earth was a wonderful place to visit.”

That genuinely delighted me. “I am always happy to hear aliens appreciate our hospitality,” I replied.

“One of my favorite things about Earth is its politics. Especially when it comes to the freedom of information.”

Over the last three weeks I’d been stopped in public more than once by people who wanted to tell me they supported me. It was flattering, if a bit unnerving; I’d always faded into the background, and suddenly having strangers recognize me was an extreme change of pace. Lauren liked it, though.

That was why I knew what Sielox was implying: she knew about my case. “I take it you’re a fan of Gaberman?”

“Of course not!” she replied. “I want you to know you were right to do what you did and it took real courage to tell the Romulans the truth. Your case is not known among Rigelians, but I plan on writing a story about it when I get back.”

“You are a journalist?” I asked, suddenly a bit nervous.

She nodded. “I write for the Rigelian news service in my spare time. I used to do it full time, but I wasn’t getting assigned to any off-world stories, so I went freelance and took up a day job as a freight hauler.”

“I imagine there are few journalist/freight workers.”

“I’m pretty sure I’m the only one,” she said with a smile. “But I like it that way.”

“Why is that?”

“Working freight is honest, unpretentious work. My colleagues here are genuine people who have no delusions of grandeur. That is the exact opposite of just about every journalist on Rigel.”

“Sounds like lawyers.”

"Including you?" she asked. A month ago I would have been startled, but I'd gotten used to people knowing more about me than I knew about them. It came with fame (or infamy, since I had both).

"Especially me!"

She laughed.

"But seriously, I do hope I can make the galaxy a more just place."

"By sharing more information?" she asked.

"Of course," I replied. I didn't want to tell her about Tuvix--at that point, I felt there was nothing to gain from making my investigation public. Better to let her know me as the guy who fought for Romulans, not as the guy fighting for Tuvix.

"Want to share some information with me?"

Ah--so that was what was behind this friendliness. She was looking for a scoop. I didn't blame her; it's not like she was flirting with me, and if she was looking for a human friend there were a lot of options. But a law clerk with a history of telling people things that officials don't want them to know--how could a journalist *not* seek me out?

I'd like to say I thought of some masterplan to take advantage of this situation for myself, that Sielox's meeting was a fortuitous opportunity where I could move the next chess piece in my game against Janeway and injustice, getting closer to capturing the queen.

In reality, I just said the first thing that crossed my mind.

"I think there's more corruption amongst the admirals than many people think," I replied. "Think about Jenner's speech at my trial. He knew the law was on my side but he still tried to use his chance to speak to get the entire Federation to hate me, even when I was in the right, legally."

"Is that corruption?" Sielox replied. I appreciated this as only a lawyer would; we were still strangers at this point, and perhaps most people would be somewhat miffed at a stranger challenging their moral worldview. For me, it was an opportunity to get closer to the truth and be on the right side of history.

"Not in a legal or technical sense, but it is immoral," I replied. "He was trying to prejudice the audience by grandstanding and calling me irresponsible and evil, without admitting both he and I were doing what we thought was right--we just had different perspectives on what was the truly right course of action."

"You sound like a politician," she replied.

That surprised me. "I do? How so?"

"On Rigel, politicians do their best to describe both sides of a debate," she replied. "They try to explain why their opponents think they are acting in the best interests of everyone. That way they can then explain why their opponents are wrong."

"Fascinating," I said, genuinely fascinated. "Human politicians tend to just say their opponents are acting in bad faith, or they're lying."

"Even when they're not?" she replied.

"Of course."

"Doesn't that mean that they, in fact, are the ones who are lying?"

"Lying is part of the job description," I said. "Politicians have been known for lying for centuries."

Now it was Sielox's turn to be surprised.

"However has Earth survived for so long?"

I laughed. "Well, we almost didn't. This is why we had three world wars."

More surprise. "You did?"

Now it was my turn--I explained the three wars as quickly as I could, and in doing so I realized just how horrible of a picture I was painting of humanity. "I assure you, we're not so bad now," I said. I kind of hated that I was using the rhetoric of post-progression, but in this context it seemed necessary.

"Maybe there are more holonovels worth importing than I'd thought," Sielox said. "Your history is extremely colorful."

"I sometimes worry that it's too colorful, especially compared to our present," I replied. "Earth is a peaceful place and has been for centuries, but peace is boring. As a result, we've explored the stars. And that's great--we've met wonderful species, like Regelians. But we've also met the Dominion and the Borg."

Sielox's back stiffened, and her mood completely changed. "You aren't...an isolationist?" She whispered the last word.

"Oh of course not!" I immediately said. I flushed, embarrassed that I'd come across as something so vile. "I would never, ever. The Federation is the most important force for good in

the galaxy and has improved billions and billions of lives. I would never go back, and I hope the Federation brings in more worlds and, eventually, makes the entire galaxy a friendly and prosperous place. In fact, if I could bet latinum on the Federation lasting longer than any other institution in the galaxy, I would. Not that I've ever owned any latinum, mind you."

She laughed. "It's not that special, trust me."

"I'm sorry if I came across as an isolationist," I said.

"Oh you didn't--and I'm sorry for using that word." It was hurtful, I must admit. "I know very few humans are these days."

"Sadly there still are some, and xenophobia is a cancer that quickly can spread. I refuse to socialize with isolationists, end of story."

"Me too," she replied. "Which is why we can be friends."

"We're friends?" I asked.

"We are now."

Chapter 26

Sielox and I spent a lot of time together on the trip, and by the time we arrived at Vulcan I did truly think of her as a friend. We exchanged com ids and I told her that I would host her and introduce her to my girlfriend next time she was on Earth. Sielox said she planned to bring her *purfahls* (which, as far as I understand, is something in between a close friend and a mate) with her on her next trip, and would visit me when she did.

"But don't worry--we will stay in a hotel," she said. "There are five of us!"

That opened up a lot of questions, and I thought it smart not to ask any of them.

Vulcan was what Vulcan always was: hot, bright, dry. It was not a popular planet for most humans, being a place where emotions are shunned and life is spent thinking, debating, and working. For the few ambitious who went to Vulcan to learn more about science, philosophy, and logic, it was a hard place to endure, and the human expatriate camps were notorious for being very insular and full of melodramatic inpolitics.

This was all the reason why I was eager to get to Tuvok, make my case, and get back home, but that was easier said than done. Tuvok was now a professor at the Vulcan Science Academy, which meant he was extremely busy. He would not reply to a message from a stranger for no reason--especially if Chakotay had told Tuvok not to talk to me.

I honestly did not know if he had done so and, even if he had, there was no guarantee he would comply. Tuvok and Chakotay had an awkward relationship on Voyager. No one admitted it, but if you read enough about the crew and you know the stories that Voyager crew has disclosed to the public, it doesn't take long to realize the two were not friends. Tuvok had at one point been a spy when Chakotay and he were in opposing camps; on Voyager they might have been a family, but Chakotay obviously never forgot Tuvok's betrayal--and he probably never forgave him, either.

For Tuvok, being passed over by his friend and long-time mentee so that Chakotay could be first officer could not have been pleasant, even for an emotionless Vulcan. The fact that it was a logical choice may have mollified Tuvok, since it symbolically united the Maquis on an equal footing and helped the two integrate at an unbelievably fast rate, but it had to have been a pebble in Tuvok's shoe for seven years.

I ultimately decided to be optimistic about my chances of meeting Tuvok and getting him on my side. Of course I was wrong to feel that way, but at the time such a conclusion felt...logical.

On my second day on Vulcan I took a public transport to the science academy. With padd in hand I translated the directory and found Tuvok's office--a large one in the corner of the Martial Arts Faculty Building.

As you'd expect, the layout of the academy is extremely logical, so it took me little time to find his office. He wasn't there.

My research told me Vulcan institutions were similar to human ones, in that higher education institutes like this had professors give lectures and hold office hours for students. I'd assumed their office hours would be publicly listed or made available, but when I inquired, staff told me they were not. And nothing was on Tuvok's door except its number and his name.

This was bothersome.

Not an insurmountable challenge, though. I'd wait.

I spent three days waiting outside that door, arriving in the morning and leaving in the evening. I sat on the floor and tried to ignore the Vulcans who looked puzzled at my presence as they walked by. Luckily no one complained, so I was allowed to keep watch.

Finally, on the third day shortly before the fourth morning hour, Tuvok arrived. He looked exactly as he'd appeared in the many videos I'd seen of him, so I recognized him immediately.

He recognized me, too.

"May I help you, lieutenant?" he asked as I got to my feet. He began unlocking the door.

"Sir, I am sorry to bother you--may I have five minutes of your time?"

"Unfortunately I am unable to provide you with more," he said. "I must be teaching soon."

"That's fine. I want to talk to you about Voyager."

He raised an eyebrow. Vulcans weren't ones to play mind games or use deceit as a conversation tactic, so his surprise told me that Chakotay had not in fact gotten in touch with him. I wondered wryly if Chakotay had gotten in touch with everyone else but him.

"That is an interesting topic of discussion," he replied. "May I inquire what exactly you would like to know?"

Absolute candor was best when dealing with Vulcans. They respected humans who could think logically and avoid the illogical phatic strategies and oblique small talk typically used to blunt hard topics of conversation. Thus my response was curt.

"I believe a crewmember may be guilty of murder."

Again, surprise. "That is a very serious accusation. And who would be the victim?"

"That is...complicated," I said, unwilling to give myself away yet.

"That is not terribly helpful," he said. "But I cannot deny the importance of hearing out such an issue, particularly when the issue is so grave."

A pun? I realized he was speaking Vulcan and the universal translator was working; just an unfortunate coincidence. That also made me realize how odd it was that he hadn't chosen to speak English with me--he knew it. Was he trying to keep the linguistic advantage of using his mother tongue?

"Thank you, sir," I said. "I want to make it absolutely clear that I am only interested in justice."

"That is your reputation," he said flatly. I didn't know if that meant he sided with me or against me on the Romulan case. I'd assume Vulcan sympathy, particularly among the Unification Party and its sympathizers. But I did not know Tuvok's politics; maybe he was a Separatist?

Why were Vulcans so damn hard to figure out?

"As I said," he continued, "I must be teaching a class. Let me scan your padd; you can visit my house tonight for dinner. We can discuss the matter then."

I have to admit, from the moment I saw Tuvok I was starstruck. Even if I've never been the type to care for celebrities, Tuvix had become a monumental part of my life, and it made both Tuvok

and Neelix quasi-obsessions. I knew everything there was to know about this man (including where his house was, but I didn't want him to know that), and the thought of being invited to his house--it just felt like an incredible honor.

"Sir, I am deeply honored," I said, my emotion betraying me. I was acting like a human, which most Vulcans would find off putting. But if Tuvok was annoyed, he didn't show it. Perhaps his tolerance for emotion had strengthened after years of being on a ship with Neelix?

"Likewise, I believe my son will be honored to meet you," he continued. "Please be there tonight at the third evening hour."

I promised I would. I took my padd, took my leave, and practically skipped down the hallway and out the building.

Chapter 27

I arrived early. Knowing the importance of punctuality in Vulcan culture, that was a good thing, but in all honesty I was early because I was so giddy. Meeting Tuvok, his family, *and* visiting his home? I felt like I'd hit the jackpot, and for the first time since I'd learned about Tuvix, I was actually having fun.

T'Pel, Tuvok's wife, met me at the front door. A stately and beautiful woman, with typical high Vulcan cheekbones, she was intimidating in just about every way. "Live long and prosper," she said, gesturing for me to enter.

"It's nice to meet you, ma'am," I said. I'd planned this out carefully--it was hard to know whether to use the native greeting or your own, and I'd ultimately decided using an Earth greeting somehow seemed more respectful than mimicking the Vulcan phrase.

"This is my son, Sek, and my daughter, Asil." Both were there, and both nodded to me.

Tuvok's house was massive--made of orange terracotta and in the classic Vulcan style, with curved arches above the doorless entryways that connected rooms and large domed roofs that helped dissipate the heat. Modern cooling systems made these unnecessary, but most Vulcan homes kept them for aesthetic reasons as well as to minimize the use of power--a logical choice. The house was set at around 25 degrees celsius, an act of hospitality I immediately noted.

"There's no need to set the house to human temperature," I said. Vulcan room temperature was around 32c and, while not exactly comfortable, I could bear it for an evening.

T'Pel shook her head. "You are our guest and your comfort is important to us. Please, the living room is this way." I followed her into the house, noting the many paintings on both walls of the hallway. That opened up into a large living room with several couches and a large viewscreen

above a hearth; to the other side of the house was a massive window, perhaps five meters tall and twice as long, showing a massive backyard full of trees that, thankfully, blocked the now setting sun's strong rays.

"Tuvok will be with us shortly," she said. "Would you like a drink?"

"Water would be great, thank you."

She nodded. "We also have Romulan ale, brandy, and human beer," she said. That surprised me--Vulcans do not drink alcohol. More hospitality, or did they want to disarm me with booze?

I decided on the less paranoid interpretation, but still kept to water just to be safe.

"You are Lieutenant Li?" Sek asked. He was a handsome man, perhaps 30, with the same haircut as Tuvok and a slightly higher voice despite being much more burly than his father.

"I am," I replied.

"Your case was significant news," he said.

"I didn't know it was well known on Vulcan."

"I was at the Academy at the time," he replied. A student? Had he joined late? "But, yes, the story is somewhat well known here as well."

"Really?" I said, surprised. "I suppose it's Vulcan diplomacy that no one has stopped me on the street here. I get that a lot on Earth."

"Perhaps--or perhaps because the video feed was not broadcast on Vulcan."

"It wasn't?"

"The case was summarized in text by the Vulcan news authority," he said. That was a relief--it also meant the chances of word spreading that I'd been on Vulcan were low. That was good; I was worried news of collusion between Tuvok and me could get me taken off the investigation after he filed his complaint. Now I know that probably won't happen, so after Tuvok files his case there won't be anything tying me to him.

Of course Tuvok could complain of my connection after the fact, but by then it'd be too late; the case would be in the courts and there'd be too much evidence for my biased input to matter anymore. I'd probably get fired and stripped of my commission (but, luckily, this misconduct was not a jailable offense), but the case would not get thrown out (and even if it did, another prosecutor would just refile it). Sure, my career would be over, but Tuvix's murderer would have to face justice for her crimes.

"May I ask, do you think I did the right thing?" I asked. Maybe it would've been too rude to ask so bluntly to humans. Socializing with Vulcans was not fun, but it was definitely efficient. And easy.

"From a legal point of view, obviously yes," Sek said. "The ethical questions invite greater debate. But I believe that on ethical grounds you must also be lauded." This was a big compliment from a Vulcan, especially one I'd just met. Now I began to see why Tuvok was so willing to let me talk to him; his son was a fan.

"That's very kind of you," I said.

"It is the only logical position," he replied. "It is a well known fact that individuals make better choices when they are given as much information as possible, and information was removed specifically germane to these Romulans' future, forcing them to make distorted choices." I couldn't have said it better myself. "A particularly concerning decision if one believes the Romulans should be welcomed into the Federation."

Was Sek an advocate of reunification? That wouldn't surprise me; it had become an increasingly popular viewpoint on Vulcan, especially among the younger generation.

"I'm just glad I could have helped." I felt my response was quite lame--I was still getting used to people knowing about my career, let alone having an opinion on it. "But I think many people would've done what I did."

"Perhaps, perhaps not," Sek said. "Many did not."

"Had they known the law, they probably would have," I said, unsure if my humility was genuine or not at this point. "I knew I wouldn't get in trouble--and I mean that. I was downright shocked when they arrested me."

At that moment, T'Pel and Tuvok entered the room. "Dinner is served," Tuvok said.

At the dinner table, it was T'Pel who spoke first. Now that I was here I was nervous--how could I possibly tell Tuvok I wanted him to file a complaint against his former captain? And in his own home? I suddenly started to get cold feet; not only did what I was doing seem like a rude, barbaric intrusion (thus fitting with how Vulcans perceive us humans, perhaps rightly), but it seemed pointless. Tuvok wasn't just Janeway's officer, he was her mentor and a close friend. How could I imagine that he'd help me, whatever the logic of the matter?

"I hope we Vulcans have been hospitable during your stay," T'Pel said, as Asil ladled plomeek soup for us. I was a provincial human, sure, but I knew of the Vulcan custom of the youngest member of the family over aged ten serving at the dinner table--a logical practice, so that the healthiest and most energetic family members would do the most work during mealtime.

“Yes,” I said, having the soup--it was popular in Malaysia, where it had been incorporated into traditional rendang. I was raised on plomeek soup, and was really excited to try the authentic version on Vulcan.

Unsurprisingly, it was blander than the Malay derivation.

“I’ve spent my time visiting temples and museums across the two major continents,” I replied, lying through my teeth. I’d seen the arrival hall at the interstellar travel station, my hotel, and the Vulcan Science Institute. That’s it. “It’s been an extremely educational experience.”

“And why have you come?”

This was it--my chance to bring up Tuvix in a straightforward and honest way. So of course I didn’t take it. “I’m hoping to learn more about Vulcan society and history, so that I can learn more about how it has influenced the Federation charter and legal system,” I said.

“Asil may know something of that, as she wishes to be a magistrate.”

I turned to the young lady, who nodded. “It requires a lengthy course of study and rigorous discipline, but I shall try my best.” She sounded a mix of humble and scared--not the most logical position. Maybe because of her age?

“Sounds unlike Earth,” I replied with an involuntary chuckle. I let the smile disappear. Displays of emotion were tolerated and inconsequential to Vulcans--or so was the party line. I couldn’t help but think the Vulcans found them annoying. “I can’t say my course was as hard as quantum mechanics or warp theory.”

“The intersection of fact, analysis, and morality is arguably the backbone of justice,” Tuvok said. “And they must be combined differently in each instance. That was especially apparent in my time as a security officer.” Then why didn’t you make the right mix when Janeway-- “Justice embodies,” he continued before I could finish my thought, “the Vulcan maxim of infinite diversity in infinite combinations.”

“That’s why justice is at the core of the Vulcan philosophy and its greatest goal,” Asil said, as if continuing Tuvok’s thoughts. It was clear this was not a family of much animosity, with parents passing down wisdom to their children, who accepted it readily. I knew not all Vulcan families were so harmonious. “And why it is the most difficult profession to enter.”

“There’s a good reason why humans consider Vulcans the most enlightened species in the galaxy,” I said.

T’Pel replied, “that is most complimentary. But one should not forget humanity has its own strengths.”

"Indeed," Sek said. "After all, if it weren't for humanity rightly chastising Vulcans' dishonorable behavior at P'Jem, there would be no Federation today--and, perhaps, no Federation."

"I must admit," I said, genuinely surprised, "I have never heard of a Vulcan giving humanity so much credit."

"Perhaps Sek's generosity has led to a slight indulgence in hyperbole," Tuvok replied. "There it was--I knew some generational disagreement had to be here; but if Sek felt any loss of face from his father, he didn't show it. "It is nonetheless unquestionable that the Vulcans owe a great deal to humanity."

"And likewise," I said, having had enough experience with diplomats to know this dance. "Arguably our debt is greater; had Vulcans not initiated First Contact, I have no doubt in my mind that humanity would no longer exist. And that's something most humans can agree on."

We continued eating with similar conversation peppering the decidedly unpeppered food. I struggled to keep up; while references to high school topics like the Vulcan/Andorian war, the birth of the Federation, and First Contact were well within my scope, a few references to more esoteric concepts in philosophy and history were simply a struggle. But I can say with confidence that you've never lived until you've heard a Vulcan explain Nietzsche.

The conversation was genuinely enjoyable, and I found myself liking Tuvok and his family, although I found it weird. As beings who did not experience emotions, did they like me? Were they capable of liking me? Did they even like each other? Just how does not having emotions work? These questions were the sort of around-the-bong fodder of first-year cadets, and as cliché as they are I have to admit they remain unsolved in my head. But that doesn't mean I felt detached from Tuvok and his family--if anything, I felt that I didn't need to have answers to these questions, just a sense of gratitude that I've met such good people.

Thus was my mood when dinner ended and Tuvok invited me to their living room for Vulcan mochas. It was just him and me, fortunately, so I decided it was time to shoot my shot. If I didn't ask for his help now, I never would.

"Thank you for the invitation, sir," I said, suddenly feeling like a lieutenant talking to a superior officer. "But I feel like I must tell you why I'm really here."

"I did wonder," he said, with an eyebrow raised, "when you would be ready to make that disclosure."

"About Tuvix," I said biting my lip, the words trailing off as I spoke them, "I really think this whole story demands a reconsideration."

"What do you mean?"

I took my padd out of my pocket. "Have you seen the video of Tuvix's final moments?"

He raised his eyebrow again. "A curious phrase, but, if you are referring to the moments before I was restored, I have not."

"Please indulge me--and all I ask is that you remember justice is at the core of Vulcan culture, like Asil said." Was I pulling on his heartstrings? Yes. Does this strategy work with Vulcans? I had no idea.

I played the video--it was not the greatest quality, being a recording of the video from Chakotay's padd when he'd shown it to me (of course I'd recorded the entire dinner in the hopes I'd have hard evidence to use; I didn't, but at least I had a bad copy of Tuvix's final moments of life). Tuvok watched with, of course, a neutral, unmoving face.

After Tuvix silently went into the turbolift and the doors closed, the video ended. Tuvok looked at me.

"I am not certain what is the significance of this record," he said flatly.

I knew then that this was a hopeless cause. Of course that wouldn't stop me, but even as I carried on I knew I was wasting my time. But justice demanded it.

"At the time of this recording, Tuvix had already asserted his refusal to be separated into...you and Neelix," I said awkwardly. "Thus he had made an explicit assertion of his individuality and desire for life. *Cogito ergo sum*--and since Tuvix thought of himself, therefore he was himself."

Tuvok listened patiently, still looking neither annoyed nor convinced.

"If he was a sentient individual capable of thinking of himself, thinking for himself, and rejecting a medical procedure that ended his life, and if Janeway coerced him to endure that procedure, this is by definition non-consensual euthanasia--or, in crude terms, murder. And a premeditated one, as Janeway ordered this and enforced it after carefully planning it in advance."

"I am not so sure," Tuvok said. "One must first establish what Tuvix was. He was the result of a transporter accident which merged the egos of Neelix and myself. When the accident was reversed, we were unmerged. Thus a unique ego called 'Tuvix' never existed, as much as did a combination of two separate egos for a brief moment of time," Tuvok said.

"But that combination had its own personality and desires, isn't that an ego? And it's an ego that is no more."

"No more, correct, but retrievable," Tuvok replied calmly. He was not being defensive at all but coldly, coldly logical. I admit his dispassionate demeanor both comforted me into thinking I'd not

stepped my bounds while also making me start to doubt that, maybe, just maybe, I'd been wrong all this time. "If Neelix and I were to return to that planet and retrieve the orchid that caused this accident, we could in theory recreate it and thus recreate Tuvix. A murdered person cannot be recreated."

"Maybe a new Tuvix would be created, but it wouldn't be the same Tuvix. You don't remember what happened when you were Tuvix, correct?"

"I do not."

"And neither does Neelix?"

"He asserted as such following the event."

"So," I said quickly, "the being that did those events and has memory of those events is gone--and would not come back if we recreated Tuvix. Another way to say it--the memories created in that time span are gone and cannot be retrieved."

"I am not certain the continuation of memory is a necessary definition of a coherent and cohesive self, either legally or scientifically," Tuvok replied. "For instance, if an alien force were to cause you to lose your memory--as once did happen to me--and you never had it restored, you would still be the same person with the same ego, the same soul, even if your memories of before were permanently lost."

"But Tuvix's memories weren't just lost!" I protested, my voice raising with incredulity. "The man himself was gone! His body is gone!"

Fortunately my heightened state didn't perturb Tuvok. "It is not," Tuvok said. "His DNA, his subatomic particles, still reside within Neelix and me. Tuvix was the combination of two life forces; when Tuvix ceased to be that combination ceased, but the two life forces did not. No killing transpired," he said coolly. Then, he added, as if pondering a curiosity, "One could argue that, in a way, Tuvix lives forever as a part of me."

"Even if you don't remember him?" I retorted. "Would you say your experience as Tuvix changed you in any way?"

"Every experience I have had has changed me," he replied.

"Let me put it this way," I said. "Did you being melded with Neelix change you at all?"

For the first time in the conversation, he seemed annoyed. "I would say with a high degree of certainty that it did not."

"So being Tuvix didn't change you--which means it stands to reason that Tuvix is gone."

Asil entered the room, and if she were aware of the growing tension in the room, admittedly one sided, she did not show it. She handed both of us Vulcan mochas.

It was clear that Tuvok had his mind set, and Vulcan stubbornness what it was, I could not deter him with my clearly logical and justice-minded argument. Justice the center of Vulcan society my ass.

"I guess," I said, knowing full well what the answer would be, "that you won't be willing to file a complaint against Janeway, then?"

"No."

Sek and T'Pel entered the room. I stayed for another few minutes and we chatted, but I have no memory whatsoever of that at all. We could've talked about Vulcan pornographic holoprograms and Klingon narcotics for all I knew. I just couldn't stop thinking about Tuvix and how I'd let him down.

I left crestfallen and defeated. I wasn't angry at Tuvok; I was angry at myself. Enough logic and I could have convinced him. Maybe I was too young of a lawyer; maybe too dumb. Maybe I used the wrong tactics. Whatever it was, I failed.

Should my time with Tuvok's family have deterred me from seeking justice? After all, Tuvix's death meant T'Pel had her husband back after seven years apart--Sek and Asil had their father back, and this family was now united because Tuvix was no longer alive. Sek clearly respected me, Asil was an ambitious young woman, and T'Pel an incredibly kind and friendly person--adjectives not often used for Vulcans. They were as close to a happy, loving family as Vulcans can be, considering they are incapable of happiness or love.

Had Tuvix's sacrifice been worth it, after all?

Not that he chose that sacrifice.

No, Tuvok's family benefitted from Janeway's killing, but that didn't justify the murder. Seeing them together did not hinder my resolve one bit, and no amount of hospitality or thermostat adjusting could stop me from doing what apparently no one else in the galaxy was willing to do: speak up for Tuvix.

Chapter 28

On the trip home, this time on a Vulcan transport ship where I had no chaperone and no one to really talk to (the Vulcans on the ship seemed very uninterested in engaging the only human on board, which suited me fine), I spent my time contemplating the next move. Obviously, it was a

desperate move doomed to failure, but there were two other people I thought might, just might, help me.

Samantha and Naomi Wildman.

If I wanted to appeal to anyone who knew Neelix, they were the only options this side of a wormhole. The two lived on Ktaris and neither had replied to my messages before--whether that was Chakotay's doing or not, I had no idea.

But Chakotay's meddling didn't matter. I knew that intellectually. Neelix had practically raised Naomi as an uncle of sorts, and in all of the interviews spoke of him with a deep love that told me, whatever he had been, he had been a good father figure to the child.

That wasn't surprising. Of course I didn't know what Neelix had been up to since Voyager lost contact, but all of the stories made Neelix sound like an eternal big brother. Of course I knew the story of how he valiantly defended Dexa and Brax, becoming a father to the latter and a loyal, protective mate to the former.

And I knew the other stories of how Neelix had done everything in his power to protect Kes from just about anyone--Paris in particular loved to tell stories of how Neelix was obsessed with caring for the helpless and the weak.

"What you need to remember about Neelix," Tom had said in an interview I watched several times, "is that he was haunted by the memory of his sister. Alixia sadly died on Rinax, one of Talax's moons. And I think Neelix had survivor's guilt. So he tried to make up for it by protecting anyone he could--that's why he hung around the Ocampa, and how he met Kes."

"Did his relationship with Kes unnerve the Voyager crew?"

"Yes, for a long time," Tom said. "And Neelix was very stoic about it. He had to know about the rumors and gossip, but he never let it get to him or let it stop him from being our morale officer. But the rumors were all nonsense."

"What do you mean?"

"So," Tom replied, eager to get into details that most people would desperately shy away from, so much did he want to have history side with Neelix, "Ocampanians have a nine-year lifespan, and hit puberty at four or five. Kes was less than two when she joined Voyager, and had already been Neelix's--partner, I guess?" Tom said with an inflection--he clearly still hadn't figured out all the details in his head. "As Starfleet we try to be open minded, and although Kes was fully grown in appearance by human standards, the age difference did bother a lot of us. Some complained to Janeway, and they got an earful about respecting other cultures and alien species."

“But surely there’s a limit to respecting other cultures.”

“The abuse of children is just one of many things we can’t tolerate,” Paris agreed. “But there was no abuse.”

“No?”

“It took a long time for many to realize, and maybe longer for me, but people who thought Neelix was manipulating or grooming Kes were wrong. Not only was she a willing companion, but they’d never had sex. They never even lived in the same quarters!”

“So why did they stay together?”

“When I learned this it was hard for me to figure out, and I kept mapping the older-brother and younger-sister dynamic to both of them, which meant flirting with Kes and coming on too strong. I have to confess I hate myself for that--neither of them deserved me disturbing their loving relationship.”

“So Kes stayed with Neelix because he protected her?”

“And took care of her after she got out of the underground Ocampan city,” Tom added. “She always loved Neelix and was grateful that he helped her see the universe, and he stayed close by her for as long as he thought she needed protection, which admittedly was probably too long. But he wanted to make sure, because it was too late to do that for his sister.”

“That is a very different figure than Voyager must have seen at first. Did the crew figure all of this out like you did?”

“Oh yeah, and Neelix quickly became beloved by the entire crew. A few apologized to him, but a lot more just didn’t have the guts to confess they’d judged him to be a pedophile.”

“How did he react to the apologies?”

“He looked them in the face and replied, with big wide eyes, ‘I have no idea what you’re talking about,’ as if he’d never heard of the rumors and didn’t know people were making them. But he knew. He always knew.”

“That was very kind of him.”

“It’s what a morale officer does,” Tom said. “Neelix cared for all of the children of Voyager--Naomi, Icheb, Mexoti, Azan, Rebi. And he never asked for anything in return.”

I replayed the interview several times on the trip home, agonizing over how I could possibly make Naomi file a complaint--but I thought there *had* to be a way, especially if I appealed to her

love of her godfather. It was obvious that Neelix had cared for her when she was so young (even with half-Ktarian physiology, she was just six when Neelix left Voyager). And at sixteen, I could surely leverage that somehow to get her to care about Tuvix, even if she'd never met him.

If that failed, Samantha was another option. She'd known and worked with Tuvix--and possibly she liked him? Obviously she had loved Neelix, if only for the simple relief he'd provided as a babysitter, but did she have residual feelings about Tuvix I could use, too?

I got home. Lauren was there. I immediately looked up Samantha Wildman on my computer and read all of the public records I could. She hadn't given many interviews about Voyager, and now lived a quiet life as a private citizen of Ktaris. That would be a problem--Ktarians loved their privacy, so finding Samantha on Ktaris would be easier said than done, even if I flew out to Samantha's new homeworld.

Despairing that I had hit a dead end, I went to bed and fell asleep, I think Lauren was there too. The next morning I got up and dragged myself to work.

For five weeks I struggled. I will be totally honest--I did not take this impasse well. I started drinking, alone, and when I wasn't drinking or working I was reading and scheming.

The obvious shortcut was just to bribe someone to make the complaint for me--but I'd have to find someone who could be bribed, and then I'd need to keep bribing them. Forever. If they ever blabbed at what I'd done, Janeway would be freed from prison and I'd be put in her cell instead.

And this is why I was drinking.

Over a month passed and I'd not forgotten about Tuvix nor given up--I was in despair, and I was getting increasingly desperate, but I did not stop using every waking moment I could to find some way to get justice for Tuvix.

Then, one day, Lena showed up.

I had spent the morning processing forms while drinking some coffee I'd quickly made, hoping to free up some spare time during the day so I could slip out of the office and access some records at Starfleet. This was why I decided to take the shuttle, so I could try to clear my head before my early morning meeting, where I'd likely get even more work. I was still processing Fenris ranger conviction records, very technical and boring work, and the workload meant less time focusing on getting justice served.

Thus I went to the shuttle transport station in Guatemala City that morning, something I didn't rarely do. And that's where a Cardassian walked towards me.

I admit that I had been on autopilot and paid attention to nothing going on around me if I didn't have to, but getting a Cardassian visitor on Earth was enough to shock anyone into paying attention.

"Greetings, Jason."

It is unnerving when someone you don't know already knows your name--I had not gotten used to it. I still haven't. But there was more about her that made me anxious--not just that she was the first Cardassian who'd ever spoken to me. There was something more to it. At first I tried to think of how this was related to Tuvix--I couldn't think of even the hint of a connection. I immediately dismissed that she could know me from the Romulan case--had the news spread to Cardassia? I found that unlikely, a ridiculous indulgence of egoism. So I really was a blank slate, standing like an idiot silently for a good few seconds.

"May I help you?" I was about to say, but she beat me to it, "Mister Li, I do hope you can forgive my forwardness."

"Um, sure," I said. "How do you know my name?"

"You are quite well known, Mister Li," she said slyly. So I guess the Romulan case had reached Cardassia? "I have read much about you here on Earth." Or she'd been here for a while. That made sense, too.

"Oh, well, nice to meet you," I replied, feeling quite dumb.

"Likewise. It is the greatest pleasure to make your acquaintance. I do hope you are free for lunch. Say, 11:30 am today?"

That would be just thirty minutes after my morning meetings ended--perfect timing.

"Can I ask what this is regarding? If it is about an open case, I'm afraid--"

"No, no, not at all!" she said dismissively with a light chuckle. "The last thing I would ever want to do is get in the way of justice, which, as you know, is a very important virtue in Cardassian society. No," she continued, changing her tone to sound more assertive, "it is in fact an entirely separate issue that I have recently discovered that I hope I can discuss with you, something that I think you would find quite interesting."

She was saying a lot, but nothing at the same time. "What was your name?"

"I am Lena," she said.

"Lena...?"

"Yes. Lena."

"Okay, and I'm Jason Li," I said, extending my hand.

"A pleasure indeed. So, does that mean you are in fact available for lunch, today?" she said. She was charming--very charming.

I will now confess that I have never had sex with an alien. Sure, there were a couple of Vulcan holograms when I was a teenager, but that's about it. In reality, I had only been with humans, which, I must admit in what may be a distasteful opinion, had always been my preference.

But I would be lying if I said Lena lacked sex appeal.

I'm not going to get into it. You don't need me to tell you what a beautiful Cardassian woman looks like--I'm sure you've seen plenty in your time. Even if they had been enemies to the Federation, they weren't anymore, and I'm sure more commingling between our races was down the pike. Maybe she was a trailblazer? In any case, she was definitely desirable, enough to make me think my preferences were probably worth tossing away.

I would go to my meetings, slip out, hear her out, and get back to work. It's not like I ever ate with anyone anyway. Of course I wouldn't let myself be seduced and, good lord, I wouldn't sleep with her or try--I was a man of honor, after all, and I had a girlfriend.

But I would hear her out.

So we met later that morning at a restaurant--an Andorian/Tellarite/Thai fusion restaurant in the Tenderloin, which was small enough and far enough away from HQ that it probably wouldn't have too many Starfleets about. I made the choice more for Lena's comfort than my own; even if our peoples were technically on friendly terms, I couldn't imagine being at the nexus of Federation power was a great place to be for a Cardassian. Especially in light of the barbarian totalitarian system they lived in, which probably made all of them bundles of constant anxiety and fear.

She elegantly slid into her chair across from me and ordered a cup of Jasmine tea. I nodded to the waitress, said "me too," and took the menu. I knew the food on order here, but I wanted to buy time to try to get my thoughts in order and figure out how to deal with this woman.

For weeks I'd not socialized with anyone, and I felt very out of practice.

"Surely the food is not so important as what I have to say," Lena continued.

"Let me just get something," I murmured, flagging down the waitress, who flickered as she came--had this place always had holographic serving staff?

"I'll get the pad thai," I said. "That's it."

"May I have pad krapaow Andorian eel and stir fried vegetables with a side of yamok sauce, if you have it. Oh, and a bowl of fruit."

The waitress nodded, slipped away.

"So you read about me in the news and decided to reach me?" I asked, incredulous. A lot of people read about me--but that was old news and made me less powerful in the Federation, not more. What did she want with me?

"I should tell you that you were highly recommended by a good friend of mine," Lena said. "A Rigelian who said you were keen on righting the wrongs of the galaxy."

"Sielox," I said, stunned. "And how did you find me in Guatemala?"

"The location of your home is not exactly a state secret," Lena said. "Articles on your story have included pictures of you at your home--and the location of that building was not hard to find."

I grimaced--fortunately this hadn't led to any other encounters.

At the same time, I felt relief--this meant Lena wasn't some super spy or anything like that, a fear that comes naturally when dealing with a Cardassian. That didn't answer why she'd sought me out, however.

"So why did you seek me out?" I asked.

"There is a situation brewing that can best be described as...unfortunate," Lena said. "In fact, it has been brewing for quite some time, and it seems that the Federation is completely unaware of it. And that is a problem, because it is not something the Federation would like to see fully develop."

"So it's bad for the Federation? Why would a Cardassian care?"

"Why, Mister Li!" she said, putting a hand to her chest. "I am shocked. Do you not think we care for our Federation friends and neighbors?"

"No, I don't," I said flatly. The charm offensive worked--up to a point.

"Very well," she said, sighing. "But do not forget that your interests and those of my people can and very often do align. Such was the case with the Dominion War--"

"Well, not for the whole war--not when you sided with the Dominion," I said.

"All's well that ends well, as one of your more celebrated poets once said," Lena replied smoothly. "And since then, it has been apparent that Cardassian and Federation interests have aligned. And now they align once more."

"So what's going on that the Federation should be so worried about?"

She passed me a data rod, which I affixed to my padd. Security clearance: no viruses, and it appeared authentic. I downloaded the contents.

In it were a collection of maps, reports, ship plans, biochemical research papers, and other various bits and pieces--a variety of multidisciplinary documents, not unlike a collection of evidence for a trial. Was this why she sought me out, my legal background?

"The executive summary should give all the detail you need," she said helpfully.

I opened that file. It was already written in Cardassian, English, Vulcan, and Andorian. Whoever wrote this was eager to have it read by the Federation.

Nulrek-C₁₇H₁₃CIN₄ Conspiracy

Stardate: 67113.1

For All Eyes

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A conspiracy has been developing on Cardassia among some rogue actors who wish to destabilize the peace with the Federation. These misguided individuals, who are working outside of the official Cardassian government and without the authority or approval of Cardassia's leaders or the vast majority of its people, have developed a new drug called "Nurek" which they plan to ship to the Federation as soon as it is fully completed.

Nurek is an odorless and tasteless mild sedative compound that, when ingested in several humanoid species, creates a chain reaction in the digestive system that results in the mutation of some bacteria into a new parasite. This parasite can then leave the digestive system and bind itself to the nervous system, creating permanent psychological and behavioral changes in the host organism.

In clinical trials, a broad number of types of changes were observed, but in over 80% of cases one consistent result was discovered: a newfound fondness for reptilian species of all sorts. In the most extreme cases, an obsessive love of reptilian species was observed.

This effect was found to occur with the greatest frequency and intensity in humans (effective in 90% of observed cases), but was also effective in Andorians (70%), Tellarites (50%), Deltans (45%), and Vulcans (20%).

The criminal conspiracy to develop and implement this drug intends to surreptitiously upload it to the food replication system at Starfleet HQ, where it will be ingested by admirals, politicians, and senior members of Starfleet. Once the bacteria in their systems have adapted to the Nulrek, the bacteria will begin to grow and spread, ideally infecting all of Earth in a matter of months. From there, it can spread to the entire Federation.

END OF SUMMARY

I looked up to Lena, who didn't give me a chance to speak. "As you can tell," she said, "a group of people are working hard to make the Federation have a more favorable attitude towards Cardassians--and not by making us more lovable, a task that is surely impossible."

I raised an eyebrow. "Would this really do that?"

"Reptilian," Lena said, accentuating the word carefully. "Think about it--if suddenly there's a greater affinity for species such as Cardassians, couldn't that encourage friendlier terms for treaties? Trade pacts? Maybe even a retreat from nearby territory--perhaps even leaving Deep Space Nine?"

"That sounds like a stretch," I said doubtfully. "From making people like lizards to abandoning the Bajorans--"

"Might we continue this conversation...somewhere else?" Lena asked.

I looked around. I definitely did not feel comfortable in this restaurant anymore. "Of course."

We left, went back to my house; Lauren wasn't there, so we were alone and far from any eavesdroppers.

"I think you miss the Order's strategy," Lena said quickly. "They do not think a plague of herpetophilia will result in changes to official policies. They bonded the particle to an old Earth sedative for a reason--so it would be detectable on scans." Now I was confused, but Lena continued. "That way, the Federation would discover what had happened, start combating it, and then investigate where it came from. Cardassia will be a likely suspect, whether evidence points to them or not."

"So then what's the point?"

"Blaming Cardassia for such a strange plot when the government knows of no such thing and is not involved? The only response would be to categorically deny and accuse the Federation of saber rattling. Soured relations between the two would cause extreme political unrest on Cardassia, 'forcing' the Obsidian Order to launch a coup and take over the civilian government."

"But the Obsidian Order is part--"

"Of the civilian government? Oh no, not at all," Lena said. "They are a force unto themselves, sometimes helping the government, sometimes opposing it. Often, sadly, making their own plans that they think will be better for Cardassia than whoever happens to have power at the time."

"And you know this plot isn't condoned by the civilian government?"

"They have no knowledge of it," she replied.

"How do you know that?"

"I am a deputy secretary to the Prime Legate."

Well, that would explain it. I quickly took out my padd and did a search.

"It is quite true," she continued, and my search showed that it indeed was. "But don't think that means I am here on official business--the Prime Legate and government would rather stay as far away from this as possible."

Which means she *was* on official business, but off the record and off the books. My head was starting to spin. Why did Cardassians make things so complicated?

"So you want me to help you tell Starfleet what is going on so they can arrest the smuggler and expose the conspiracy?" I asked.

Lena shook her head. "Not quite. It would be much more expedient for all parties concerned if the Obsidian Order's involvement were not exposed, because of the sensitivity of their somewhat delicate relationship with the civilian government. That also is why I am reaching you and not going to Starfleet directly," she continued. "If you bring the smuggler to the Federation, the plot will be exposed and put to an end, and the Order will be distant enough to deny any involvement, and hopefully give up trying such a stunt again. And since the civilian government isn't involved, the Order cannot blame the civilian government or try to overthrow it."

"If I bring Starfleet the data rod you gave me," I replied, "they're going to go straight to the Prime Legate and implicate the government or the Obsidian Order. Probably both."

"Yes, and that's why you're not going to do that. Instead, you're going to bring them the smuggler himself. The smuggler is a paid hand, a Cardassian, sure, but when he is captured and confesses, all the Federation will have is a mercenary hired by another mercenary--far from sufficient evidence to implicate a government conspiracy."

I was stunned. "You want me to kidnap the smuggler? What?! How?"

"I have a Klingon shuttle armed with a cloaking device that we can use to ambush the ship."

"And when we get there?"

"Easy," she said. "We decloak, beam out the smuggler before they have a chance to notice us, and go to warp before they can react."

That did sound easy--and terrifying. "But wait," I replied. "Why should I help the Obsidian Order escape justice?"

"Do you think their exposure would result in any form of justice?" Lena said, laughing. "You do know little about Cardassian politics."

I sighed. I had learned enough in the last two hours to know there was no way I could outsmart these people.

"Plus," she said, "if you hand over that data rod, you'll get a pat on the back. Bring the smuggler and the evidence of his actions, and you'll become a hero."

That was true. Starfleet rewarded closure--you could expose a risk to the Federation and get commendation for the initiative. But if you saved the Federation from that risk, you'd get front page coverage, a promotion, and ceremonies with admirals.

The adulation didn't appeal to my vanity, but the thought of restoring my reputation did. Many in the Federation sympathized with me, but the top brass hated me--and if I saved the Federation from such a wide-ranging conspiracy in a way that did not endanger the peace with Cardassia, they would have to have a change of heart. I could finally be forgiven and get my career back on track.

And that meant a promotion. Which, in turn, meant getting close to the General Prosecutor, who would then see me as his star.

And that would change everything. Close to the GP, I could ask him to order an independent investigation about Tuvix *and* urge him to bring charges against Janeway. Such an order wouldn't trigger a conflict of interest complaint--I could get Janeway charged without a complainant to get the ball rolling.

This also meant I could abandon my admittedly desperate and half-baked plan to get Samantha or Naomi Wildman to testify--if I could ever find where they were.

Since I'd made no progress on that, helping Lena out so that I could get to the GP seemed like my best course of action. And with a bit of reputation restored, my arguments about Tuvix being murdered would at least get a fair hearing.

At this point I was convinced that was all it would take for Janeway to face justice. Tuvok was motivated by logic, but he was still Janeway's friend and, at the end of the day, a beneficiary to her homicide. All of Voyager's crew owed her something, but no one in the GP's office did, nor did the man himself. They'd see it my way. They'd agree with me.

They'd bring Janeway down.

"As a hero," Lena said as if reading my thoughts, "you'd have a lot more friends in the Federation than you do now. Powerful, powerful friends."

That was it. I was onboard. My fear of spaceflight, especially on a small Klingon ship, would have to wait. The risks of being vaporized or spaced on this mission were very real, and I was just as terrified of them as ever, but the clear pathway to justice meant I had to take those risks and stop thinking of my own mortality.

For Tuvix.

"Okay, I'm in. When do we start?"

Chapter 29

I left a note for Lauren saying I'd be back in a few days and took the next two weeks off of work; Lena insisted we leave immediately, which I was happy with--the sooner I got this done, the sooner I could come back, sit through whatever ceremony they gave me, and have a little chat with the GP about Janeway.

We beamed to Orbital Station 3, where her shuttle was docked. A cramped and uncomfortable ship, it was what you'd expect from the Klingons: low lighting, the red and green glow of panels, metal everywhere. I tried not to look outside at space, a sense of vertigo already starting to drown my feet and legs. There were two cots in the back of the ship, fortunately well padded--I wouldn't have to sleep on a Klingon slab.

"How long until we reach them?" I asked.

"We'll need to get a pattern scatterer first," Lena said, tapping on the panel in front of her. "If we don't, they'll detect the subspace distortion wave when we enter their sensor range even if we're cloaked, and they'll immediately go to warp to avoid us."

"And how will we do that?"

"Going to warp," she said. The stars blurred around us. "We're going to Xendi Sabu--I have an appointment with a merchant there."

"What?" I said incredulously. "That's over three days away at maximum warp."

"A week, actually," she said. "This isn't the fastest ship in the fleet."

"Tell me you have more than gagh on board."

She laughed. "I promise a gourmet experience."

A week on a Klingon shuttle is not fun. Fortunately she'd installed a Federation replicator, so there was passable food for the trip. Also fortunately, the week was uneventful--I did get to know Lena during that time (or so I thought), and I tried my best to keep our conversations to small talk as much as possible.

Lena came from a prominent Cardassian family that had worked in government for generations; it was only natural that she would follow her father's footsteps. She told me she loved her family very deeply--her brother, a year her senior, was her best friend, and the two had grown up adoring her father. Sadly, the father died five years ago of an ailment he contracted while being stationed as the head administrator of a research colony, and since then Lena and her brother had been living with her mother, who herself withdrew from her work as a councilwoman for their home province as she grieved the loss of her husband.

A sad story--and a bitter reminder that Cardassians, while not human, share many emotions with us. It made me hopeful as much as I was saddened by the story; maybe this meant we could truly be allies with them for a long time, not just temporarily friendly until the next opportunity to expand their empire showed up.

Maybe we had underestimated the Cardassians' capacity for good?

These were the thoughts in my mind when we got to Xendi Sabu.

Just a few million kilometers from the last planet around the star, we came across a Ferengi ship that was pointing in our direction. It seemed they were expecting us.

The screen lit up and I saw three Ferengi--two males in the background, and a female in the fore.

"Well if it isn't my favorite Caradassian!" the female said.

"Cut it, Remis. I have the latinum, do you have the scatterer?"

"Of course--it's three bricks, as we already agreed."

"Wonderful. My partner and I will be delighted to make the trade. You can see him here," I turned and looked at the viewscreen. "Lieutenant Jason Li of Starfleet Headquarters."

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Lieutenant Li," Remis said.

I stayed quiet, frankly confused.

"So remember if you fail to deliver, Starfleet will not be too happy with you. Or if you try to take it back after the exchange."

"Why, I am deeply hurt that you would think so lowly of me, Lena," Remis said. "Whatever would make you think--"

"Rules 10, 17, 47," Lena replied without a beat.

Remis blushed. "Is my dress that nice?"

"Consider it a high compliment. We Cardassians value a fine garment above all else."

Just what the hell was going on? I later looked up rule 47, "Don't trust a man wearing a better suit than your own," which explained Remis's response, but didn't explain the repartee. Lena later told me she was feeling Remis out, trying to see if anyone else had paid Remis to give them Lena's location or any information--but she concluded Remis hadn't.

And, I later realized to my irritation, she had made it clear that I was there as insurance. Remis might, like some Ferengi, try to steal the product back after getting the latinum or even try to blow Lena's ship up and take the parts--but she wouldn't dare try that with a Federation citizen on board, let alone a Starfleet lieutenant. I was a prophylactic against Ferengi greed.

"In that case, if you are willing to transport the latinum, we will transport the pattern scatterer presently." The smile that followed this crept me out on several levels. Lena wasn't phased.

They made the exchange, and to my surprise a small spherical object materialized behind us. Lena immediately scanned it, nodded, went back to the console, and went to warp.

"I guess it's good?" I asked.

"It'll work. At the very least, Remis hasn't double crossed us."

"Well that's good."

"Now that female Ferengi are allowed off-world, doing business with them is much better," Lena said, expressing a kind of gender preference that one rarely hears in the Federation. "Male Ferengi are ruthless and dishonest, but the females seem better suited for business--they know the intrinsic value of a repeat customer."

I nodded. Ferengi have only allowed women to engage in commerce for about a decade and, from what I'd heard, their entrance to the labor market had destroyed the economy. A massive depression followed, as a doubling of the workforce literally overnight had caused havoc that I didn't understand, as pre-scarcity economics was a field I'd never bothered to study.

It was another five days until we'd intersect the transport ship, and on the way I should have started asking myself just exactly how Lena knew where this ship was going so far in advance, and what she needed me for. Sure, I was a bit of insurance to smooth out her getting the pattern scatterer, but that couldn't be enough. And I eventually did learn that was the cherry on top of a very sweet and very large sundae--for her, that is.

Instead, I started making flowcharts. I realized that my efforts to get the legal apparatus to work in my favor and start targeting Janeway had depended on a lot of pieces falling perfectly into place--a frustrating conundrum, since it depended so much on the will of many other people, all of whom didn't see things as I did.

So I needed a plan--or, rather, several plans. I needed to create a matrix of various boolean statements, with answers to the questions "if I fail at this, then I'll try that." Thus I could avoid the mistakes I made with Tuvok, Paris, Kim--hell, I could even revisit them.

With a complex enough algorithm, I could fix this problem. I could fix the world.

I spent my days working on mapping out nodes of events, counterevents, and responses to each conditionality. I knew if I got this right, Janeway would be in jail.

After a few days at this work, Lena snapped me out of my haze. "Probe with scatterer deployed," she said. I looked up from my cot, saw beeping on a terminal, went to it. On the panel was a monitor displaying the probe, less than a meter in length and width, ahead of us and flying towards another ship on long-range scanners.

It was the Cardassian cargo vessel.

A large vessel, about double the size of an Antares class ship, it looked like it could transport a massive amount of cargo. "That seems excessive to send some code," I noted. Since the plan was to upload the genetic instructions to create Nulrek into Starfleet HQ's replicators, which takes no more than a data rod and a crewmember of a Federation species to beam down to the visitor's center, I didn't see why they'd use such a big ship.

Yes, I was stupid. I know that now.

"They are excessively fond of self-protection," Lena said. "I assume the ship is stocked full of artillery in case they are intercepted."

And we were on our way to intercept them. I swallowed, and in a cold sweat I tried to scan them. Inconclusive, despite their shields down.

"Deflective hull," Lena said. "Scans don't work."

I'd been distracted enough on this trip to ignore the inherent risks, but as we closed in on the ship I was terrified. Would it be painful to die in space?

"Engaging cloak."

We cloaked and the ship went from long-range to short-range sensors. We were seconds away from arrival.

"I'll focus on piloting, so all you need to do is beam the captain out as soon as we arrive, and when he's materialized in our brig, I'll jump to warp. They won't know what hit them."

I nodded, despite the fact that I was behind her with my back turned to her. "Yes ma'am," I said belatedly, so she knew I was alert.

I kept my eyes fixed on two panels in front of me: one monitoring weapons and shields of the Cardassian ship, and the other that would engage the warp program Lena had designed. And, no, I did not check what was inside that program, being it was written in Cardassian on a Klingon ship, even if I had thought of doing so, the task would've taken too much translating and hands-on work than I had time for.

"50,000 meters to rendezvous," I said.

I heard Lena say, "I know...in ten seconds."

My heart felt like it was jumping on a trampoline, trying its best to burst through my ribcage and skin. The closest I'd been to a space battle was in the Qiris sector, but even then I was safely ensconced on a heavily armed ship within a heavily armed armada facing many smaller factions, none of whom wanted to wake the sleeping dragon that the Federation has quietly become. So while my anxiety may have caused butterflies to appear in my stomach sometimes, there was no rational justification for the fear.

But now terror was very much a rational response to this situation. A freighter it may be, but the Cardassians were manning a ship several times our size and, according to my scans, they had several photon torpedo bays and at least five phaser banks. We had no torpedos and two phasers; even the Klingons don't make shuttlecraft for war.

Stealth was our weapon, and my panel told me stealth was being maintained. Our cloak was still up, the probe was still scattering any detection signals looking for cloaked vessels. But even if you're invisible before a massive death machine, you never truly feel safe.

Especially when the plan required perfect timing, with a window of four, maybe five seconds to make it work.

“10,000 meters,” Lena said. “Get ready.”

I didn’t move, didn’t breathe. Just looked at the “execute” button on my panel, my finger hovering above it.

“NOW!”

I pressed the button, immediately saw we had decloaked and, at the same time, heard the sound of a transporter beam, but it sounded slightly out of phase somehow, like it was echoing. That could mean a problem, but there was no time to check that now. After being decloaked for about two seconds, the program then recloaked us and went immediately to warp.

Had I heard the sound of a phaser lighting up just before the stars fell behind us in a blur as we broke the light barrier? Must have been my imagination playing tricks on me.

It didn’t matter. Adrenaline still surging, fear was not only no longer an option but a physical impossibility. Then came a rush of euphoria--we’d done it!

As we continued to warp, I quickly ran to the back of the shuttle to check--and, yes, our prisoner was there, a young cardassian male, about the same age as Lena. He was sitting on the floor, crosslegged, amused.

“I admit I am very impressed,” he said.

I looked at the panel, the color dropping from my face because I couldn’t understand it. I quickly looked around for my padd, dashed back to the main cabin, found it, went back. “Force field is up, right?!” I yelled in a panic, my voice breaking. I didn’t wait for Lena to reply--I dashed back-cabin and translated the panel with my padd.

I felt my shoulders fall and my muscles unclench as I read: “FORCE FIELD ENGAGED. ENERGY: 100%”

I fell to the floor in relief. I just sat there for a few moments, waiting to catch my breath.

“Let me guess,” the Cardassian said, “you’re new at this.”

I looked at him. “What’s your name?” I demanded.

“I’m not sure that information is terribly important at this stage,” he said.

I was starting to really dislike Cardassians.

"Fine, don't tell me," I said like an angered child picking up his toys and leaving. I half expected the prisoner to respond, but he didn't. So I went back to the front of the shuttle.

"Lena?" I called out.

She was gone.

"Computer, locate Lena." I felt like an idiot doing this on a tiny ship.

"Lena is not on board."

"How many humanoids are on board?"

"Two--one Cardassian and one human."

Where was she?

I went back to the pilot's con, saw it was all in Cardassian. Grumble. "Computer, translate all shuttle consoles to English." It was done. I quickly scanned the records and saw that, when we'd picked up our prisoner, there'd been a second transporter event--a beam out to the same coordinates.

What?

Equal parts confused and angry, I realized I'd been played, but I didn't fully understand how or why. Perhaps five percent of my subconscious indulged the fantasy that the Cardassian ship had kidnapped Lena as a countermeasure, but the rational part of me knew I'd been betrayed. For what or why--and what exactly was going on--that all remained a mystery.

The only way I could know was to go back to where we'd just been. We hadn't retrieved the probe, so it should still be where we left it--meaning I'd be safe cloaked. There was a risk that they had seen the probe and deactivated or destroyed it, but it was so small that there was a good chance they hadn't. Still, this was risky, but I was too full of fury and adrenaline to care.

I returned to where we had just been a few moments ago, where the freighter had been--it was gone. So too was the probe. Had they vaporized the probe? If so, the ship might be keeping a sensor sweep on this location to see if I'd returned to the scene of the crime--and without the probe they could find an anomaly, if not my precise location.

That bought me some maneuvering. I could set an algorithm to immediately go to warp in the direction of Federation space if long-range sensors detected the freighter or any Cardassian

vessel coming. The closest Federation ship was a couple parsecs away, so with subspace communications I could at least let them know I was there and get some protection.

First I did a preliminary search for a warp signature. Nothing. "Computer, do a multispectral analysis and report any residual warp signatures originating from a quarter of a light year from this location."

"Processing time: approximately fifteen minutes."

Fine. I could wait.

I sat there for a while thinking of what had happened. At first I couldn't understand why Lena would beam to the ship of her own accord--surely the crew would be angry that she had beamed out their commanding officer, right? Unless they knew her somehow.

Which meant the prisoner would know her or of her.

I went back to where the Cardassian was sitting, looking serene as he sat cross-legged on the perforated metal floor.

"Can I make you more comfortable?" I said. Lawyer mode: engaged.

"Some kanar, perhaps?" he said, in a tone that made it clear he was joking.

"Not a problem," I said. I went to the replicator, "one large bottle of kanar, high-quality vintage." It appeared.

I set it on the food conduit, set the force field to let it through, and it went into the small cell, which was really just a corner of the small back-room of this small shuttle. I sat on a bench just outside of the small cell, looking down at the Cardassian who remained quite still on the floor.

"That should be about 30% abv, I believe," I said. "I can't say I'm an expert on kanar. But by all means, cheers."

He looked straight at me, eyes never once veering to look at the bottle.

"I don't drink."

"Then I find it very odd that you would ask for kanar," I replied, feeling suddenly like a Cardassian myself. "Did you just miss the smell of the stuff?"

He smirked. "What is your name?"

"I am Lieutenant Jason Li of Starfleet," I said. I was wearing civilian clothes, as I almost always do, so while he must have known I was human, he probably didn't know just how much trouble he was in.

But if that fact upset him, he didn't let it show.

"And why, Lieutenant Jason Li of Starfleet, are we not going anywhere?"

There was no window here; how could he know we weren't going anywhere? Klingon inertial dampeners weren't that bad.

The talents people develop over careers in space travel will always amaze me.

"We're waiting for answers," I replied. "The wait can be truncated if you give me some."

"Then it is a shame that I have none to give," he replied.

"How can you say that when you don't know the questions?"

"Oh, but I do," he replied. "What was my ship's business? That is the only question you really care about--and perhaps not even so much, as you likely have a theory already in your mind." He sighed. "Alas, it is a question a mere deckhand cannot answer."

A deckhand? This was getting bizarre. Why would she beam out a deckhand and stowaway on a freighter? And implicate me in all of this?

"Fine," I muttered, growing frustrated. Lawyer mode disengaged. "I'll figure it out. Lena can't have gone far," I said, mostly to myself as I got up and began walking back to the con.

"Was that Lena you said?" the Cardassian said to me, suddenly his voice raised in excitement.

"You know her?" I demanded.

"My name is Larem," he replied. "And I believe you have been the victim of a fraud."

I sat back down. That was entirely possible--and, I suddenly realized, I had no evidence connecting his ship to the documents Lena had shown me. And although I had verified those documents, now I was starting to panic that maybe it was an exquisite fake I couldn't see through.

"Go on," I said, still somewhat doubtful.

"Lena is my sister," he said, "my younger sister. She has wanted control of the freighter ever since our parents died and bequeathed it to me three years ago. I assume she told you I was

engaging in some criminal conspiracy that could harm the Federation, and only you could help save your world?"

Suddenly I had a massive lump in my throat and my voice went dry. "Yes," I croaked, suddenly horrified.

"I am impressed at her guile," Larem said, suddenly smiling. "And unfortunately now she has control over the ship--the crew is paid by our family, so they will do whatever anyone in our family tells them to do, if there isn't another family member there to override them. And now that our family has a population of two, that means only I can override her." He paused for effect. "But I admit I'm finding it difficult to override her due to my present circumstances."

So I'd been played, I thought, and I could use Larem's help to get unplayed. Or would Larem play me? Was he lying? He'd already lied about being a mere deckhand, but I admit I couldn't blame him for that lie, given the circumstances. Still, it pointed to just how Cardassians use the truth and lies to get what they want--this was not a species that valued integrity.

I needed to get more proof, objective proof. No more Cardassian manipulation.

My brain raced through my options. I couldn't go back to Xendi Sabu; even if I could trust Ferengi, there was no guarantee Remis would be there.

I'd have better luck with Sielox--Lena was a friend of hers, so presumably Sielox could give me something to go on. But that assumed Sielox hadn't been manipulated herself--or, if she hadn't, that Sielox would side with me and not Lena. Plus, it would take time tracking Sielox and getting a response--and by that time, Lena could be long gone.

Or worse.

What if the Nulrek planting conspiracy was real, and Lena didn't want to stop it--she wanted to be the head of it? What if she was on her way to rendezvous with another ship, maybe even Remis's, to transport her operative and the Nulrek code to spread the pathogen on Earth?

I had to act fast--and I had to get Lena.

"I don't know what's going on," I said, jumping up from the bench, "but I need to intercept Lena and make sure she isn't on her way to destroy my homeworld."

"Then might I suggest freeing me?" Larem said as I was walking away. "I can easily locate my own ship, and my crew is sworn to protect my life, so seeing me next to you will guarantee your safety."

I admit I was very tempted. But the risks outweighed the benefits, so I simply walked back to the pilot's con and waited for the sensor sweep to run its course.

“Multispectral analysis complete. No warp signatures detected.”

That seemed impossible--even if they'd gone to impulse, moved away from here, and then started to slowly ramp up to warp speed, the signature would be detectable somewhere.

And the chances of them doing that seemed very unlikely. Given the risks of lingering, I'm sure Lena would have gone to warp immediately, so why--

That's when I realized it.

“Computer, do a level 5 diagnostic on all sensors, prioritizing any indication of an external scatterer being deployed.”

“Acknowledged. Estimated time to completion: three hours.”

In fact, in two minutes the computer announced: “Residual effect of a pattern scatterer detected in the vicinity.” A fast response because we were right on top of where the scatterer had been used.

Aha! “Gotcha,” I murmured.

“Now, analyze the particle density of the scatterer and determine whether there is a vector that the particles are moving along.”

“Completed. Results onscreen.”

And there it was--a conical shape coming to a point precisely where the ship had been before Lena commandeered it and leading into Cardassian territory.

Well, that was a relief. At least she wasn't on her way to poisoning Starfleet HQ.

“Set course to match the vector of that pattern, maximum warp.” And we went to warp, just like that. I heard Larem from behind the ship yell something to me--probably an attempt to free himself. I ignored it. Now I was in control, and I had a plan. For some reason, despite the fact that I was a tiny defenseless ship going into Cardassian territory, I felt no fear.

The rage had overpowered it.

As my ship continued to race into Cardassian space, I felt more and more determined to reach my goal. I was only faintly aware of the risks to my safety there were in being in Cardassian space; I pushed those down, wallpapering over them with the thought that I could cloak and go to warp back to the Federation, if need be.

Until suddenly I got a message.

"Thank you, Jason, you've been most helpful." It was Lena. "But I think you should go home."

I was enraged at her calm demeanor, adding insult to injury. "Lena, you're going to prison, no matter what."

"I think you will find it more difficult to find us than you think," she said. "But even if you did find us, it would not be in your best interest."

"No need to threaten me," I replied. "You can kill me--and your brother--but the Federation will still be after you."

"No one is going to kill you!" she said immediately, laughing. "Such a barbaric thought. We aren't Klingons. No," she continued, "rather, you will be committing suicide if you do not turn around immediately. Career suicide, that is."

"What are you talking about?" I demanded.

"Let's say you found me--you cannot overpower my ship. There is no way for you to capture me. And at the same time, Remis is on her way to the closest Starbase to warn them of a rogue human who has gone quite literally insane and is plotting to plant a bioweapon in HQ. It is really sad that Lieutenant Jason Li has descended to such madness and such dastard acts of treason. And with my testimony, tearfully explaining how a madman had imprisoned my brother and nearly caught me too, if I hadn't escaped at the last minute--well, it will look like a solitary madman has tried to frame us innocent Cardassians in a rampage of felonies that will see you in a jail cell for decades."

I realized just how complex the game was. She'd made contact with Remis to make the connection so that she could bribe Remis to falsely accuse me of transporting Nulrek. I was implicated.

"There's a flaw in your plan," I said. "Larem will corroborate my version of events."

"Oh will he?" Lena said, laughing. "All he knows is that you beamed him out of his ship and that you know my name. During the depositions, he'll quickly realize it makes no sense to support your version of events, especially since you're claiming he is a bioterrorist. But he can tell them the bare truth--that he was on the bridge of his ship one moment, on your ship the next, and that you were making wild accusations about his beloved sister that made no sense. The Federation will have to let him go."

"And is that what you want?" I demanded. "Surely he will get revenge on--"

"Cardassians are not fans of revenge," she replied. "You truly do not understand how we work."

I admitted I did not understand what was going on. Not out loud--but I was beginning to feel that I had lost and it was time to go home.

"I admit having him back home and you in jail is an imperfect ending for me," she continued. "But it isn't as bad for me as it is for you. Of course, you could give me a perfect ending by going back to Starfleet and turning Larem over to the authorities. And it'd be a perfect ending for you--you would be a hero."

"But," I said, now less demanding and enraged and more pleading, "what if he's innocent?"

"I promise you that part of my story was true," Lena said. "My brother was hired to smuggle Nulrek to Earth by a proxy hired by the Obsidian Order--one of many business deals my dear brother and I have had a difference of opinion on."

I felt rudderless, stunned, slumped in my chair.

"I assure you, having me in charge of the family business is for the best--the best for you, for me, for Cardassia, and for the Federation."

Talking to Lena was like dancing to music only she could hear. It was like this with most Cardassians, I'd been told, which was why Bajorans hated them so much. It wasn't just that Cardassians stole, raped, and murdered--they embraced the sophistry that didn't just justify their evil, but argued it was angelic.

Lena was no Gul Dukat, notoriously the most evil Cardassian in history whose reputation had transcended that of men like Khan Noonien Singh, Adolf Hitler, and Xi Jinping. But she was Cardassian, and that meant the only moral action was staying loyal to Cardassia, no matter what suffering that meant, either to aliens or Cardassians.

I realized at that moment just how outgunned I was--in intellectual terms, in strategic terms, in terms of sheer ruthlessness.

It was time to go home.

Chapter 30

I did not speak to Larem on the journey back--he tried to get through to me, but I ignored everything. To his credit, on the second day he gave up.

The journey back was uneventful, as I stayed alone near the con, my sleeping cot just behind the pilot's chair. I admit to falling into despair at what had happened.

I did not know whether I was harboring a criminal or not; it was still uncertain if Larem had done what Lena claimed. And I realized I could not find the truth on my own--I had to have faith in the Federation to investigate this man, and determine whether he was guilty or innocent.

The cruel irony of my need to rely on a system I had been losing faith in for over a year made my retreat to Earth all the more painful.

I channeled my rage elsewhere, deciding finally that I needed to have a talk with Sielox.

She got back to my query within a day.

"Jason, it is good to hear from you!" she said with a cheery smile that looked either entirely innocent or cruelly mocking. I could not tell.

"You betrayed me, didn't you?" I couldn't control myself. "You told Lena she could use me for her own damn ends, because our friendship clearly means nothing to you."

"Whoa, whoa," she said, "calm down. Firstly, what are you doing in a Klingon shuttle?"

I decided to tell her everything, honestly, as embarrassing as it was and despite the fact that it might give her more latitude to lie to me. But, frankly, I saw no other option--and, I thought, getting witnesses to my story sooner rather than later would keep me on the offensive in case Lena tried to frame me.

"That is just crazy," Sielox said with a sigh. "But not surprising. Cardassians."

"So explain to me why you betrayed me, and why I shouldn't hate you."

"I met Lena three years ago," she said, "at a journalist conference. She had wanted to be a journalist herself, before her parents died. Then she and her brother had a bitter fight over the family business--she told me he wanted to use it to smuggle drugs, she wanted to use it for less profitable but more humane tasks."

A plausible--and consistent story.

"When did she say this?"

"Shortly after her parents died," Sielox said.

"If she's such a good person," I demanded, "why would she let her brother rot in jail for a decade? It's doubtful they'll keep him for less, considering what the conspiracy was."

“Well, he was committing a heinous crime,” Sielox said. “And Cardassians are loyal to their family--which sometimes means sacrificing a bad sheep to protect the flock. And who is the greatest family of Cardassia other than the state itself?”

I was flustered, I scratched my head viciously and let out a guttural scream. “She could’ve just asked for my help!” I demanded. “If she’d told me the truth--”

“That she wanted you to help her get her family’s ship back? Even if the Federation was on the line, you wouldn’t have, you know that.”

It was true. If she’d told me the ship was captained by her brother and she wanted to get it back *and* stop this smuggling, I would’ve handed her over to the Federation as a co-conspirator. She might’ve been released if the evidence exonerated her, but knowing Larem, he would’ve made sure it didn’t.

“I’ve been played,” I said finally.

“Well, don’t feel bad,” Sielox said. “So was I. Friendship with Cardassians has its limits--and now we’ve found the limit with her. I suggest we let this friendship end.”

I laughed. “Yeah, I think that ship has sailed.”

Chapter 31

The investigation into Larem took three weeks, and I was surprised that a substantial amount of evidence confirmed that he, indeed, had been smuggling Nulrek in order to manipulate the Federation into feeling a closer affinity to the Cardassians. And while evidence pointed to several Cardassian citizens, none were in the Obsidian Order, which the state of Cardassia clearly and categorically denied existed on Cardassia anymore. But, the Prime Legate assured the Federation, those private citizens’ dastard conspiracy would be harshly punished by their free and fairly elected civilian government.

To this day I remain unsatisfied. I was not privy to the investigation, so I cannot say whether the evidence was robust enough or not. I followed the trial beyond my own testimony, and while the physical evidence was all convincing on the surface, I could easily contrive in my mind a complex conspiracy of Cardassian subterfuge that undermined everything.

To this day Larem is in jail and, I presume, Lena is free and piloting her ship, and I do not know whether this was a just outcome or not. I probably never will.

I was the star witness in the case and I told the entire truth. I also tried to make it clear that I had doubts and uncertainties about the story; I tried my best to get the jury to think about the various ways that Cardassians can and do distort reality. But in the end, Larem was sentenced to nine years in prison without the possibility of parole.

And my life changed in just about every way imaginable.

Once the scourge of the authoritarians and top brass, I had redeemed myself. I hadn't exactly saved the Federation from an existential risk, but I had definitely stopped a plot that could have had horrendous consequences, including a possible war and the deaths of thousands. I was honored, as not just this conspiracy and the drug ring around it was shut down, but Starfleet was equipped to ensure a similar kind of infiltration would never happen.

And I was promoted.

Lieutenant Commander Jason Li became the Chief of Staff to the General Prosecutor of the Federation. No longer a scourge of the top brass--I was the top brass.

It had been an infuriating way to get to where I needed to be, but finally I could do what now was the only thing on my mind. Getting Janeway investigated and prosecuted had been important before, because she had murdered a unique individual. Now it wasn't just my way of avenging a murder--it was a path to self-redemption, just in case I had enabled a thief and helped imprison an innocent man.

Now I needed to get Janeway, no matter what.

Chapter 32

I woke up as I always did: at 7:35a.m. precisely, at which time I got out of bed, opened up my padd, and went through my notes, flowcharts, and plans for my next step. I replicated a coffee and drank it as I looked at the list of Voyager crewmembers and what I knew about them. I then sat at my LCARS terminal to look up as much information as I could about the General Prosecutor while my coffee got cold.

It had been three years since I had learned of the betrayal of Tuvix, and I was finally closer than ever. I could make this work.

This was usually the point when Lauren woke up. I hadn't always woken up before her, but in the last few weeks she'd been sleeping in--not getting up until after I'd left for work.

It took a few days to make my plan, and even when I had it, I did not strike immediately. The first month was spent with many meetings and lunches with my new boss, Erit P'Tuhn, an Andorian who was surprisingly gregarious and friendly for his position. Erit, as he preferred to be called in private meetings, was in charge of overseeing the criminal indictments and prosecutions of thousands of war criminals from the Romulan Neutral Zone, but he enjoyed a lunch of fish and chips and an Earth ale while casually talking about Parisses Squares and Earth football, his two favorite sports.

He was beloved, so his high rank was no surprise, and these lunches were often accompanied by friends who were themselves high ranking officials in other arms of Starfleet or the Federation. I was suddenly having casual conversations every day with fleet admirals and prime ministers, after a solid year of being despised by these people.

All of that was forgotten in the blink of an eye.

Well, they had forgotten. I had not. And I did not see them as friends, or even potential allies. I was now on a three-dimensional chess board and they were pieces to be moved. I had lost badly against Lena, and I had learned from that loss. Now it was time to win.

I waited over a month until I felt it was time. I'd laughed at Erit's unfunny jokes, I politely inquired about colleagues' families whom I cared nothing about, I told dignitaries it was an honor to meet them, even if these same people had publicly denounced me as a criminal just months ago. I did it all, so I could see justice served.

When I felt like Erit trusted me and saw me as a loyal subordinate who would do anything for him and never, ever, question the party line, I finally took my chance.

It was around 2pm, Erit had had a couple of beers and a particularly heavy deep fried lunch, resulting in a somewhat tipsy and lethargic Andorian that, I thought, would be most receptive to my request.

"Sir, may I have a moment?" I said as I popped my head through his open doorway.

"Of course, Jay!" he said warmly. The nickname had never been requested, but he'd given it nonetheless. "What can I do for you?"

"It is something of a personal professional matter," I said awkwardly as I eased myself into one of the antique chairs he kept in his office. I still admired the view of the Golden Gate Bridge from his office; it was a symbol of his status and power, and with that view everyday it was no surprise he'd become such a lover of human culture.

"There is a case that I stumbled upon a few weeks ago," I said, "a rather curious one. How familiar are you with the story of the Voyager crew?"

"As familiar as anyone," he replied, leaning back in his chair. "Why?"

"Have you heard of Tuvix?"

He pondered for a moment. "Name sounds vaguely Vulcan, but, no."

"You're not far off--he was half Vulcan." I quickly described the transporter accident in as dispassionate and calm of a manner possible. In my description I did not implicate Janeway as a possible murderer, nor did I even hint that she was the subject of my proposed investigation.

I was not a naive ensign anymore.

"It seems to me," I said after laying out the facts of the case, "that this situation was handled well within Starfleet protocols, except for the fact that any anomalous event on a starship that results in the loss of life requires a debriefing of the senior staff."

"All of Voyager was debriefed when they got back," Erit replied. "Weren't they?"

"They were, sir, have a look at this," I handed over a padd. "Here is an outline of the events which were a part of the two-week debriefing of the senior staff upon their arrival. You'll note a few instances were not included, such as the Tuvix one."

"That is interesting," Erit agreed. It was the first hint of a sympathetic ear to my argument I'd had in nearly two years, and I tried my best to stifle my joy. Hope--I felt that for the first time in too long.

"The Tuvix instance is a particularly odd one," I continued after a pause; clearly Erit hadn't taken the hint. "Two crewmen were combined in a transporter accident."

Erit laughed. "I never did like transporters!"

Transporterphobia always struck me as an absurd indulgence of the lazy and regressive; no surprise Erit was transporterphobic. "Well, in this case it created an entirely new sentient being, unique and unlike any ever made in the universe before."

"And what happened to him?" he asked.

"Well, that's the interesting thing," I replied. "He wanted to stay on Voyager, but..."

"But what?" Erit demanded, right on time.

"He disappears from the record," I said. "Weird, isn't it?"

"Now that is weird. Well, all of the people on Voyager were outstanding people--"

"All?" I asked. "Part of the crew was Maquis after all."

"That is true," Erit said. Like many elder statesmen of Starfleet, he had not forgotten the Maquis and, even if that sad chapter of history was over, many of Erit's generation and status still held a grudge. "And this wasn't investigated?"

"No sir," I continued. "But, if I may be frank, I think it is worth looking into."

"You're absolutely right," Erit said, making a note on his padd. "I'll get someone on this immediately."

Not me, though. I couldn't interject into the process quite yet, but no matter.

Finally, finally, things had started.

Chapter 33

I waited two weeks. That's fair, isn't it?

Erit was a fat lazy fool, the kind of man who thrived in a world where work was optional. And his love of hobnobbing, with entertaining, with greasing palms and playing tennis with buddies--it all meant he was great in good times. And worthless in bad times.

And this was a very bad time. Rot in the Federation, a homicidal admiral decorated and beloved, an entire generation unaware of their worship of a monster, a mafia carefully protecting a woman with immense power and influence?

These were dark days--darker than the worst times of the Changelings' infiltration of Earth, when paradise was truly lost. This was a time of great reckoning, where we needed to realize our own faults and make merit for our past transgressions.

It was not a time for men like Erit.

And think of how maddening for me! Me, a man who had spent nearly three years fighting against the tide so that the memory of a man could finally be honored. Me, a man who had risked his life and his freedom for millions, billions of Romulans who hated him. Me, a man who became a slur on the lips of the most powerful people in the Federation, all because I did what was right and not what was easy.

And here I was, hostage to Erit's whims, his holodeck schedule, his three-cocktail "braintrust" sessions with blowhards, which had neither brains nor much trust.

If this in itself was not an indictment of Janeway, what was? The corrupt powers of the Federation had empowered men like Erit and forced decent, justice-loving people like me to delicately help them preen, like an Egyptian plover cleaning between the teeth of a crocodile sitting in the afternoon sun.

After two weeks of patient waiting, I had not yet decided whether I was intentionally being stonewalled by a man who feared disrupting the peace with an inquiry into Voyager or Erit

simply had forgotten the whole thing after an afternoon bender or a sex party with some Federation judge.

So I called Sielox.

“Hello, Jason,” she said guardedly. She was obviously not happy to see me.

I didn’t care. “Listen, Sielox, you owe me and you owe me big. I don’t know if you played me with Lena or not, and it doesn’t matter anymore--the harm was done. And now I’m going to collect.”

“Collect how?”

“You need to get me the address of this family.” I sent all of the details I had on file.

“Last known location--Ktaris?” she said incredulously. “You want me to get personal information about a Ktarian citizen? Do you have any idea how difficult that is?”

“Difficult, yes, illegal, no,” I said. “You’re a journalist and you like traveling to other worlds. This sounds like a great assignment.”

She sighed. She knew she owed me. “Okay, I’ll try,” she said, clear resignation in her voice.

That was not good enough.

“Don’t remember, Sielox, I know you brought Lena to me, and I have the records to prove it.”

Then I went for the jugular. No I don’t regret it; I had to do it. For Tuvix.

“If you don’t really try to get this address, and I mean really, really try, I’ll see to it that you’re arrested for conspiring with a drug smuggler.”

Her eyes narrowed to slits; it was her turn to feel fury. “How dare you!”

“I am doing what is right,” I insisted. “No, you don’t know everything and I can’t tell you everything.” How could I trust her not to compromise my investigation? I couldn’t explain about Tuvix--sure, if I did, she’d understand the need to get the Wildmans, she’d be on my side fully, she’d help me as much as she could. Because it was the right thing to do. But I couldn’t tell her in case it compromised the case. Things were too sensitive now, too precarious.

“I’ll report back soon,” she said.

Chapter 34

A full month had gone by and Erit still clearly had no interest in pursuing justice, lazy git that he was. Fine--let him pickle himself in martinis in his office with the beautiful view while I *fixed the goddamn Federation*.

Sielox's message came in the morning just after I'd gulped down my second cup of replicated double espresso. It was pre-recorded--she clearly didn't want to talk to me. That was fine.

"I've found them," she said. "The coordinates are attached. They live south of the Arpasian Range, just outside of the farming town of Lower Kerrik. Godspeed, and don't contact me again. We're even."

I immediately beamed to the Americas transport station, booked a flight to Ktaris. There was a flight that day with an open seat, much to my dismay. It was a pretty short trip; I'd be back soon enough, no one would have time to miss me.

Chapter 35

An aquamarine farmhouse, approximately 12 meters by 20 meters, at the base of a massive snow-capped mountain that gave a sublime and stark contrast to the house's humble, traditional human architecture. It was connected to 5 hectares of moba crops, apparently imported from Bajor. Around those crops was a light forest of massive trees, the size of redwoods, spread apart; blue and red flowers carpeted the ground between them.

I had taken a traditional *klecknat*, a kind of crudely motorized groundbound vehicle that was reminiscent of the motor vehicles of the late 21st century; they were commonly still used on Ktaris, a planet that concentrated on agriculture, tourism, and nature. It was rare in the Federation as a world with no industrial manufacturing at all; no computers, ships, or engines were made here. Replicators were rare, with the majority engaging in a kind of old-world early-stage capitalism in which farmers met at local markets to trade wares.

Of course, much of this was theatre; Ktaris was a very advanced civilization and part of the post-scarcity Federation economy, with the credits and rights to space travel, land, food, healthcare, and so on therein. Many Ktarians went to Starfleet, as it was the most science-focused institution in the Federation, and such pursuits were not available on Ktaris.

Many saw Ktaris as an idyllic paradise, a more innocent and chaste Risa.

And colder.

While the southern hemisphere was not so chilly, Lower Kerrik was in an area with a climate similar to upstate New York. I had spent little time in such climes, and was not fond of them. My jacket protected me from the cold, but it still was a bit of a shock.

As it was still early morning here, I decided to take a walk to Lower Kerrik, both to get my blood circulating and to think through how I would approach the Wildmans. This required delicacy and care.

It was a little over a kilometer on a winding road to town, fortunately only slightly downhill, so the trip back would not be too exhausting. The cold air urged me to a brisk pace, though I'd never been a slow walker. The speed kickstarted my mind, and I thought through every word I would use with the Wildmans, careful not to frighten or upset them.

Lower Kerrik looked like a traditional Ktarian village, with curved roofs made of black needles stitched together over local adobe, which on this planet tended to be slate or grey. In Kerrik it was slate, but green timbers framing the house gave it some color, while abundant grass between buildings and over the surrounding meadows made the village more virescent, save for pale yellow flowers dotting the fields.

As I approached the town I felt I was too early; no one was here or, if they were, they were still asleep. The only sign of life I saw was from a building to my left, this built of white stone that had gone grey over the years from the elements. Dull, dirty white smoke came out of the chimney, but it seemed to come out too slow, as if defying the laws of physics. Or so was my human perception; perhaps the wood here burned differently.

The house's front door was ajar, and I heard fumbling inside. I was compelled to knock, but I don't know why. A man yelled for me to come, and I opened the door just enough to let me in.

Inside oil lamps lit up the dark room; three small windows on two sides were not enough to fully illuminate the place. An old man was hunched over a pile of quartered wooden logs, the light yellow fibers looking eerily familiar. The man wore a heavy dark blue sweater and had a full head of white hair. I could not see his face at first, but in profile as he hunched over I could see the Ktarian ridges.

"Sir, forgive me, I saw the smoke and thought to say hello," I said.

"No problem at all, none at all," he said, his voice broken and cracking, yet strong and confident. He didn't bother to look at me, still throwing wood into his hearth. To the side of the hearth was a collection of tools, including some very large hammers, a large anvil and a bucket.

"Please, fill that bucket, if you could," he said, nodding towards a large trough of water at the back of the room.

I walked to the back of the room, the creaking of the floor panels muffled by layers of thick wool rugs, and saw a small bucket with a rope handle at its top inside the trough.

And so I began pulling water, pouring it into one bucket so that I could pour it into another. Several rounds of this in silence as the man continued to throw wood into the fire.

Finally, my arms sore from the labor, the large bucket was full. I walked back towards the front of the room, closer to the front door, feeling somehow out of place at the back of the shop. I sat down on a bench near the front--a bench made of iron covered in layers of wool blankets. It still felt hard, causing me to shift in place.

The man threw two thick slabs of wood into the fire, causing a loud pop as the fire met with a pocket of sap. "There," he said, pleased, as the orange flames licked the wood.

My face was hot with the fire, but I did not turn away. I looked at the man as he stood up completely and, still without looking at me, turned to another corner of the room. "Tea?" he asked, as if he knew me, as if this was routine.

"Yes, sir," I said.

The old man lifted an iron kettle that had Ktarian symbols etched into its sides. I assumed he had made this kettle himself, but long ago; it was fully black with notable scorch marks where the fire had been too hot in places, the wooden handle worn and scorched too.

He poured tea into two small cups--I saw the water was already hot. The cups had thick ridges at the top and thinner ridges along the bottom.

He took one and handed it to me; it had no handle, and the hot cup burned my hand at first. As I held it carefully near the lip of the cup my hands cooled, then warmed again from the radiant heat of the tea.

He sat down opposite me at his workbench, sipping his tea. I sipped mine; it tasted of puh-er, a memory from childhood.

"You are human," he said.

"Yes, sir. My name is Jason." My rank seemed unimportant now. Starfleet seemed unimportant now.

"Nice to meet you," he said, and did not offer his own name. I did not ask. "What brings you to Ktaris?"

I did not know how to reply. "I am here to meet a friend."

"Good," he said, nodding, closing his eyes. "It is good to see Ktarians make alien friends." He drank more deeply of his tea, a feat I could not do. It was still too hot.

"I have met humans before," he continued, "some friends of my grandson. He's in Starfleet, you know."

"So am I," I said.

"Rekvis," the blacksmith replied. "Commander Rekvis."

"I must admit, I don't know him."

"Oh that's alright," he said with a chuckle. "Starfleet is a very big place, as my grandson has told me."

Had he been human, the blacksmith would be in his mid-70s perhaps. A weathered, spotted face, his wrinkles looked like ridges of a tree.

"He visits me often, tells me stories of space. Many hard to imagine stories, it seems crazy things happen in Starfleet," the blacksmith continued. "So many alien species out there, so many different voices. I can't imagine keeping track of them all."

"I don't think anyone does."

"Fortunately I cannot hear any of them in my smithy. Here there is just the work, and my friends in the village."

"Your friends?"

"Everyone in the village is my friend," he continued. "Some of us have known each other since we were children. I was born and raised here, and I shall die here. It is a blessed life to be from Kerrik. But I am proud of my grandson--very, very proud. Not many Ktarians have the nerve to leave the planet, let alone become a commander of Starfleet! And Rekvis has been all across the sector, even fighting against the Borg at Wolf 359. An explorer and a hero, not like his old grandfather. And yet he still comes to visit me whenever he can, and he always helps out with the shop. It's important, you know, to honor your ancestors. It's all we have, and without them we are nothing. My father was a blacksmith, as was his father; his father was a farmer, as were their fathers going back at least ten generations. All in Kerrik, all right here. But Rekvis always looked at the stars--he'd made a star map of the sector from eye observations alone by the age of 10. Just an incredible mind--a mind that my family has gifted the universe with." He paused, smiled to himself. "They should thank me, you know."

I smiled, nodded.

"Tell me, young Jason, what gifts did your father give you?"

I thought briefly. "When I was ten years old, my father gave me a programmable block set--it was made of a liquid metal alloy attached to a computer, so I could design plans and the alloy

would turn into different shapes. At first I made simple things like bowls or cubes, but I played with that thing for years, eventually making houses and rocketships.” I smiled. “I loved that toy.”

“Your father must have loved you for giving it to you.”

“He definitely did,” I replied. “He taught me a lot. When he first gave it to me I was so excited, I played with it for days on end. I remember when I opened the box at my birthday party I was so proud of it, I immediately went to show it off to my cousin. And my father immediately chastised me. He took me aside, leaned over so we were looking eye to eye, and he said, ‘Jason, never feel proud of what you own, because nothing that can be owned has any true value.’”

The blacksmith chuckled again, looking down at the leaves in his tea. “Your father sounds like a wise man.”

“Yes, sir, he is.”

“So what did he say has true value?”

I thought for a long moment, staring into the tea as if it could help kickstart my memory.

“I don’t remember.”

Suddenly the fire felt too hot on my right cheek, and I covered my face with my hand. The light of the fire was too bright. I’d only had half of my tea and worried it might be rude to not finish it, so I said, “sir, I must thank you for the tea, but I feel I’m getting in the way of your work.”

“Work gets in the way of people, not the other way around. Stay a while longer.”

And I obliged him, slowly sipping my still hot tea.

Chapter 36

The cool air outside was a relieving respite from the hot blacksmith’s shop, and as I stepped outside I heard the old man begin clanging away behind me. Per his request I left the door slightly ajar, and began to make my way back towards the Wildmans. I passed by a small inn, and through an open window I could hear musicians practicing--it sounded like two stringed instruments and a singer, a woman. I was startled to hear she was singing in English.

*She had a penknife long and sharp
Weela Weela Walya
She had a penknife long and sharp
Down by the river Saile.*

I did not stay to listen, though I did wonder if they were practicing for human tourists? I was not staying here tonight, so it was not for me, but perhaps other humans were coming later that day.

So as not to get too out of breath, I took the walk uphill slowly now, still warmed by the tea and the fire. It was now mid-morning and the sun, however distant and red in the sky, began to warm the air so that I could no longer see clouds of mist every time I exhaled.

It felt like no time at all until I was back at the aquamarine house, and I was now fully prepared for what was to come. Whether the Wildmans would side with me or not was in the air, and I was not foolish enough to be hopeful, but at the very least I was prepared for the encounter. I was calm.

I knocked on the front door with the iron knocker affixed to it, wondering if the old man had made it. I waited twenty seconds and got no response.

I tried again. Another twenty seconds, no response.

Were they not home? It was possible--I had no idea what lifestyle these two women led. I didn't even know if Naomi still lived here; she was now 18, old enough to leave home by Ktarian or human standards, though not old enough where it was expected. Was Samantha reunited with her husband, or had she remarried? And would her husband not take kindly to a strange human coming and asking about a former shipmate who had died years ago?

I had tried to prepare myself for all of these eventualities, but anxiety would override my plans every time I returned to these thoughts. And yet now, faced with the looming encounter, I was no longer anxious. I wasn't even worried. Whatever was going to happen was going to happen, and while I'd do my best for Tuvix, I had to assume failure.

A good minute waiting at the front door, and I decided no one was going to answer me. So I walked around the house to the backyard, which I saw was a fenced off vegetable patch, separate from the moba fields. I recognized some of the plants: there was Asian eggplant, and holy basil, and even a chestnut tree, already a good 10 meters tall. Ktarian soil was known for accelerating plant maturation, just as the air quickly matured the Ktarians themselves.

At the foot of the tree was Samantha Wildman, a trowel in hand as she was digging up weeds.

She did not hear me approach.

"Excuse me, ma'am," I said in a voice loud enough to get her attention but quiet enough not to startle her.

It worked. She turned around, looked up at me. "Hello?"

"I am very sorry to bother you," I replied. "But I have come all this way to Ktaris just to speak with you, and I was hoping you could give me a few minutes of your time."

"Well, I suppose so," she said, turning around to face me. "What is this about?"

"My name is Jason Li and I want to talk to you about Neelix."

"Oh, it's you," she said. "Chakotay told me all about you. I'm not interested." She turned around and went back to her weeding.

"Please," I pleaded, coming closer and squatting near her. "All I ask is you hear me out. I promise you I am not a madman."

"Madman or no, I have no interest in testifying that Janeway is a murderer. It's a ridiculous thought!"

"That isn't what I want," I lied. "I want to know more about Tuvix."

She sighed. "It was an unfortunate accident, that's all."

"Did you work with him?"

"With who?"

"Tuvix."

"Yes, I did, quite often. He was amazing."

"How so?"

"He had Neelix's sense of humor and Tuvok's discipline," Sam said, briefly smiling with the kind of memory that brings back both happiness for having had the experience and pain at having lost it. "I remember his food the most--it was delicious."

"It seems you have fond memories of him," I said. "Isn't that reason enough to try to get him justice?"

"Justice? There's no need for justice at all," she said quickly. "Yes I heard he was scared at being brought back to normal, but then Neelix and Tuvok were back with us."

"But let me just ask you this, if you don't mind," I said gently. "And I'm sorry, please don't think I'm trying to offend you, I am just trying to understand this--for my own sanity."

She sighed. "Go ahead."

"You seem to say he had the best of both worlds, in a way."

"Sure, in a way he did."

"Would you say you liked Tuvix better than Neelix and Tuvok?"

She laughed. "Absolutely not!"

Her laughter was loud and completely uncontrolled, as if I'd told her the funniest joke in the world. The response surprised me; I fully expected disagreement, but this was outside of normal parameters.

"Why not?"

"I loved Neelix," she said sharply. "Loved the man. No one in the alpha quadrant knows how good of a man he was. I have never met anyone as purely good as Neelix." This caught me by surprise. "Neelix took care of every single person on that ship, and he did it because he *wanted* to. In Starfleet you take care of your colleagues because there's a symbiosis; you make sure they don't die, they make sure you don't die. It's a harrowing job full of risks. And even if you don't like your coworker, you'll still jump in front of a phaser to make sure they live--and you expect them to do the same for you. If you betray that social contract, you're worse than a Klingon without honor--you're a devolved human."

I was startled, but said nothing.

"Neelix wasn't like us, all he ever wanted was to be a part of the Voyager family. He was the first one on the ship that realized we were a family--and he did everything he could to keep us together. That's why, when Naomi was born, he immediately made it his top priority that Naomi would have a happy childhood. And you don't know what that means to me," she said, her eyes watering. "Do you know what it was like to suddenly raise a child on a starship, 70,000 light years from home?"

I immediately sat on the ground and hugged her. It was an instinct--and as I did so she started crying even harder.

"I wanted to be a good mother to Naomi, she deserved it," Sam said, still crying. "But how could I be a good mother when my daughter wouldn't even see real blue skies? Oh, I was so scared."

I still said nothing.

"And Neelix, Neelix was there," she said, the crying now subsided and I gently let her go. "He was always there, even when he died, he was still there."

I knew what she was talking about--the time Seven of Nine saved his life with nanoprobes.

"Well, that makes sense, after he was revived--"

"You don't understand," she said, shaking her head. "Neelix was dead for almost a full day, one of the longest periods in Federation history--and definitely longer than any Talaxian. Neelix was a deeply religious man, his people had a belief in the Great Forest--he used to tell Naomi these stories all the time. It was their afterlife, and it was something he clung onto. He needed his faith, he needed to believe his sister was in a better place. And then when he woke up, he remembered nothing. There was no Great Forest, no Guiding Tree. No reunion with his beloved sister." She looked straight at me--straight past me, really. "Can you imagine what that must have been like? He cared for all of us because he couldn't care for his sister, and now he knew, absolutely knew, he would never see her again. And she was gone. Forever."

I looked down at my hands, ashamed.

"He didn't get angry, he didn't resent us, he didn't leave. And he didn't stop telling Naomi about the Great Forest."

I suddenly heard birds singing in the background.

"Why do you think I left Starfleet and moved here?" Here, of course, being a farmhouse in the middle of a forest.

I nodded.

"Naomi is going off to Starfleet next year--she and her stepfather are in Kerrik preparing a celebration. Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to get my gardening done so I can see my daughter off tonight."

Again, I nodded, and wordlessly got up to my feet. As I walked away, I felt ashamed, deeply ashamed at having disturbed Samantha Wildman.

Chapter 37

I was at the end of my quest, it was obvious. No one on Voyager felt Tuvix had been murdered, and if they did, they lived in denial or fought their inner sense of justice, letting loyalty win.

In some cases, like Chakotay, I could blame a sociopathic disregard for the sanctity of life. But in other cases, like with Ms. Wildman, it was blameless--motivated purely by love.

The flight home was a quiet one for me. I did not study my flowcharts, I did not outline new strategies to fight for Tuvix, I did not think of who I could interview next.

I thought mostly of my father and mother.

It was for this reason that I did something that I hadn't done for a while. I opened up my padd and checked my personal messages.

What I saw horrified me. There were 2,174 unread messages spanning 18 months.

I nearly dropped the padd onto the floor. How was this possible? Eighteen months of not checking my messages? I know it had been a while, but--

I frantically started scrolling. There were messages from Trevor, my mother, my sister, and Lauren. There were messages two years ago from Tora--Tora! I had completely forgotten about her. They all wrote subjects like "where are you?" and "why haven't I heard from you?" Lauren's last, from October 23rd, was titled: "Goodbye."

Jason, I want you to know that I will always think of you as my love. You are the love I lost, and I don't even know how or why it happened. For the last year you have been like a ghost, distant when we are together, and we are barely together because you're always away doing something or the other. Ever since you got back from the neutral zone I thought you were shell shocked, and I wanted to stay and support you. But you haven't spoken to me in days, and you hardly seem to notice if I'm at home or not. And so I need to seek a new life with someone who can love me as much as I love them. Whatever you are going through and however you are feeling, I hope you find peace one day.

Love, Lauren

The letter was nearly a month old and was written over two weeks before I left Earth for Ktaris. That meant I'd spent a fortnight at home, alone, without noticing Lauren had left. How was that possible? Surely that wasn't possible, surely my padd had been hacked or this was a trick, or something--

When I got home, I saw something I had not seen before, but which surely had been there for a long time. Layers of filth and mess had accumulated, in the living room, in the bedroom, in the study. Between layers of clothing and replicated food trays and dishes were itinerant spiders and other bugs native to Guatemala, requiring an extermination sweep after I'd recycled old uniforms, suits, and other clothing items I'd replicated but for some reason not recycled.

Not some reason. I knew the reason. I'd been too preoccupied with my work.

The time spent bringing Janeway to justice had meant time not spent on cleaning the house, watching holonovels or, for that matter, sleeping. And it had also meant time both not giving Lauren attention and not realizing she had given up on me.

And now I was alone with my plans to get Janeway.

This was the moment when I realized just how much I had sacrificed for justice. I went back to my padd, looked through my messages--there were messages of worry and fear from my mother, pleading from my father, and increasingly frantic questions of my whereabouts from friends. At the start of this period of missed messages were several invitations to parties, casual dinners, get-togethers with friends. Friends from school, friends from Kuala Lumpur, friends from the academy, the law society, the diplomatic corps. People and connections I'd picked up along the way.

The invitations faded over a couple of months, and by a year ago they had disappeared. Messages from friends, going from friendly invites to increasingly worried queries as to my whereabouts, faded to silence. Then it was just Lauren and my family; then it was just my family, until Lauren's goodbye message.

The connections were severed.

It was the weekend, so I could not go to work to distract myself from this loss. Instead I stayed at home, on my couch, and looked out at the lake.

I thought of the Great Forest, and I thought of Neelix dreaming of it every night on Voyager. I thought of him seeing his sister, running to hug her after years of being apart--her frozen in time by death, still young and beautiful, smiling as he embraced her, happy to be a part of his orbit once more.

And I saw Tuvok there, stoically standing beside the Guiding Tree, looking very much like a guide himself. Yet his stiff upper lip clearly softened as he nodded towards Neelix.

There were Tom and Harry, laughing and embracing Neelix, patting him on the back and welcoming him to the Great Forest where they had been waiting for him.

And there was Samantha and Naomi, the girl running up to him and hugging his legs tightly, as if scared he would disappear again if she let him go.

I was suddenly in a cold sweat and a panic, not knowing why. "Computer, hot toddy," I said immediately, cupping the drink in my hands carefully and sipping, as I did the blacksmith's tea just a few days ago. I looked into the amber liquid and let the hints of cinnamon tickle my nose, and I closed my eyes and desperately tried to remember what the blacksmith's fire on my cheek felt like.

I took three days off of work and stayed at home, rudderless and afraid. Family is family and I knew they would quickly forgive my absence, perhaps even fret over where I had been for so long. And my friends? Some, like Trevor, may simply pick up where we left off, but others might

be too offended at my prolonged absence. I had been a cur, ignoring their messages--not just ignoring. Forgetting people sent me messages at all.

I had been wrapped up in an obsession that had caused a lot of people a lot of hurt. I knew with no doubt in my mind that I had ruined what was supposed to be a wonderful day for Sam--the day she would see her daughter off to the Academy, when Naomi could spend an evening in the Great Forest with her Ktarian friends. Maybe some of Voyager's crew had gone to visit as well--maybe that's what the English-language singing was all about.

And my friends on Earth saw me disappear even as I gained notoriety and fame. Did they think I had abandoned them to hobnob with the upper crust? Did they feel insulted--and if they did, would they be able to forgive me? Would they believe me if I said, no, it was not my fame and my promotions that made me lose touch, it was my obsession with a dead half-Talaxian half-Vulcan you have never heard of and who died 70,000 light years away when I was a child? Who would believe such an absurd story?

But it was true, it was all true. I had done it to honor the principles of the Federation, which state above all else that life is priceless, and unique life even more so. I had done it so that a future Tuvix would not be callously murdered by a captain driven by wonton, arbitrary emotions. I did it so that all improper and questionable decisions made in the field would be properly analyzed and investigated by an impartial third party.

Suddenly a rage consumed me, and I threw my hot toddy to the wall, the glass shattering on impact. This wasn't my fault. It was Starfleet's fault.

It was Janeway's fault.

And if I let her get away, all of this would have been for nothing. How could I let this monster ruin my life, all because I was upholding the values of the Federation?

"Computer, are there any public functions scheduled that Admiral Katheryn Janeway will be attending?"

Chapter 38

The Interstellar Congress for Planetary Defense was a transunion partnership that had formed after the attack on Wolf 359. Their stated charter was to "openly share technological and strategic progress in the better securing of civilian worlds from interplanetary attacks from technologically advanced and unknown species." It was the first of its kind in having as members the Federation, the Romulans, the Klingons, the Orions, and the Ferengi. Several other non-Federation members were a part of it too, as the alpha and beta quadrants saw the urgent need to protect civilian populations from the Borg threat.

The ICPD was rightly credited for saving billions of lives in the Dominion War, as planetary defense systems had been improved by the first couple of years of developments that the ICPD shared amongst its members. That, some say, also helped create unions to fight the Dominion that otherwise would not have happened, which in turn meant there was more diplomatic enthusiasm behind the ICPD as a way of creating closer and longer lasting alliances in the alpha and beta quadrants than ever before.

But ICPD stuck very closely to its focus on technology, asserting it was an apolitical institution. That was not a controversial viewpoint, as just about everyone agreed that inserting politics into the ICPD would likely cause it to fall apart.

Thus ICPD's meetings were popular among scientists *and* the general public, which meant their public conferences tended to be full of presentations from attention-seeking admirals presenting on the research conducted by more introverted scientists, who were happy to stay behind the scenes.

The ICPD's 2391 Conference was at Starfleet Headquarters, the first Earth conference in nearly a decade, and it was given a German Christmas Market theme, since it was held in December. This meant an unusually popular crowd--a group of well connected people in the audience, and easily a hundred million watching the simulcast on Earth alone.

Erit of course was an invitee, and when I asked to join he ensured that I got a ticket as well. I had a standing area ticket (even Erit wasn't high enough to get me a chair), meaning I'd be in the back of the room. But that was fine.

It didn't matter. All that mattered is that I would be there, and so would Janeway.

The event itself surprised me. Being held just outside of Headquarters in the public side of the building, it was relatively open, with just a cadre of ticket-checkers at a makeshift turnstile set to the side of the large lawn, where white chairs had been set up facing a large stage where the panel would sit. When they checked my ticket, they did not scan me for weapons, which felt rather odd. This was a close-knit crowd of higher ups indeed; my collar had the least pips in the crowd.

When I got to the back of the lawn and stood behind the many rows of chairs, I looked up at the empty stage and did not blink. I could wait; I had been waiting for years.

Finally, this would all be over.

About fifteen minutes later, the panel all walked onto the stage to a loud applause. Unsurprisingly, they were all admirals save for one chief of research, who was himself a commander. However, he'd won the nobel prize for his theories on disrupting Borg shield adaptations, so his relatively low rank hardly put him beneath the others on the panel, even if he technically needed to address them all as "sir."

The host was Captain Robert DeSoto, and although he had top billing for the conference, the crowd's enthusiasm when he appeared was fierce. They leapt to their feet to give him a standing ovation as he approached the microphone. Known as one of the friendliest and most accomplished captains of Starfleet, he had refused promotions more times than anyone else in history to keep his chair onboard a starship. He was not often at public events like this, which made his appearance an even greater treat. I admit that even I was moved to see the man.

"Greetings, and thank you to all," he said. "It has been 26 years since Q forced our introduction to the greatest threat to the alpha and beta quadrants, the Borg. And while at first many on Earth were furious at this cruel introduction to a cruel species, we have come to be grateful. The Romulans, of course, had begun to brush up against this real threat to all of us, and if Q had not made it a central concern, the Borg may have successfully assimilated the Romulan Star Empire, the Federation, and everyone watching this today." I noted the diplomatic tactic of referring to the Empire as if it were still standing; DeSoto was a master.

"We should consider Q's gift an important lesson: sometimes we must face difficulties and make sacrifices to protect what we value the most. And that is what the ICPD is all about--giving us the tools that we can use to protect ourselves and the things we love."

Applause. It was a moving speech; I clapped as well.

"Today our panel is going to introduce us to some of the innovations that the ICPD's members have worked on, and how all of our governments can use those innovations to protect us from the many threats out there in the galaxy. I think you all will be impressed at what our scientists have done--and how fruitful it can be when we work together, as friends and allies." More applause. I was surprised; a few of the species in the ICPD were quite xenophobic, so this appeal to interspecies cooperation seemed a bit daring. But I doubt many would be offended, even among those xenophobic worlds.

"First I would like to introduce Fleet Admiral Kregg of Klingon, House of Dragh of the Klingon High Council."

Polite applause as the Klingon thanked DeSoto. His booming voice did not startle anyone in the audience; the ICPD was a group that made everyone feel safe and at ease.

Kregg spoke for thirty minutes, as did the Vulcan admiral who followed him. And then, DeSoto announced the third speaker.

"Next we will hear from an admiral that needs no introduction--someone who has done more to protect us from the threat of the Borg than anyone ever has. Few have beamed aboard a Borg Cube and lived to tell the tale; well, my next guest has been on several. Not just that, she has severed many Borg from the collective, and her crew's work with the Borg has helped us save many ex-Borg lives here at home. Over the years she has continued her work on developing

Borg defenses here on Earth, and I cannot help but wonder if, possibly, she has saved more lives than any other living being in the galaxy. Please, ma'am, we all eagerly await your words of wisdom!"

Unlike the other speakers, Janeway did not give her presentation seated at the table. Instead she stood up (and, as she did, so did everyone else seated), and as a roar of applause and cheers came from the crowd she walked over to the microphone stand at the center of the stage, which made itself a bit shorter to adjust to her height as she neared it. Everyone was clapping as viciously as they could, as if they were masochists trying to inflict pain on themselves.

I was likely the only one in the crowd who did not clap.

The applause did not stop as she motioned for the crowd to be seated--they loved her that much. She waved everyone down again with her right hand, and finally did everyone sit down.

I got a good look at her. She hadn't changed much since her Voyager days--at least not how I could tell from this distance.

She still had the near shoulder-length bob cut, with the light brown hairs curling inwards to frame her stern face with its strong chin. Even at this distance her blue eyes seemed to pierce through to the crowd as she looked around the room. And as if she knew why I was there, she did not once make eye contact with me.

"Greetings, everyone," she said as the crowd began to quiet down. As she spoke they finally took their seats.

"Today, I have an exciting project to talk to you about," she said immediately, "a project that my team has been working on for over five years, and that we are finally ready to begin implementing. Welcome to Project Blue Skies!"

As she said that a screen behind her lit up with schematics for what looked like a satellite system.

"In cooperation with a team at the Klingon Science Council and Qo'noS University, we have developed the PWPDS--the pre-warp planetary defense system."

The graphic on the screen zoomed into the planet, showing an iron age civilization from cloud-level.

"The PWPDS works on the simple premise that we can protect pre-warp civilizations without them knowing we are protecting them--and at a distance that, in their pre-warp spacefaring stage--they will still not know we are there. Combining Klingon cloaking technology with a multiphasic adaptive shield system, the PWPDS uses an array of satellites stationed along the

orbital plane of a system's outermost planet to patrol and combat any Borg vessels or weaponry that may begin to approach the system." At this point the graphic zoomed out to beyond the planet's atmosphere and outward past several planets, until the solar system's star was a distant speck. We saw the opaque outline of a dozen small satellites, indicating they were cloaked and thus invisible. "Powered by the energy from the system's star at this distance, the satellites are equipped with phasers in addition to the cloak, as well as a navigation system to keep it on track and a subspace beacon to stay in constant contact. The satellites can be programmed to transmit to all members of the ICPD or just the group that launches the satellites to the system, ensuring maximum privacy and control of territory."

The audience was aweing as she spoke, and I could not blame them. It was an impressive project.

She continued to outline the building process, estimated costs in resources and manhours, and the Federation's and Klingons' commitment to produce satellites for fifty systems over the next year.

"So, are there any questions from the audience?"

Finally, it was time.

Chapter 39

I raised my hand immediately, but so did several others in the crowd, and someone sitting in the middle of the audience was called on first. She asked some question about sharing cloaking technology. I ignored it.

Another audience member asked another question, this one more technical about the weapons systems on the satellites. Again I ignored.

Two more people got questions called, even as I kept my hand up the entire time. I was anxious and terrified at first, but now I was just annoyed.

"And one last question, from--you," DeSoto said, pointing to a Tellarite near the front of the crowd.

Unacceptable.

"Yeah, I have a question!" I yelled, stepping forward into the aisle so she could see me better. She looked straight at me (so, too, did just about everyone there). "Why aren't you in jail for murder?"

"What?" she said, half-laughing as she said it in stunned surprise.

“You killed Tuvix!” I screamed.

“Oh, shut the fuck up you fucking idiot!” I heard Fleet Admiral Kirsten Clancy yell from her seat onstage.

“You killed him!” I repeated. “He was a sentient being, fully alive and aware and able to speak and do things--he was a living being just as alive and as entitled to life as any of us! But there was just one problem, if he lived that meant two of Janeway’s crew could not live, although they were already dead, and so she told him that he would have to undergo a surgical process so that they could live. But Tuvix didn’t want to--he wanted to live! He told them he wanted to live! The Doctor refused to do it! ‘Do no harm,’ the Hippocratic Oath says, and this was doing harm!” At this point security had arrived and had grabbed me by the arms. “She murdered an innocent being no less than if she ordered anyone here to give up their heart or kidneys so they could be put in someone else’s body, against their wishes. MURDERER!” I screamed. At that point I now broke free and started running toward the stage. “MURDERER! ANSWER FOR YOUR CRIMES!”

And that’s when two more security staff jumped in front of me, wrestled me to the ground, and put me in restraints.

Chapter 40

I’d been in jail before, so I knew the drill--the intake process, the questions, the examination, the clothes, the cell. It was a different cell in a different part of the galaxy, but somehow it smelled the same. The smell of imprisonment.

No one spoke to me after my intake, and I was put in a solitary cell with no windows, just the force field keeping me in and everyone else out. Outside of my cell was a hallway and a wall of duranium, painted white. There was an LCARS console with very limited access, and no messaging operationality. A bed, a toilet, a shower, a small desk by the wall, a chair.

My new home.

It didn’t matter, of course. Finally, the world knew about Tuvix and what Janeway had done, and even if I was arrested and jailed (on what charges? Disturbing the peace? Attempted assault?), at the very least the public knew--everyone knew. A hundred million people at least had heard of Janeway’s crime, and I refused to believe that every single one of them would think she was innocent. Especially coming from me--the man who had saved the Federation from a Cardassian plot and who had bravely sacrificed his career for Romulan refugees when no one else would stand up for them. If nothing else, that had to get at least some sliver of the population to take what I said seriously.

There would be an investigation now. Janeway would finally need to explain herself, and justice could be served.

There would be another investigation, though--and that would be against me. I hadn't been formally charged yet (that would have to come soon, though; they couldn't hold me for more than 24 hours without charge), and already I knew what would happen. After all, this was all part of the plan.

They'd look for weapons, bombs, anything--they'd find nothing. They'd already seen I had no weapons on me, and surely a sweep of the area showed nothing of any danger at all. Then they'd go to my home, which I'd kept meticulously spotless--no signs of madness there. They'd look through my personal computer and my padd, they'd see I had thousands of unread messages from a full personal com--but there was nothing illegal about neglecting people. If anything, they might use it to determine I was not of sound mind and demand I be held for psychiatric evaluation.

None of that mattered, not now.

I was given my charges within three hours of arriving; there were two: obstructing official Starfleet business and attempted assault. The former was a misdemeanor, the latter a gross misdemeanor; maximum penalty for both would be a year and a half in prison.

I'd already spent eighteen months destroying my life for what was right; I could handle another eighteen months.

Honestly, I laughed at the charges--insignificant, inconsequential. But at the same time, I could not help but feel a need to tell the Federation that these charges were unjust. Why? Because I was fighting for the life of a man who never had anyone fight for him--not even his close friends and colleagues.

And that is why I am writing this letter to you. It is crucial that you know everything. If you are a lawyer, you are one because you care about justice. You don't care about the law--the law is only a means to the end. The end is a just and fair universe. And maybe you think imprisoning me for a year and a half is just, that's fine. I really don't care. Maybe you think charging me with more crimes is just, again it doesn't matter.

What matters is you understand that Janeway must face justice, like me.

Yes, she's an admiral, yes she outranks me. But we are all Federation citizens, and this is the 24th century. We are a society of rules, and laws, and mercy, we do not let admirals kill individuals because they are admirals. Do not set the clock back six hundred years because Janeway is a celebrity.

Do the right thing. For Tuvix. For *us*.

My lawyer visited me the morning of my second day--Sir Thomas Fennick, one of the most decorated and respected lawyers in the quadrant. I had attended guest lectures of his at the Academy, and in any other circumstance I may have been stunned to see him in person. Of course, being a public defender on Earth is the top of the legal profession, a job reserved for the most qualified, successful, esteemed legal minds in the Federation. So I had expected to get a defender I knew and respected, but I had not expected to get one of the best legal minds alive.

As he approached my cell the force field dropped and a table and two chairs materialized in the center of the cell. He stepped in with two padds, put them on the table, and introduced himself as he sat down.

"I know who you are," I responded quickly. "I attended your lecture on the history of theft in pre- and post-scarcity societies."

"Ah, yes, at the Academy a few years ago, I do remember that--a fun topic," he said. "I am aware of your legal background, of course. Shall we begin?" He motioned to the chair in front of him. I sat in it.

"You are being charged with two relatively minor charges, which is a stroke of luck," he continued. "Technically an attack on the conference could be seen as an act of sedition, and the assault an attack on a senior officer. It appears they're going soft on you, probably due to your own reputation."

I smirked. "Or they're going soft on me because they're scared."

Fennick raised an eyebrow. "Oh?" he said, his Kensington accent wilting with condescension.

"Yes, sir," I replied. "I won against a cadre of admirals on the wrong side of history, and I can do it again."

"Do you mean to say you intend to fight this?" he asked.

I nodded. "Why shouldn't I?"

"Well quite simply because you will lose," Fennick replied. "As you are most certainly aware, there are several million eyewitnesses to your attempted assault, and your charging the stage is unquestionably probable cause for the arrest and a conviction."

I sat in silence, unsure of what to say.

"You would be best to keep your mouth shut during this ordeal and plead insanity, that way you can get a room at a psychiatric hospital," he said. *And get the help you need*, he seemed to be suggesting.

"I am not crazy!" I demanded. "I did what was right."

"If you thought Tuvix was murdered," Fennick continued, "and you very well have some grounds for such a belief, you should have used the proper channels."

"I did," I said, defeated. "Trust me, I tried." I then told him what I've told you--about the visits, the attempts to get a complaint made, to get the GP to investigate, and my frustrated efforts along the way.

"Just how long have you been trying to get Janeway?" he asked.

"Three years."

Fennick's eyes widened. "That...is an awfully long time to avenge the death of a total stranger."

"Avenge?" I said incredulously. "No, not avenge. Justice. This was always about making sure the Federation stayed true to its principles and did not bend for a powerful woman because she's loved. That's called corruption, and it is wrong."

"Your argument has merit, for sure," he replied, "and that is why you should have used the proper channel--"

"Aren't you listening to me, goddammit?" I demanded. "I did. I tried."

"Did you never think to file a police report?"

I stared at him. "Are you serious?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"The police--on Earth? Starfleet Internal Affairs? Earth police are incompetent--they're used to handling disputes between tourists and merchants, there hasn't been a murder committed by an Earth citizen in nearly five years. And IA? An Ensign files a report against an Admiral? They'd laugh at it and file it away." I shook my head. "No. The only way I could make sure it got the proper attention it deserved is if I was doing the investigation."

"To me," Fennick said dryly, "that sounds rather like corruption."

I stared into his black eyes. He meant no ill will at all; if anything, he was a legal mind thinking through the merits of my case and my approach. I couldn't blame him for his questions any more than I could immediately say he was wrong.

"Sometimes," I said lamely, "you have to do what you can to do what's right."

“Justifications are rarely needed when your cause is just,” he replied.

After a pause, he continued, “my advice is that you say nothing--if the prosecutor asks for an interview, insist that I am present, but say nothing. If they are willing to make an offer they will inform me, but when we have a trial date my advice is for you to plead guilt and beg for the court’s mercy. I can submit as evidence your personal message history and ask that the court order you to six months of psychiatric rehabilitation. Even if you are not crazy,” he added, belatedly.

I did not reply. I knew this was the best outcome, but I really was in no mood to strategize my defense. I wanted to know what was happening with the Tuvix controversy.

“Please, tell me,” I said, “what’s happening with Tuvix?”

“What do you mean?” he replied.

“I told the world Janeway killed Tuvix. Is there an investigation? Are people demanding one?”

Fennick shut off his padd. “I think it best if we don’t discuss such matters before the trial.”

Chapter 41

Later that day, Erit came to visit me--a visit that honestly caught me off guard.

“Jason,” he said as he tsk’d me. “What have you done?”

He looked genuinely worried and confused--this was a man that did not understand fighting the power structures when they were wrong; indeed, the idea of the system making a mistake was beyond his comprehension. It wasn’t that he was evil--the truth was much more banal. He was stupid.

“Hello, sir,” I said curtly. If I was supposed to be embarrassed by my situation, I did not show it. After all, I wasn’t. “What can I do for you?”

He laughed. “Do for me? How about an explanation, for starters! You were to be my successor, you know that? You had an amazing career in front of you.”

“I don’t care about careers.”

“Then what do you care about?”

“I care about doing the right thing.”

“And how is this right?” he asked. “How is ruining your life and your future right?”

"How is letting Janeway get away with murder--"

"Oh come off it," he said, irritation creeping into his voice. "She didn't kill anyone and you know it."

"And everyone thinks that?" I demanded.

He laughed. "Look, you've caused quite a stir--"

Yes! Success! I leapt to my feet. "Is there an investigation?"

"What?" he said, confused. "Of course--you're facing two--"

"I mean of Janeway."

He looked at me blankly. "I can't believe you're still--"

"Just tell me!" I demanded. "Look, I've sacrificed so much for this. Just tell me: is Janeway being investigated for killing Tuvix?"

A long pause.

"I cannot believe you would destroy your career over something so...unimportant."

"So unimportant!" I demanded. "So unimportant as the life of an innocent individual? You're no better than Janeway--why, I'm sure you'd join her and bathe in his blood if you could. Get out of my sight!" I yelled, but it was too late--he had already turned away and was walking away from me. "Rot in your goddamn office with your whiskey and your golf buddies, worthless coward!"

Chapter 42

I had written most of this letter in the first week of my incarceration, and suddenly I had another visitor. I could not believe it, but the voice woke me up from a nap. I winced at the lights from the hallway as I turned around, and there with arms crossed staring straight at me, was her.

"Hello, Lieutenant," Janeway said, staring straight at me.

"Have you come here to gloat?" I demanded.

"Actually, I came to tell you how much I admired you," she replied softly. That was not what I was expecting. I sat up. "What you did took real guts. I just want to know why you did it."

"I did it for Tuvix," I said softly.

"Tuvix is still alive--in Tuvok and Neelix. And in my memory. Do not think for a moment that I am not pained at the decision I made that day. It still pains me."

"Then why did you do it?"

She sighed. "Can I join you?"

I nodded.

She lowered the force field and stepped into the cell. The field stayed down, much to my surprise. She took the chair, turned it around, and sat next to me, facing me, eye to eye.

"I don't expect anyone who wasn't there to understand just what happened to us," she said. "We were a family, and I was their mother. I'd never expected to be a mother, yet there I was. And a mother cares for the lives of her children above all else."

"With all due respect, Admiral," I replied.

"Call me Kathryn," she said.

"Kathryn..." I said painfully, the oddness of calling an admiral by her first name was too much for me, even after everything I'd been through. "I can understand your need to take care of your crew, but that doesn't justify murder."

"Let's say I had killed Tuvix," she replied. "You know what? I would be fine with that--I would have killed anyone to protect my crew. I did that, on many occasions. Kazon, Vidiians, Borg--many lives were lost so that Voyager could make their way home. But I did not kill Tuvix, and you will never make me believe I did."

"How did you feel when he begged for his life on the bridge?" I demanded.

"Hurt," she said. I slumped--it was the last word I'd expected. "Hurt because I knew Tuvix was scared, and hurt because I knew I had to hurt him for his own good. He was a good man--how could he not be? He had the best of two of my finest crew."

"Was Neelix your finest?" I asked, honestly surprised. I knew the Wildmans loved him, but did Janeway?

"Even Tuvok eventually learned that Neelix was one of our finest," she said quickly. "He did more to keep us together than just about anyone else, and all of us were sad when he left us. I still think of him often."

"So you killed Tuvix for Neelix?"

"Yes. And Tuvok. And Tuvok's family," she continued. "Before I boarded Voyager, T'Pol messaged me to ask for a status update for her husband. To hell with what the Vulcans say, she was worried." Janeway quickly smiled. "I told her that everything was going according to plan and I would rendezvous with him soon. I also told her that I would bring her husband back safely--I promised her I would."

"And you think that justifies killing Tuvix?" I demanded. "Even when he pleaded for his life?"

"I took his pleas seriously," Janeway said curtly. "I considered his position. Just before I made my decision, Kes came to me. I hadn't expected it and I was surprised to see her. She'd come to me a couple days before, telling me Tuvix had said he was in love with her. And at the time I felt so bad for her--caught in this muddle, and Tuvix didn't help at all by dragging her in further. But I told her not to give up hope."

She smiled. "I told her I thought of Mark, dreamed of him all the time. And the dreams felt so real--and then I'd wake up. I can't tell you how painful those moments were--and I realized that Kes was enduring something just as painful, and at such a young age." Janeway sighed. "I knew then I had to do everything I could for this poor young girl."

"And that's when you decided Tuvix must die," I said.

"Not in the least," she said quickly. "That was before we knew we could even restore Tuvok and Neelix. No, I realized that I was dealing with a lot of conflicting interests at that moment, and that I could not just so easily restore Tuvok and Neelix like it was some official order to an officer. No, this was much more than that."

I was surprised--so often had I heard the argument that she had given an order to save two lives, and here Janeway was saying the exact opposite.

"I realized that I had to weigh the voices of two men, then silenced, against one man, who had a right to live," she continued.

"And you decided to choose the voices of two men who were already dead," I replied.

"After we saved Seven of Nine, she pleaded with me to let her go. She begged to be sent back to the Borg, to be a drone. And I didn't listen to her, because I knew she wasn't speaking as her true self. The same was true of Tuvix. He was not in his right mind--"

"You don't know that!" I demanded. It was not a question.

"As I thought the whole thing over, after I found out we could separate them, I thought of the implications. My first instinct was to do it, even after Tuvix said he didn't want to be split. After all, I thought, if Tuvok and Neelix wanted to remerge, we could get another orchid and replicate

the accident,” Janeway said. “But then I thought, no, there was no way to know that that Tuvix was the same as this Tuvix--and this Tuvix had a right to exist, just as the rest of us did. That’s when I started to think I could not order him to be separated.”

I was stunned--I had hardly expected this.

“I want to tell you something,” Katheryn said, “something I have not told anyone ever--I didn’t even record it in my personal log.”

I waited, silent.

“I was thinking the problem over in my ready room, and I was nearing a decision. Then Kes came to see me.”

She took a moment; the memory was clearly not easy for her.

“I have never told anyone what she said to me--not even Chakotay, not even Tuvok or Neelix. Kes told me that Tuvix had asked her to speak on his behalf. ‘But I can’t,’ she told me. And she burst into tears.” Janeway’s voice cracked. “I embraced her; I tried to comfort her. But no one could comfort that poor girl at that horrible moment.”

Janeway’s eyes fell to the floor as she remembered what happened next. “Kes told me, ‘I don’t know how to say goodbye to Neelix and Tuvok. I know this sounds horrible, and I feel so guilty for saying it, and Tuvix doesn’t deserve to die, but I want Neelix back.’ Those were her exact words--I will never forget them.”

The air lay thick in the cell with the weight of what she had just said. And what she said next weighed us down even further.

“That was when I decided to order Tuvix to die.”

She did not look up. I could tell she was fighting back tears.

“I saw so many good men and women die on Voyager, so many had to die, so many I could not save,” she went on. “But I could save Tuvok and Neelix. And that’s exactly what I did.”

With that she inhaled deeply and looked at me again.

“Just as you are willing to go to prison for what you believe, I am willing to sacrifice whatever it takes for what I believe. And I believe giving Neelix and Tuvok their lives back was worth whatever sacrifice it took. I don’t care if you think I murdered Tuvix or not. All I care about is my children. And I got them back.”

And with that she stood up.

"I wish you good luck, Lieutenant Commander."

She left the cell and I was once again alone, with no company but the faint hum of the force field in front of me.

Chapter 43

It took another two days for the counselor to show up. I knew this was standard practice for defendants held in custody, and since the trial had not yet been scheduled I'd expected a counselor to show up any day now. Their job would be to investigate my mental state and determine if I was fit for trial; standard stuff. But I was not prepared for what happened.

"Jason, what have you gotten into," I heard the familiar voice say.

I'd been eating breakfast at the time, facing away from the hallway. I turned and there was Trevor, in enlisted uniform.

"Trevor!" I exclaimed. "What...what..." I couldn't get the words out.

"What am I doing here?" he said helpfully. "Really I should be asking you that. What has happened to you?"

The weight of everything fell on my shoulders at that moment. My stomach started to tie itself up in knots and I felt an urge to cry. I was deeply, deeply ashamed.

"Trevor.." I said, and then I lost control.

He immediately embraced me, patted my back. "Buddy," he said softly, "what happened?"

As I gained composure, he handed me my glass of water. I took a deep drink, then a deep breath.

"First," I said, "what are you doing here?"

"Isn't it obvious," he said, his tone more sarcastic than a question. "I took your advice and became a counselor. If you'd read your messages over the last two years you'd know that."

"Eighteen months," I corrected him.

"Oh," he said. "What a good friend you are." Then he laughed.

And I laughed. It was the first time I'd laughed since I'd been in jail, the first real heartfelt, unironic belly laugh in my time here. It was the first moment of real joy I'd had since I'd got here--it was the first moment of real joy I'd had in a long time.

"But you know me," I said. "Isn't that a conflict of interest?"

"Well, yes," he said, "but conflicts of interest are tolerated if they favor the defendant, unless there is a formal complaint by the victim or prosecutor. And there hasn't been one yet."

That surprised me.

"Janeway," he said helpfully. "Janeway got me assigned to your case. It's my first case, by the way; I graduated last week."

That stunned me. Of course there was no way for a fresh out of school counsellor to be assigned to a high profile case--that is, unless strings were pulled. And Janeway had pulled those strings. To protect me.

I didn't know what to say or what to feel. Confusion perhaps could best describe my mental state, combined with exhaustion.

"So let me ask you again, buddy," he said. "What happened?"

And I told him everything. Everything I've told you. All of it.

He listened to my story, first with patient eyes, then with interest, then with intensity.

"That's a goddamn crazy story," he said.

"It's all true. All of it."

"Oh I don't doubt you," Trevor said. "And that's why I'm going to recommend that you are not fit for trial." He smiled, patted me on the back, stood up. "Don't worry, man, you're in trouble but your life isn't over. My recommendation will probably go through, and I expect you'll face a few months of out-patient psychiatric oversight. You'll be home soon enough."

He left the cell and, just as he was walking away, turned back. "Don't forget--you owe Janeway for this."

I grimaced.

"And when you get out, let's meet for drinks--we got a lot of catching up to do."

That was about an hour ago. After he left my cell I opened up this letter and read through it. I could keep it to myself and go home, thanks to the graces of a corrupt Admiral pulling her corrupt strings. I could go eat steak in Argentina and go for a walk in London and drink wine in Tuscany and visit my family in Malaysia. I could maybe even find Lauren and beg for her forgiveness. I could put Tuvix past me and go rejoin polite Federation society.

I know that's what you want me to do. I know that's what Janeway wants. It's what *all* of you want.

And it seems like my choices now are to do what all of you want or do what I want. What is it that I want? To tell the truth, to have the real story recorded for posterity.

Do I delete this letter, abandon Tuvix's memory, and go free? Or do I send it and risk the greater wrath of a furious Federation that a poor simple law clerk dares question?

Does it even matter? Now you have me. You have complete control. You decide my fate. You can decide to imprison me for telling the truth. You can suppress what is right and protect a murderer. I know my choices are limited. Years in prison or go join a society that pats itself on the back for being good and just--who cares if there are some dead bodies along the way?

Trevor has probably told you by now I am not mentally fit for trial and punishment, but I am. I am fit. But you know who isn't fit? You. Your laws. Your system. Your corrupt, corrupt system designed to protect a murderer just because she is one of you. Fine. Stamp on the weak and powerless as we try to protect ourselves from you homicidal maniacs. In the end, it won't matter. Because the arc of the universe bends towards justice, as a great man once said, and one day, someday, eventually I will have what you deny, and what the universe deserves.

I will have justice for Tuvix.