



Avalar

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She could smell the death of that place. The ashes had fallen to the ground, and the rains had returned with a simple shift of fronts. The scars remained, sunk into the dirt and rocks, where the ashes had likewise crept. It would all now fertilize the soil, the ashes of the forests and farms, the animals...the people.

Her dark eyes took in the barren plain below, the amber wasteland. Straightening, pulling up her chin, she breathed again. That smell was sweet in a way, as soil could be after a rain, like wet wood. The itself air was dry, however. The scorched earth had sucked that water in, in desperation, in need, and was burrowing in. Death would bring new life. She believed that more than ever, then. She had to.

The wind picked up, sweeping up the hill to where she stood and beyond to the slope behind her, sweeping the hem of her tunic and strands of her hair, then the fire-dried grasses and coaly dirt. She didn't blink.

The plain lay barren, but she could see it green again, teeming with trees, bright moss and birds. In the nether regions of that blighted world, those things and more survived. Water still flowed on the planet, even through the clearing they stood upon, trickling down into the valley. Not everything had been laid to waste. There was water. There was sun. There was hope.

"It'll grow back," she stated.

"How can you be so certain?" her captain challenged.

Her small smile grew. "I just believe it."

"You have to be crazy. How can you think of making a life here right now?"

She said nothing at first, releasing her crossed arms, raising her eyes to feel the yellow sun, which was partially blocked with heavy cirrus clouds. Only the day before, the clouds were still gray with soot. The breeze did not slow, but her face grew warm. Her heart began to quicken; her senses piqued. She could see it all over again, everything it could be.

"We need to be here."

She turned from the view and walked into the court of her new yard. There, she found her husband.

He was kneeling on the dirt as he studied the A-frame house. Some walls were missing, others were cracked, there was no power. It had been blackened with fire on one side. As she watched him

continue to assess it, his eyes showed little, but she knew how to read him.

She remembered the ghostly look on his face when the confirmation they knew would come finally came. She laid with him at night, calmed him when he awoke, shaking with memories refreshed by a horror they couldn't prevent. Night after night in their small bunk since the day it happened, he woke up the same way, and she put him back to sleep, holding him near, whispering to his ear. They were okay. It would be okay. He would be okay.

She read to him, caressed him and ached for him and prayed in what ways she did pray that he would get back to sleep. He held her warm, kissed her and thanked whatever powers there were that she was. Regardless, his sleep remained unstable.

Not a week after the attack, Tom Paris and B'Elanna Torres rerouted to Avalar. He needed to see it; he needed to help if anyone needed help. He needed to try to put it behind him. Seeing the land for herself, B'Elanna shook her head. She told him they should stay there and rebuild with the others what they could of that world. She told him he needed to do it, to see the planet grow back, as he had grown back, survived, recovered. She needed to help there too, though her only memories of that planet had come from him. She had seen similar planets left to smolder and smelling of death, though, and that was enough. Staying there was the only way to redeem that tragedy and ease their powerlessness to prevent it.

Hand in hand, they treaded the barren soil. It was freshly wet with rain but hard with ash. They said little. They found some of the survivors their sensors had picked up and contacted the Liberty for help. Then they went to work.

As that long first day began to fade, B'Elanna pressed Tom to take her back to the foothills. There, she saw a small structure high on the fire-stripped slope. Treading up a path littered with rubble from the blast, her eyes searched curiously ahead. But Tom knew where they were going. After a half hour of ascent, they found Mila Morgan's guesthouse.

Standing before it, staring at it, they wondered aloud how it could ever be fixed.

"Then again," Tom continued, "we could say that about the rest of Avalar."

They walked around. Seeing the lake above was indeed still there and the stream flowing down from it still trickled past the other side of the house, B'Elanna looked back at the little A-frame again. "The frame's still in tact," she said.

"We could mask the holes for now," Tom added and peered down at her. "How about we clear some of this rubble away, see what's under it?"

She immediately removed her vest and tunic.

They worked until they had no more light.

Two days later, she didn't know why she couldn't call it a crazy idea to claim that place as home. More than a few of their comrades from the Liberty had said they were insane, but she'd easily ignored them. A good portion of them just didn't want to be stuck with her job, and the others simply couldn't understand. That was partially her fault, though. She wasn't quite ready to explain their latest impulse, either, and she knew Tom wouldn't bother to in the first place. Their comrades would just have to figure it out for themselves.

Tom turned a quick grin her way when B'Elanna knelt beside him on the blackened ground and placed

her hand on his. She watched his eyes as they returned to the house. The sun crossed his face, brightening his expression, negating the shadows.

In her soul, somehow she knew that planet's sun would take the shadows away forever.

"What do you think?" she asked.

Tom took a breath, taking in the scent of the earth in his own turn, then nodded at the house again. "The slate slabs can be transported up with the Marseilles, put them in by hand. We don't need an anti-grav, just a few hands.... We should transplant some trees, too." He shrugged. "Wouldn't be right to have a yard without trees."

B'Elanna smiled. "I think so, too."

Beginnings

51041: Three years later

"How can we believe the likes of you? You raised the trouble all around the region and left us to dust once already! How can we trust you?"

The Maquis captain breathed deeply to stay his patience. He'd been through that conversation before and didn't intend to stop until that personal mission was done. He was still indebted, and he knew those people were, too.

At the front of the small meeting hall, which the strange old man had swiftly taken control of, the captain steeled his voice and again addressed the unofficial leader of those farmers, too busy to shake his head at the irony of his situation. But at least they came to hear you, he reminded himself. Don't forget the importance of this; keep it together.

"The Cardassians are launching a new offensive," he began again, "I've already told you why and how--and even the Federation can't stop the Dominion now. They will come. Soon. The only way to save this world is to leave it deserted. Power it down so they think nothing is here. They will come only for your lives, because that's all they're after. They've already taken other innocent colonies, including my homeworld. They've even cleared a couple of their own colonies where they think underground movements began. They are clearing the DMZ planet by planet, and they don't care who you are or whether you've fought a day in your life. They will kill you."

He'd spoken as passionately as he could, but maybe his face would help his argument, too. They needed to be afraid. Then again, he also knew those people had already seen their world devastated. By their quick recovery, he could tell they were still seasoned to threat.

So was he, more than his heart could bear. He had lost everything, and so would they if he did not act. They needed more, though, to make them act.

"Must I beg you?" he continued. "Must I lower myself so far to convince you I'm telling the truth? I would not have risked coming here if--"

"Sorry I'm late," came a woman's voice from the back of the meetinghouse. "It's hard getting the twins into bed this early..." She silenced as soon as she looked forward.

The captain froze, too. The pretty, dark-haired matron was staring right at him. Most people did not do that, but flinched once and tried to avoid him. Out of habit alone, he turned his own gaze away.

She did not. She could not look away to look at him and know without asking what was. "What is happening here?" she asked slowly.

"This Rodrigo fellow says we've got to pack up and relocate," said the old man at the front table.

She looked at another neighbor. "Is this true?"

She took the news from her friend in less than a minute. As she listened, she unabashedly turned her gaze back to the man with the black leather trousers and vest, soot stained shirt and scars. *The poor creature*, was all she could conclude. She did not recall him but by name, now. The man's face was striped with fire, twisting his mouth oddly, deforming one of his ears and defining a bit too clearly the lines of his face. His face and neck were imprints of an explosion. She could only imagine the pain he had endured.

Then she heard the news that man had brought and felt her heart sink with dread, much as she was not at all surprised. So, she thought numbly, *it truly *has* come to pass, just as they predicted...* She closed her eyes for a moment, drew a slow breath to stave off her tears. But then she remembered the warm little bodies she'd covered not ten minutes ago, and the man's soft head, which she'd kissed before breezing out her front door.

They knew it would come, and yet they'd had their plan for it, too.

She breathed again.

"Captain," she said as she slowly met his gaze again, "my friends have reason to distrust you, as do I. But I will hear you. Please tell me what I've missed."

"You will?" His question was almost youthful in its surprise, his dark eyes brightening with that slight possibility of success.

"I have heard of you," she told him.

And so he repeated his purpose: to help them leave, escape an undeniable force and possibly even save their world when it was done. "If they pick nothing up on their sensors, no life, no power, they will more likely ignore it. But their sensors are very good, we've had an impossible time tricking them when normal Cardassian technology we could get around." He looked around at the large group there, the heat returning to his voice as he tried focused on the whole group. "The Federation is fighting back--and not only the Cardassians, but the Maquis, too. This DMZ will soon be very militarized on all sides. You'll be right in the middle of it. The only way to save yourselves and what you have here is to leave it. Come with us to one of our secure camps until our transport ship comes. My crew is willing to give themselves up to the Federation if necessary, but you won't be imprisoned for being colonists. You can go somewhere else until this all ends. But you will be alive and your children will be alive."

She held her hand up to him, ceasing his pleas. "You needn't go any further than that. I believe you."

"Ha!" barked the gruff old man. "That's just what it is, you know--scare tactics!"

"Now, Eric, why would this man have risked his life to bring us lies? Would you eat plasma rather than that caltola you've been fattening yourself with off the Parises' land? They would love to hear you

call all their advice 'scare tactics.'"

The reminder of the Parises silenced the room and earned the captain's gaze again in the same moment.

"You remember them?" he asked softly.

She nodded. "They were friends to us in the short time they were here. I remember you through them." She moved into the meeting hall completely then, heading forward. "We wouldn't we living so well had they not come, had they not given so much of themselves. We wouldn't have this very room, our power, our replicators, our atmospheric stabilizers--likely even our homes wouldn't have recovered had they and their friends not helped, if they hadn't risked their lives and their ship to get those things for us."

She had moved to the front of the room by then. Upon her pause, she reached out and took the man's hand with a sad, sisterly, smile. "Captain, we both know that B'Elanna and Tom would roll in their graves to think Avarar had been destroyed again. I wouldn't particularly enjoy having to rebuild again, either; I doubt any of us would. So, I will do what I can to convince my stubborn neighbors to follow your good advice."

"Thank you," the captain breathed. If there had been one world he'd wished to save that he could save, it was that one, and not just for their dead friends. He was certain he remembered the woman before him. B'Elanna had spoken of her neighbor the last time he saw her, when she laughed and talked about how Tom was handling fatherhood. He briefly recalled her being at the house when he had ferried some parts there, and B'Elanna joking about the replicator; she was anxious for Tom to arrive so she could get regular home-generated meals again. They'd laughed, and three years later, he drove down the lump that formed in his throat with an odd ease he'd learned since losing all his friends on the Liberty.

"You can't be serious," said another woman, approaching the two. "After everything we've done to recover! You of all people belong to this land. You were born here and you'd swore to die here no matter what came upon us."

"That much is true and I still mean that." The lady smiled gently. "But I'm a parent, now, and I also remember, Prisva, something B'Elanna told me. Well, two things: one being that the action in the war would eventually come back to us. She and Tom both said it would happen, and now we see they were right. But also, I remember she said that sometimes, the only way to fight one thing is to sacrifice the rest. She and Tom did a lot of that."

"And look where it ended them up," said another man, perched forward his seat, his narrow eyes set hard on his neighbor.

"Yes," the lady pressed, "locked in our memories as two who gave themselves to and away from this place. Had they been any more selfish, Jack, they'd be right here arguing along with me--and I'd say Tom would do a much better job of convincing you. He was good at that."

The captain chuckled. "Yes, he was."

She enjoyed a light laugh at that, too, a memory shared between strangers being no less pleasant. Soon, though, it faded as she addressed her friends, many of whom she'd known since girlhood.

"They gave their lives," she added, bucking up her unsteady nerve as she spoke. She tried hard to

inspire herself with the memory of her friend, trying to say what B'Elanna might have if she'd been there. She never imagined it'd be so hard, and yet the words did find her.

"Certainly, we might sacrifice our home a while so we can return someday? If the Cardassians have become as powerful as this man says, then we should take the threat seriously this time and not lose any more of our loved ones because we were too short-sighted and stubborn to see this war for what it really is. Have we learned nothing?"

51533: Six months later

As he often had with his wife, Joe Carey wondered how she did it.

B'Elanna had Kiarn in an arm and Alaine at her heels as she set the table, answering her daughter's barrage of questions all the while. Food was on a warmer and she stopped to check it, then she checked the chronometer, dropped a few PADDs in her pocket, circled the table with utensils and bounced her squirming son. She worked without blinking, even as she said, "We'll have lunch later, but would you like some coffee now, Joe?"

Carey gave an emphatic nod. "You know I'd love some coffee, B'Elanna. But can I help you with anything?"

"That's all right, thanks. I've got this." She turned and looked down. "Alaine, do you want to sit with Joe and I on the sofa while we talk about work?"

Alaine froze, staring up at her mother's smile. The girl almost said 'no' outright, but the kindness displayed above her made her shrink a little. "May I pay crayons, please?"

B'Elanna's smile did not waver. "Yes, you may." The child hurried away and B'Elanna turned a look over to Carey. "I hope that continues to work as well as it has so far."

He laughed. "I think they never tire of escaping grownup talk, unless we're talking about them."

Grinning back, B'Elanna collected the carafe and brought it to the table, then went back for the cups. Kiarn still in her arm, she sat across from him and poured their coffee. "I need to talk to you," she said, quiet, almost casual.

Giving her a slightly cautious look--B'Elanna Paris was not often the subtle sort; when she was, there was usually cause for trepidation--Carey accepted his cup when she slid it across the table. "About what?"

B'Elanna wisely waited for him to finish sipping and swallowing. "I've given this a lot of thought, Joe. If you might have noticed, Tom and I have been spending some time with the Maquis crewmembers since we learned about what happened in the DMZ last week."

"We'd all noticed that." He studied her plain expression. "Is there something we should be concerned about?"

"Not really. I just didn't want to cause any more trouble than I will." B'Elanna met her first

assistant's eyes. "'I'm resigning my commission and I want you to take over engineering."

Carey shakily set his coffee back on the table. "What are you talking about?"

"I want to keep working in engineering," she clarified, "but I won't be in charge anymore. You will. You've done this twice already--you're doing it now. It's just your assignment will be longer. A lot longer."

"B--but, B'Elanna, you're...." Carey shook his head, but then catching her steady gaze, he put it together. "This is over what happened to the Maquis?"

She nodded, sipped her coffee then leaned back into the plush cushions of her chair. "I liked being an officer, Joe," she told him. "But the system that I ended up working for and came to admire betrayed me. They let the Cardassians and those allies, the Dominion, murder the Maquis and lay the DMZ to waste. Starfleet didn't even try to help our people. They instead went out of their way to destroy a movement that would have left them alone if they'd shown the same respect. Then the Cardassians once again turned their backs on the treaty this all began over and sided with a race that helped wipe the Maquis out for good.

"We'd been right all along, Joe. The Federation pandered to people they never respected for an easy fix, and they made an enemy of people who were only trying--at least when we were there--to protect an area that was supposed to be demilitarized, but wasn't. Because they did that only to be made fools of with their stupid treaty, who knows how many colonists, Maquis and non-Maquis, were slaughtered. And the Federation offered no apology. No mercy. They only imprisoned those who were lucky enough to survive and let us know how lucky we are that Captain Janeway's been generous to criminals."

Carey stared down at his cup for a minute, taking in her softly assured words. "So you're doing this because you can't forgive Starfleet for its part in it?"

B'Elanna nodded. "I might forgive them someday, but I can't in good conscience be what I was before, even here. I can't bear the idea of wearing a uniform that belongs to the organization that let my friends, my home and everything that I'd fought and suffered for be taken away.

"I'm resigning my commission and I'm recommending you to take over. I'll also be requesting a position as a consultant in engineering--meaning, I'll work there to whatever degree you or Kathryn think appropriate, but you'll be in charge of the staff, the duty assignments and reports, everything I did that was Starfleet governed. I'm even willing to continue attending staff meetings. I'm sure I can arrange that, since Tom's always been in on them. But I will be taking more time off to be with my family and to do research I've wanted to since Seven shared her transwarp knowledge with us."

"I thought you said it was a bad idea."

B'Elanna smirked. "Considering what happened when we tried it the first time, I'd say that again. But I can work with it, run better and safer tests. As a civilian crewmember, I'll have more time to do that." She watched him take that in before finishing it. "I've made up my mind, Joe. I'm resigning."

Slowly, Carey nodded. He knew the chief well enough not to doubt her intent. "Does the captain know?"

The corners of her mouth briefly soured with the reminder. "She will tomorrow," she told him. "We've tried to do the damage control ahead of time, and I wanted to know how you felt, too."

B'Elanna leaned forward, placed her hand on the table. "You're the only one I'd trust with the job."

Carey straightened a little, took a good breath. "You know I'd do my best for you, Lieutenant Paris."

B'Elanna smiled. "You'd better."

He snorted. "Aye, sir." Carey had just, albeit more slowly, taken up his cup again when the door behind them opened and Tom entered.

"Hi, Joe," he said, sliding off his coat as he moved to his wife. "Hello there."

B'Elanna looked back and up to accept a kiss, then followed him with her eyes as he crossed to a nearby chair and tossed his coat over the back. She almost spoke, but only shook her head. Why bother? she asked herself. "How was your talk with Frank?"

"A little touchy at first, but he's fine." Tom eyed the uneasy officer adjacent to him. "I guess B'Elanna's dropped the bomb on you, too, then?"

He sighed and nodded at the same time. "I guess it'd be too much to ask her to reconsider."

"It wasn't my decision, Joe; it was hers. Or don't you want the job?"

"Daddy!" came a happy cry before Carey could answer, and he smiled as Alaine ran from her room and jumped into her father's open arms. He tossed her into the air and caught her then hung her upside down, his strong hands sure not to let the gleeful child slip.

"That's my banshee," he laughed, swinging her back up into his arms. He turned back to their guest. "So?"

Carey gave him a nod. "I've already told her I would." Looking at B'Elanna again--she was grinning at her daughter, who was slithering back to the floor. "If that's what you really want to do, B'Elanna, then I'm with you. I just hope you won't give it up too much once you get spoiled by civilian life."

B'Elanna laughed at Alaine's putting her head between her father's knees and making some ungodly growling sound. Finally, she brought herself back to the conversation. "No way, Joe. I'm not letting you mess up all my hard work." She stood. "Tom, why don't you keep Joe company for a bit and I'll get lunch on the table. --Alaine? Do you want to put the napkins down?"

"Yes, Mommy!" Alaine chirped and scampered to the wall cabinet. Punching the side with her chubby fingers to open the drawer, she peered down at her choices. "We have geen napkins," she said decidedly, yanking them out.

"How many?" Tom challenged her over his shoulder, making the child stop and count, earning him a wink from his wife. Alaine had been a live wire all day, having even woken the couple up early that morning.

"I need to remember to do things like that more often," B'Elanna whispered as she offered Kiarn to him.

"Brilliance is hard to copy, though, you know," he returned jauntily, earning that time a pinch on the ribs.

Tom finally took the baby and propped him up against his shoulder. He watched B'Elanna move back

to the dinette. Her head was a little bent and her shoulders were straight. *That was hard for her, all right.* Tom glanced at their friend. He was watching her, too, but obviously didn't see what Tom did. He was smiling on her work and at Alaine's 'exact' napkin placing.

To Joe, such a scene probably reminded him of home, of the family he had been separated from. What Joe didn't really realize was that Tom usually did that chore, as B'Elanna was usually on duty around lunchtime or just getting off duty when dinner was served. She liked to do those simple, everyday things when she could, but she usually couldn't balance that with the work she also loved.

Now she will, Tom thought, grinning at little. *But I'll still be the one to do the cooking...*

Breaking away from the thought, Tom finally sat where B'Elanna had been before. "Hope you don't mind a working lunch, Joe. You and B'Elanna have to first figure out your division of power and how people need to answer to you and her."

B'Elanna shot him a look from the dinette. "I thought since Tom's used to working as a civilian, he'd be able to help."

"I think we're going to need it," Carey agreed.

"Four naps-kins!" Alaine announced and proudly accepted her mother's hug and kiss of reward. B'Elanna knelt on the floor and helped Alaine recount the people and napkins, then praised her again.

"What if the captain came for lunch?" B'Elanna asked her. "Let's count how many napkins would we need, then."

Carey watched the two begin counting again then finally grinned back to Tom. "Okay, what first?"

Prisoner O-5288547-b pulled herself up to her elbows when the forcefield was dropped. Glancing up, she saw the neat, well-outfitted officer that had been announced to her enter and stop in the middle of the small space. The prisoner did not move much more, not necessarily because of submission or defiance, but for sheer exhaustion. The heat was terrible there. Everything was terrible there. Everything was terrible.

The officer noted the other woman's pallor as she dabbed at the sweat quickly forming on her brow, looked worse for the wear. Her shoulder-length black hair was dry and unkempt and hung over her dull face; her eyes, half closed, pointed only straight ahead as she raised herself to sit. She remained half-slumped and her face held no expression. Then again, there didn't seem to be any need for one.

It was too hot in that cell, desert dry and dark. The officer made a mental note to pose another inquiry about the prison's conditions. This was no place for a woman like her--for any human, really.

"My children?" the prisoner rasped in her unused throat. She swallowed hard to wet it. "My husband?" It was all she ever spoke of, and she didn't add words to her constant request on that occasion, either. She expected the same response: nothing.

But the officer had another answer.

"Your children are waiting for you," came the reply with a gentleness that made the guard behind her raise his brow a bit. Her tone was completely changed from the one she'd used only a minute before. Nevertheless, he went back to work, ignoring--as ordered--the conversation that was taking place. "An inquiry was raised upon your request and you have been found innocent of the charges laid against you. The Federation does have reparations to make on your behalf."

The prisoner might have collapsed to the bunk in her relief, but remained upright, gasping for want to cry.

"But first things first," the officer continued. "Your children are on my ship and have been very well-cared for, I promise you." Bending close, she reached down and touched the other woman's shoulder, which had begun to tremble. "I hope you don't mind that I brought--"

"Take me to them," said the prisoner. "Please. I beg you. I must see them." Raising her eyes in supplication to the cool, clear eyes of the woman before her, she got her feet under her to sit on her knees and took the soft, manicured hand that had touched her. "Please, I must... My husband?"

The other woman sighed and took a seat by her, not releasing the prisoner's cracked fingers. "I'm sorry, but I could not have him granted an early parole."

"But he's innocent. I swear that. He was only in the wrong place when..." Her back bent as she shook her head. "Oh, why should I ask? If I had to spend months here for mere association, befriending the Maquis captain who saved us and our world ought to have earned him far worse."

"I couldn't do more--right now. I haven't given up yet. I intend to investigate you case and others to the best of my ability, Mrs. Osol. But it's going to take some more time."

"What we all seem to have in ready supply," she muttered, but relented from her half-attempted fight. "I will continue to wait for him--now with our children." Her stare drifted out to the door, and grew wet as she drew a breath to speak again. "Helen...Nicol. I...I have dreamed of them every time I closed my eyes. I thought I could touch them, but every time, I awoke with empty arms. Empty, cold in this heat..." Shuddering, she looked at the woman beside her once again, whose stare had widened slightly. She felt her hand give hers a reassuring squeeze. "I want to see them. You say they are with you?"

"I came to bring you to my ship and to them, yes. We'll go to sickbay, get you checked out and a change of clothes, and then we'll bring them. I've arranged for family quarters, and a counselor--"

"Why are you doing this?" the prisoner suddenly demanded, stopping the officer's words. "I don't know you. Why would you be concerned about my family when no one else in the Federation would be so much as bothered?"

"Honestly?" the officer asked; the prisoner nodded. "What brought your case to my attention was a summary report listing your formal request for an open hearing. It mentioned that you had resided on a planet called Avarar."

"It's my homeworld, madam, and my children's too."

"You lived there about three, three and a half years ago, if I'm not mistaken."

"Of course."

The officer smiled slightly. "It caught my eye. Now, can you walk? Or should I have us beamed

directly to sickbay? I can, if you're unable."

The woman shook her head and slowly scooted her unsure feet out and to the floor. With a few jerks of her hands, she straightened her prison uniform as best she could. "I would rather walk away from this place," she muttered. She turned her stare to the tall, doe-faced woman beside her. "I owe you my life, madam," she said, distant yet entirely sincere.

The officer only smiled, nodded then led the other woman out.

Not two hours later, she came into her ship's sickbay with her charges and found herself impressed. The former prisoner, treated for slight malnutrition, showered, hair brushed and wearing a simple blue dress and knee-high boots, stood speaking quietly with the CMO. Her hand clutched the side of the biobed and her words still seemed shaky, but she looked a world better, certainly well enough for a reunion.

Lowering herself to a knee, the officer placed both her hands on the toddlers' shoulders. Oddly sedate, she'd thought, they were already staring at the woman across, as if wondering if she really was whom they thought. She confirmed it for them. "Go to your mother, now."

Not looking back again, their faces lit up when the woman turned and they all recognized each other. Mrs. Osol immediately burst into tears. Crying out to her, both children rushed forward as she fell to her knees and barely opened her arms before both bundles were within them.

For minutes, she sobbed and kissed them, thanked the gods for them and kissed them again as they squeezed her tightly. She had no idea that when she'd begun that wretched day that it would end with her first and most fervent wish granted. There were other desires, but she had missed and feared for her children the most, and now cried without shame to have her arms full with them again.

Finally looking up, her tear-filled eyes found her benefactor's and she smiled in a way that hurt her cheeks for that expression's recent rareness. "Thank you, madam," she managed through her thick throat before she gave her babies another quick inspection, running her fingers through their bushy hair, pressing them into another embrace. "Thank you."

The family continued as such with no more notice of outsiders, so the chief medical officer stepped around to his commanding officer. "Looks like all that work paid off, Admiral," he smiled.

"It's not over, Dr. Nelms," she replied, "but it's a start. According to Counselor Brione's initial observation, Mrs. Osol's not going to recover from this easily. There's her husband to deal with, too, and the others from their colony."

"So we go back to Earth?"

"Yes. I won't be joining you that far, however. Commander Kaplam will take you there. I'll be on Andoria for a series of conferences before rejoining you. Until then, the Gorkon will be undergoing some refits."

"Chief Brosk should like that. And the Osols?"

"Her husband has some family living by the base at Danula-two. It seems like the best place for now. They have nowhere else to go."

She sighed to herself at that, remembering Mrs. Osol's admission about Avalar being her homeworld, that simple pride, a complete certainty of where her home was. The war was escalating; Starfleet was

already huddling into its shell, planning its defenses very carefully after the internal scares they had already gotten. That home could easily be lost forever along with a good deal of their own territory if things swung the wrong way. The slaughters in the Demilitarized Zone were only a part of it all.

She couldn't imagine going back to the DMZ herself, even to a planet like Avalar, which was only a half light year from the Federation border and had indeed before the treaty been well within Federation space. Then again, she had difficulty relating to such a strong sense of home in any case. Rather, she was a Starfleet officer whose life had not been planted since before she graduated the Academy. The woman, kneeling, almost sitting, on that sickbay floor, still kissing and talking sweetly through her tears to her children: She was probably as dedicated, but from a very different stock. A Traditionalist in many ways and a born colonist, that woman's life was wrapped up in her land, in farming and crossbreeding and a strong community of like-minded, second and third generation colonists...

Or at least it had been. The saddest part of it all was that that woman probably could not have imagined a moment of the hell she'd endured before the incursions began four years ago. According to the report, in but a month, she had discovered that hell in full and lost everything.

The admiral turned an eye to the CMO. "Advise Counselor Brione when she arrives to consult with the Osols tomorrow instead of this evening, give them some space, time to catch up. Have her escort them today, but nothing more unless Mrs. Osol requests it. I don't want her to feel she's being pushed. I'll be in my ready room. Notify me when she gets to her quarters."

"Yes, Admiral." Dr. Nelms followed his superior with his eyes as she strode out of the sickbay.

He knew that the admiral was leaving to continue making inquiries over the cases she had chosen to investigate during her "down time" from the Cardassian conflict. In fact, she had already made herself very busy with with that project, though nobody understood why her attention was so sharply turned when she had hunted the Maquis with downright determination and efficiency only a year before. She never explained her motives or offered any reasons--as if she had to. Admirals were like that.

Then again, Dr. Nelms wasn't too concerned about the cause, considering the effect to which he returned his attention. His smile grew, knowing that there would be another reunion in store for that family, if Alynna Nechayev had anything to say about it.

She ran a finger under her eye. She'd needed the makeup for the lack of sleep. She wanted to look very good for that day. She didn't want anybody to get any idea but what she was going to say. She needed to do it. She wanted to do it. She had dreaded it, too.

Closing the front of her tunic, B'Elanna drew a long breath and placed her insignia on her collar. Looking at herself in her uniform, with everything in place and standing straight, she still wanted to do it. Her quick heart still ached for that closure. It wouldn't change anything that had happened, and likely, it would negatively affect her if they ever got back to the Alpha Quadrant, but she still knew it was necessary. She gave a tiny nod to herself, satisfied.

She glanced up. Tom was almost done pinning her hair back, a braided knot worn at her nape, as always. He had done that for her almost as often as she had worn her uniform. He too was dressed

neatly: crisp beige shirt, black trousers. He even got a haircut, even though he wasn't quite due for one yet.

Done with the last pin, he placed a free hand gently on her shoulder, rubbing a little. Then he stepped back and let his eyes roam her body, appraising her. "I dunno, Chief, I might miss you in that uniform," he drawled. "I always thought you were pretty damned sexy in it."

B'Elanna laughed, glad for the diversion. She'd expected one sooner or later. "Well, I'll try to keep one like it tucked away next time you're looking for a thrill."

"It *is* a thrill, B'Elanna," he returned as he moved around to face her, "pulling off layer by layer, getting under all that business."

She ran her tongue across her lip, let him kiss her softly after. "I'm sure we can work something out," she replied and took his hand in hers. His fingers enclosed hers warmly. She felt it so that day, when she needed to.

They met Jenna in the living room. The children were asleep, so she stood alone, arms crossed. Her bright eyes turned and found them when they entered and cursorily ran up and down them both. Then she moved up to kiss B'Elanna's cheeks. "You look fine and proud enough, so don't be scared about it. You know what's the right thing to do."

"Thanks," B'Elanna said, summoning up another grin. "No, I'm not doubting this. I'm just...nervous."

Jenna nodded in acknowledgment. "Go on now. You don't want to be late."

Raising her brow with a breath of a laugh at that, she turned and followed Tom out the door, turning one more look back at her friend before the doors closed behind them.

She remembered the first day she'd worn that uniform.

She hated the turtleneck, the added weight and the heavy insignia at her throat; the boots were stiff with heels too thick and the tunic was too heavy despite Starfleet's gloried idea that they were built for optimum comfort. They weren't her clothes and she hated them. Donning them the first time, she was sorry she'd let Chakotay convince her she was so desperately needed.

Tom had chosen what to do with her hair, just pulling it back and looping it. She didn't argue though she hated that fashion, too. He said nothing about it, only held her hand as they strolled to the turbolift. Punching the button, he instead told her she'd teach them a thing or two about what an engineer was supposed to be.

Well, she did give him that one.

Once enclosed in the lift for a short time together--he was on his way to Sickbay--he leaned down and pressed his lips to hers, drawing her close, between himself and the wall. When he pulled away, he rubbed his nose against hers and smiled. She knew exactly what it meant, and for a moment she almost forgot why she'd been nervous. Meeting Chakotay just outside engineering, she'd almost forgotten about hating the uniform, too.

Since that day, their quarters had changed, their family had grown and their outlook had shifted to one far more positive, but the corridor passed her eyes in the same unreal fashion.

She hated change, even if it was for the better.

B'Elanna kept her hand in Tom's as they walked into the turbolift; there, she moved easily into his arms to accept his kiss. She'd expected it, and yet she still almost forgot where they were going and what she was doing there that day, even when he pulled back a little and gave her that nuzzle and smile she knew so well.

He knew. He was there. It was going to be okay.

And she would never have to wear those damned boots ever again.

The lift door opened.

When they came into the briefing room, they found the senior staff already assembled and gave them a glance or grin, their usual greeting. At her seat near the viewport, Janeway was reviewing some PADDs and did not look up. B'Elanna didn't try to catch her attention, either. Their hour long conversation in her ready room had been more than enough to say all that needed to be said. Kathryn had been generous and B'Elanna had tried not to sound bitter. Both women were as disappointed as understanding.

"If everybody would like to have a seat," the captain said as she set aside the data that had proved to be an unsuccessful distraction. When all but the Parises had moved into their usual places, she continued, "As you know, this meeting was called for purposes other than ordinary ship's business. But I didn't request it." Her officers looked around at each other when she paused. Janeway was surprised that the rumor mill hadn't gotten loose, for they seemed indeed to be out of the loop. *The Maquis crew must be tighter than I thought they would be after these few years*, she remarked to herself, but put it aside for the moment to say what she hadn't wanted to say: "Lieutenant Paris has an announcement to make."

B'Elanna didn't mind the formality. It seemed appropriate, considering. She had chosen that semi-public decommission so that the others would understand, certainly not to be casual.

As she left Tom at the back wall and stepped forward, she took in the faces of her friends, of Chakotay and Harry, Tuvok and the Doctor. Even Neelix and Seven were there. They all looked to her then. "Thank you, Kathryn," she said quietly, punctuating the difference before she'd even made it official.

Taking a deep breath, she made her case, stating with unusual eloquence the issues that had come upon her. As she related her resulting feelings, she watched their faces fall, contort or simply turn a stare. The captain had been as discreet as her old friends had been. They all had put the news about the DMZ and the Maquis behind them and hadn't been aware of any lasting issues on Voyager--all but Chakotay.

To no great surprise on her part, he seemed to take it with his usual stoicism. He had known from the start that she was considering it, of course, but asked her repeatedly to reconsider, even after she had talked to Carey. He had embraced Starfleet again far more than she ever had; she was glad he had found peace with it again after his long, difficult time in the Maquis. He had been so vindicated to see her set up as Chief Engineer--he'd fought long and hard on her behalf, as much as Tom had worked on the Starfleet crew for her sake, as much as she had worked to become comfortable with her staff and her duties once she had been promoted. She took it on and excelled, making up for that bitter time years before--vindicating her failure in that system, which she'd likewise given up on for lack of both maturity and commitment. Her former captain couldn't have been prouder for her.

As B'Elanna finally announced her resignation, Chakotay sighed with an ironic grin.

She then stated her plans for the future, reassuring her audience it was but for her conscience that she was making that choice. She asserted that Joe Carey would be more than capable in continuing her usual work. Though they agreed aloud, she could tell they'd have preferred she stay. It warmed her, but did little else.

"There's nothing we can say to change your mind?" Harry asked, looking to Chakotay, whose head was slightly bent.

B'Elanna shook her head, her lips turning up a bit at his attempt, so very much like him. "I'm sorry, Harry, but I've decided. I need to do this to feel right with myself."

"Because of Avarar," Chakotay said softly.

"Because of Avarar," B'Elanna confirmed, "because of Rodrigo and Atara, all our friends and neighbors--because of it all." Finally, her old friend's eyes rose to meet hers and she held his stare without blinking. "We've lost everything, Chakotay. I can't walk away from that unaffected."

"But that's not Starfleet's fault," Harry told her.

"Not directly," she agreed. "But after hearing what they did and didn't do, I had to decide what I believed in." She moved a few steps toward him, placed her hand on his shoulder so he'd look up to her. "Harry, I'm a Maquis. It's a part of me, just like it's a part of Tom. We never gave up what we stood for, what brought us to that fight; we still believe in what we'd been defending and the life we were trying to make before ending up out here. I became an officer on Voyager because it was a something I'd left unfinished and something that I needed to explore--but mainly because I was needed at the time. I didn't fight for the position, but I did take it and was glad I did, and I did it while managing a family and..." She winked at Tom, "...a pain in the ass husband."

Her smile grew when Harry laughed a little, glad she could at least lighten it a little. It didn't last long after the sound died away, so she continued, "I might have kept doing that here if I hadn't been reminded what was left behind us, how much of a Maquis I still was--even how much of a colonist I'd become. It's not like I'm encouraging mutiny, here, but you should have known all along that I'm not career Starfleet. I had provisional rank and never forgot that."

"You were more than a provisional officer, Lieutenant Paris," stated Tuvok.

B'Elanna gave him a nod. "Thank you, Tuvok. That's quite a compliment. But that's not how I saw it."

Turning, she looked at her captain again. "I'm sorry, Kathryn."

Janeway grinned weakly. "Your usual presence will be missed, B'Elanna," she told her. "I still need you; all of Voyager does. But if this is what you feel you need to do, and if none of us can convince you otherwise, I can only accept your request and support your decision."

"You say that as if I hadn't tried to convince myself," B'Elanna quietly returned. She looked at her older friend. "Chakotay, I hope you understand. I want you to."

Her former captain offered a grin she knew all too well, one of pained acceptance of things he had no control over.

"I guess I shouldn't have expected you to go back on your mindset," he admitted.

"Another thing that hasn't changed, I guess," B'Elanna grinned, though her eyes still searched him. Of all her friends, she wanted his approval most, and she might have regretted in hindsight not telling him everything before the meeting. She was comforted when he blinked and a tiny smile twitched on his mouth.

Chakotay looked at Tom then, who hadn't moved from the back of the room. It was where he usually stood, arms crossed as always, watching everything closely, silent and seemingly amused. Chakotay knew he wasn't. "And you?"

Tom shrugged. "I don't have anything to do with it, aside from asking her if she was sure. This is what B'Elanna wants. I support her. That's it."

B'Elanna suppressed a snort. He could make things sound so simple, and even when everyone knew he was understating everything, he could sell them his view in five words or less.

"Very well, then," Janeway said, quiet but anxious to move the meeting forward. Looking across the table, she regained the engineer's attention. "Lieutenant Paris, I hereby accept your resignation. Your record will be updated, and I will include a letter of gratitude for your service aboard my ship."

"Thank you, Captain." Carefully detaching her insignia from her collar, she walked around the briefing room table to place it beside the other woman's work. Janeway didn't move at first, but finally, silently, tapped the record into her PADD. When their eyes met again, B'Elanna's returning expression was a gentle one. She let out her breath when the captain finally relented with a little grin.

Kathryn handed her the PADD. B'Elanna pressed her thumb to it. It beeped.

B'Elanna felt her relief instantly. It was finally done.

The meeting was adjourned. She was no longer an officer.

She looked at everyone in turn, but thought better than to invite them to dinner or even to meet them in the messhall, though she knew a night over a meal and some wine with talk and friendship would be needed eventually. They had not even moved from their seats--would probably sit and discuss her replacement, probably call Joe to the briefing room, question him about what she'd already discussed with him and try to integrate him into the senior staff as quickly as possible.

So, she said nothing. Excusing herself, returned to Tom and walked with him to the lift, where her kept his arm supportively around her as they descended. Through the corridor, they walked hand in hand. His hand moved to rest upon the curve of her back when they got to their quarters, and he gave her waist a little squeeze when he pressed the door panel.

The doors opened, and she immediately heard Kiarn crying in the other room and Jenna soothing him. As Tom moved through to see what the matter was, B'Elanna opened and pulled off her tunic for what she knew would be the last time. Hearing Jenna explain to Tom that the baby had just been fed, however, she did not go immediately. Tom would bring Kiarn to her. For the moment, she knelt when Alaine abandoned her breakfast to jump into her waiting arms.

47972: 3.6 years ago

Tom Paris grinned at the young, dark-haired man at his side. Fresh off the farm--an artists' colony at Jaros-three--the kid with two first names definitely had some flying sense, though not much more about what he was doing at that moment: whistling when his eyes drifted across the deck and pinned on the woman who had entered.

That gesture alone made Tom's eyes gleam, his mouth curl precariously to the side. For that opportunity alone, he was glad Chakotay had found the kid.

"Like that?" he asked as he wedged another clip into the new circuit assembly they were planning to install.

"I think I could," the other man affirmed, sealing off a nodule in the new frame. "My brother used to call that *spicy*."

Tom didn't bother to tell the younger man what *he* called it. But he did share the view, a vision in leather and an earthy red vest; silken, sable curls just brushing her shoulders. Bending over a console, she stated the antimatter conversion levels with a heavy bite of dissatisfaction with the systems and the people she was talking to. It was nothing new to Tom, but nothing he'd ever tire of either. Glancing back at the new guy's appreciation of the lady's changed position, he licked a lip. "Quite a package, isn't she?"

"Mm, yeah," said the younger man. "Tightly wrapped with ribbons and bows. Knows her business, too."

"She's a hot little cookie," Tom added, "--or tamale, if your spice adds up right."

He laughed. "Tamale!" But there, the recruit backed off, shrugging. "Really though, I shouldn't be talking about a lady I don't know like that. No insult, but it's no fair to her." He turned a little smile to his new friend. "You know her well?"

Tom opened his mouth, but closed it. *Damn, this kid's too nice. Way too nice. That must have been some farm.* Though spoiled of his joke, he did perk with a last-minute save as he remembered the question. "Only in the conjugal sense."

"Huh?"

"I'm married to her." Tom laughed as the recruit's face immediately flushed to a fine shade of crimson. *Well, that reaction was just as much fun.* "Don't worry about me. I know damn well she's worth staring at. I've done enough of it, myself. --Just don't do anything about it. She'd kill you, and we need all the pilots we can get."

Rodrigo grinned sheepishly. "Thanks a lot."

Chuckling, Tom looked caught his wife's attention with a wave of his hand. "Got a minute, B'Elanna?" he called. "Come meet Chakotay's new pigeon."

She turned and looked at the young guy working at her husband's side. She'd seen him before, heard all about him from Tom and the others. Then again, she hadn't yet seen him looking like that--blushing with his eyes everywhere but on her. Instantly she knew Tom had been up to something, and brushes her hands on her vest to approach the pilots. "Your new victim, you mean?"

"Something like that," Tom replied and stood when she came close to take her hand and introduce her. "B'Elanna Torres, Andre Rodrigo."

B'Elanna greeted the young man with a grin, still wondering what Tom had done to embarrass the man so thoroughly. He wouldn't even squeeze her hand when she shook it. "Don't worry about my husband," she told him. "He's the best around, but he's a devil sometimes. Don't let him get you in trouble."

Rodrigo laughed and gave his head a slight bow. "Gracias, señora. You're husband's actually a most deserving man, and so you must be, too, to have earned his feelings. He's been great, teaching me more than I thought I would learn. I didn't expect to feel as welcome, coming to this ship, but I do."

B'Elanna straightened, blinking with surprise at the recruit's manners. She caught Tom's shrug when she glanced over. "Well, thanks. We're glad you're here."

Suddenly--and likely to all three's relief--the COMM opened above them. "Paris and Torres, I need you on the bridge," came Chakotay's quick yet casual command.

"Why don't you finish that grid," Tom told his apprentice as he took B'Elanna's hand. "I'll be back down later. Henley can help you on the rest of that grid." He pointed. "Right over there."

"No problem," Rodrigo grinned and waved them off. Going back to his work, he nodded to himself, reminded of how glad he was to have accepted Chakotay's offer. His superior, Paris, had been an excellent instructor despite the fun he'd just had, and most of the people he had met so far really believed in what they were doing and treated each other, if not like close comrades, like family. Not all, but enough did to impress the young man who'd expected much worse conditions.

Then his eyes drifted aside and found a svelte, flaxen-haired Bajoran. *Better and better, my luck*, he thought, then smiled and bowed. "Señorita."

"Atara," she corrected, then tipped her head the other way, raised her brow at the darkly handsome man, his big, brown eyes and softly chiseled features...his lean, muscled body and long, slender hands... "Atara Mael."

Rodrigo straightened himself, boasting a broad, white smile.

Even as they left the deck, B'Elanna had to look back. "Right off the farm, hmm?" she said with a smirk. "I'd have never known it. We're probably going to have to warn him about Chakotay's policies, though."

Tom lips pulled up. "Yeah, like we're just the example for him to follow. And you know, I'm going to start getting jealous if he keeps charming you like that."

"Oh right. Tom, he looked like he was going to have an accident when I said no more than hello."

"But that's their tactic," Tom returned, "make them think they're not interested, pure as snow, all that, and then move in for the kill. Got to watch out for suave rogues like that. You know, while you weren't looking, he said you were spicy."

She laughed aloud. "And I'll bet you led him right into it."

"Not at all, Miss Torres," he replied, his eyes gleaming. "He went there all by himself. That said, I might have agreed wholeheartedly about your assets." He sighed for effect. "When any random guy

can liken you to table condiments, I don't know if I can take the competition--"

B'Elanna gave his ribs a sharp squeeze, making Tom yelp. "You're not getting away from me that easily, Tom Paris. You're marked and chained, remember?"

Tom put his arm around her shoulder as they stepped into the lift. "You bet I am."

51919: Almost four years later

"We're crazy, you know."

"Maybe that's why we're married," he returned.

"Yes, that must be it."

He hugged her warmly when she leaned back into his arms. "So," he whispered into her ear, "whose turn is it?"

"Mine, I guess," B'Elanna answered, grinning deep within herself.

We really are insane, she told herself again. Without question, they already had a family--more than enough by normal starship standards. So certainly, they were shocked when they noticed her usual physiological reaction to the first weeks of pregnancy. She couldn't figure out why she felt so happy for their putting even more responsibility in their lives and on that ship, lost in the Delta Quadrant and in regular danger, when it'd already been turned upside down by her own hand only a few months ago.

We were asking for a jolt, all right, she thought. Her smile turned bittersweet at it.

"I want to name it for one of our friends this time, Tom..." Her smile faded a little there. "I think about them all the time, and I kick myself sometimes for not remembering them more often."

Tom nodded. "I guess we'd been given a pretty damn good reason to remember." Despite his sober statement, he suddenly chuckled, burying it in her shoulder to soften the sound lest they wake Kiarn behind them. B'Elanna nudged him. "You just got me to thinking about those kickball games," he said.

B'Elanna snickered. "You *would* remember! As if we hadn't had enough battles..." There, she shook her head. "How can we even laugh about that after everything that's happened?"

Tom sighed through the remnants of his smile, resigned to the knowledge already. "Because we can."

"I guess so." Their eyes went to the picture wall again and found one among their collection, one once kept on the Marseilles. Their smiles slowly returned.

"Mommy, Daddy?"

Both parents looked over to find a sleepy girl in their doorway, rubbing her eye as she drug back a long lock of dark hair from her round face. B'Elanna, all but forgotten of the memory in that glance, reached out to her. "Come over here. Daddy and I want to show you something we put on the wall

today, and we have some news."

Tom bent a little to help his girl up onto the bed where he and B'Elanna were sitting. "Remember when Mommy's belly was really big?" he asked her.

"Yes," Alaine said and looked at her mother with a clever smile. "You looked like Pooka bear."

B'Elanna rolled her eyes before meeting her daughter's again. "Well, I'm going to look like one again, sweetheart. Mommy's having another baby."

"Anoter baby broter?" Alaine chimed, her big blue eyes lighting up at the thought.

"Maybe," Tom told her. "Maybe a little sister. We'll have to see."

Alaine gave her parents a look--one look Tom correctly attributed to his wife's genetics--and sighed dramatically. "Ak Denna, Daddy."

They laughed again. "Guess it's time for that dinner," B'Elanna grinned.

"Keeping things lively?!" Jenna snorted, getting out of her seat to kiss them both. "That's not liveliness, that's loveable madness!"

B'Elanna leaned over into Tom's arm, rather proud of herself as they both accepted the good wishes of her friends as well, which circled around the candlelit sitting area. Another nice dinner and great timing with getting the children to bed had made their announcement a pleasant one, that with a comfortable night among a collection of their friends, just the way she liked it. The big, public announcement would come in a few days--but that was Neelix's party.

Plopping back into her chair, Jenna grabbed her wine and downed the remainder. "I'm going to need to get some real vino on this ship, they keep up at this pace," she grinned aside to the captain.

"Good excuse," Kathryn returned wryly.

"Feel free to use it any time you like. --Harry, be a gentleman and get our lovely Kathryn drunker."

"I'm not drunk. I've only had...two glasses."

"Says you," Jenna returned. "Loosen up, Aunt Kat, you've had a hell of a week with those loonies running around after you. You're not on parade here amongst the unwashed."

Kathryn held out her goblet. "Now that you put it like that. --Ensign? If you will?"

As he refilled his captain's glass, Harry grinned still, shaking his head at the news. "You said she was pregnant, Jenna, and I didn't believe you. What do I owe you?"

"How about you serve me, too?" Jenna winked and held out her glass for him to fill as well.

Returning her attention to her hosts, Janeway's face melted into a thoughtful smile. "You two never cease to amaze me. --Though I sometimes think you're in it just to keep me knitting."

Tom chuckled. "Well, that'll give you something to do on the bridge: If someone countermands you, you can practice your archery, instead."

Chakotay laughed at the image that brought to mind. "I don't think that'd be too good for morale, Tom." Leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, he looked at B'Elanna. "When you said you'd have time for more work outside engineering, you weren't kidding," he said.

She rolled her eyes. "I try to put myself to good use when I'm not rebuilding shuttles."

"So, Jenna," Carey asked, looking at the wise-eyed nurse, "is it a boy or a girl?"

"Ah, best I keep that one to the betting pool," she replied.

Chakotay grinned. "It's only a fifty-fifty guess--it won't spoil anything."

"Except in that she hasn't missed yet," Janeway muttered over her glass before sipping.

Jenna eyed the parents again, her small mouth curling into a grin. "Do you really want to know? You know I'll say what I think."

"I never seem to be surprised in the end," B'Elanna told her, "and you know Tom won't wait and see."

Jenna straightened, peered B'Elanna over again, glanced at Tom, then back to the first, drew a breath. "It's another boy," she told them, her smile growing wide as a laugh overtook her voice. "And I'm betting for a big one, mmm...five kilo!"

B'Elanna coughed with indignation. "Don't you *dare* wish that into existence!"

"La! Your fault for making yourself irresistible. And what were *you* up to, Thomas--*thinking*, I mean--knocking up the poor girl so soon after? --Not that I'm any less a population addict, but I've got to ask it."

Tom grinned. "We told Alaine the tooth fairy put it there--"

"And she didn't believe you for an instant," B'Elanna rejoined.

Jenna snorted. "Though I'm certain teeth were involved."

B'Elanna didn't dare confirm that, and was still staring at Jenna askance for the weight prediction. *There's no way she could actually tell*, she reminded herself firmly. "Let's just say it's a pleasant surprise."

"Agreed," Janeway said, still smiling at the couple. Perhaps Jenna had gotten her a little drunk after all, or maybe it was just the meal settling in. Either way, Kathryn couldn't help but feel a little sentimental as she looked at them, so relaxed and at home, welcoming as always in their family quarters.

She had never thought about how Tom and B'Elanna had ended up as such good friends to her. Certainly, they were the least likely people she thought she could ever be close to. As a fellow captain, Chakotay had a far better chance, even as a Maquis. But despite their difficult beginning on Voyager, the Parises had somehow become great confidantes and her greatest source of respite when that ship's revised mission felt like it might crush her. In the worse times, their company had most recently become a great refuge to her.

On that thought, she said, "Look at us, together like this where when we met we'd so easily despised each other. I couldn't be more grateful for that change.... How proud your families would be if they

could see you as I do."

"Here, here," Harry said as he filled his own glass, then the Carey's again. "How about a toast, then?"

"Allow me," Chakotay said, raising his glass. "To Tom, B'Elanna, the kids--and to us all; to family, friendship and home. May we all enjoy them all however quickly they want to come at us."

B'Elanna clicked her glass around, then against Tom's glass as he kissed her softly. Leaning into his arm again, she regarded Chakotay, who looked at them much as he had years before, when he married her and Tom. Rush or no rush, he'd been a proud friend. He was on that night, too.

"That was very nice, Chakotay. Thank you."

"Aft, Rodrigo! I said *aft* inversion!"

"I am inverting!"

"Yeah, and you're going *forward*!" Tom laughed despite the obvious danger his scout was in at the hands of his student. Redirecting helm control to the rear station, he straightened them out of their spin and set the Marseilles on a course back to the Liberty. "We'll try it again when we have the time," he told the younger man, "and on a ship a little less charged up. This one's too easy to flip, so to speak."

Rodrigo switched seats again without protest when the captain of the scout came forward to claim the helm. He knew Tom decently enough by then to know he wasn't being insulted.

"I do want to learn that maneuver, though," he said. "I've seen you do it. It's a great move that really rocks the Cardassian sensors."

"Instinct and practice," Tom told him. "You've got the first. We just need the time to get the rest in a ship that's not so customized to its owners."

"I guess I *am* flying your house, aren't I?"

"Were," Tom corrected with a grin as he ran a sensor sweep. "You *were* flying my house... Ah, there they are. I was wondering where they'd decided to hole up."

Within another hour and some passing repartee between "captains, one outranking," the Marseilles set down in its usual spot in the belly of the Liberty. After he set the controls to stand-by and opened the back hatch for the others to unload the supplies they'd picked up, Tom grabbed his gear and followed his pupil out and up to the bridge.

Chakotay was already reviewing the lists when they got there. "Tom, I don't know how you do it," was the first thing out of his mouth.

The pilot grinned. "One post and three raids," he said with a shrug. He playfully grabbed the back of Rodrigo's neck and wrung it a little, "And one puppy barely housetrained."

Rodrigo laughed. "Give me a break, Tom. That ship of yours is difficult."

"You're doing fine," Tom told him then looked to his captain. "Definitely let him tell you about his first inversion--then tell me what he said, okay? Where's B'Elanna?"

"I just let her off. She'll like getting those magnetic seals and constrictors, but grab a break first. She's been at it all day and so have you. I'll need you both by nineteen hundred to use what they unpack down there."

Tom nodded. "See you two later, then."

Before the pilot turned, Chakotay motioned to his hand. "Nice," he commented.

It took Tom a moment to realize what his friend meant, but smiled when he understood. "I thought so."

Through the slightly dark and regularly dingy corridors of the Liberty, Tom made good speed to the quarters he and B'Elanna shared, only a deck and a short walk from the bridge. He said hellos to the few he passed before noticing a familiar form turn the corner before him. "B'Elanna," he called.

She glanced back around and smiled as her husband came to her. "Hello, there," she said, kissing him as soon as was within range. "Have a good run?"

"Lots of goodies," Tom answered and took her hand to continue with her. "They're still unpacking, so we're ordered to have a break." He brought his other hand around. "Got you something."

She looked down and sighed, smiling at the white Grinaraan tulips he'd brought, complete with a sustaining vase of Nixian coral. "They're beautiful, Tom," she said, taking them. "You really know how to charm a girl, don't you?"

"And I'm glad she likes it," he returned as they turned into their quarters.

She walked ahead to wash her face and hands first, placing the flowers on the bucket shelf beside the bunk on her way. "Too bad I don't have the time to tell you how much I like them," she teased.

"We'll have time soon enough," he said. Opening the bag on his other arm, he went to the bedside table and started pulling out PADDs. "Got you something else."

She turned from the wall basin and furrowed her brow. "What are those?"

"Books," he replied. "While I was borrowing some plasma from a passing ship, I picked these up, too. Pretty much by accident, really, but I thought you'd like them. They're Earth collections from the Federation database. A few classics, some poetry, this and that."

B'Elanna was surprised. They didn't have time to sit around and read. She'd never even picked up a PADD that didn't have ship specs on it since well before she'd met Tom. Apparently, he recalled her telling him how she'd once enjoyed literature.

Trading places to let him into the bathroom, she sat and pulled her hair loose. At the same time, she toed off her boots part of the way and peered over at the pile of PADDs. There must have been forty of them. "How in the world did you think to pick up books while grabbing parts?" she thought aloud. "Sometimes I wonder about you."

"Only sometimes?"

"I'll never have time to read all of this."

"Then we'll read in bed," he returned. Tom had already washed up and removed his coat; he took off his vest and loosened his shirt. Then he took off his boots and socks, but went no further than that. The Liberty being in an insecure area, it was not the best idea to undress too much. He instead sat on their little bunk and dunked his fingers into her hair, loosening her curls for her so she could pull off her boots the rest of the way. "I'd like to hear some of it," he added softly.

Her lips turned up. "You want me to read you bedtime stories?"

Tom kissed her neck. "I like your voice, B'Elanna. I'd love to hear you read something besides a diagnostic--though that's pretty exciting, too."

"Fine," she said, softened by both his compliment and the feeling of him near her again. She hated admitting how much she missed him when he was gone, but couldn't help but be reminded when they were reunited. "Pick one."

"Which one?"

"Any of them," she said and peered back at him. "I think I can manage to read whichever one you give me."

"Smartass," he grinned and turned to pluck up one from the pile.

Her boots removed, she slipped her vest off her arms and pulled the hem of her blouse from her trousers. Tom was already waiting, leaning on the pillow against the wall. She scooted back into his open arm. Cuddling together, getting themselves comfortable, he hit a random index on the small PADD and picked a number from the selection before handing it to her.

Taking it, her brow twitched when she read the header. She didn't know that one. Glancing over, she saw him nod, so she rested her head against him and took a breath. As he twirled her hair in his fingers, she began to read:

"In my beginning is my end. In succession, houses rise and fall, crumble, are extended, are removed, destroyed, restored, or in their place is an open field, or a factory, or a by-pass. Old stone to new building, old timber to new fires, old fires to ashes, and ashes to the earth, which is already flesh, fur and faces, bone of man and beast, cornstalk and leaf. Houses live and die: there is a time for building and a time for living and for generation, and a time for the wind to break the loosened pane and to shake the wainscot where the field-mouse trots, and to shake the tattered arras woven with a silent motto.

"In my beginning is my end. Now the light falls across the open field, leaving the deep lane shuttered with branches, dark in the afternoon, where you lean against a bank while a van passes, and the deep lane insists on the direction into the village, in the electric heat, hypnotized. In a warm haze the sultry light is absorbed, not refracted, by gray stone. The dahlias sleep in the empty silence. Wait for the early owl. In my beginning is my end."

She paused, and Tom rubbed his chin against her hair. "Keep going," he whispered.

Janeway wandered into the bedroom while the others were filing out of the Parises' quarters and saying goodnight. There, she found B'Elanna straying back out from the bathroom, stifling a yawn. "I wanted to thank you for another wonderful dinner, B'Elanna. It was lovely."

She smiled. "Thank you--and you're welcome--Kathryn. While you're here, has Tuvok changed the briefing time again or are we still on for ten-hundred?"

"It's ten hundred, unless we have another interruption. But we're coming up on a rather empty region of space. I think we might get a break for a change."

B'Elanna grinned. "Well, now that you've said that, you know we're in for it."

The captain laughed at that, let her eyes roam around in the silence that followed. Coming around to the picture wall, her smile grew odd, her eyes focused on the center portrait.

"What is it, Kathryn?" B'Elanna asked. Her captain didn't often stare at the wall.

"Just wondering..." she said quietly, and she seemed to think about more than she voiced, even as she asked, "Did you and Tom plan to have a large family? You're such good parents, but I have to admit, I'm curious how you'll handle it here with a third."

"Well, we hadn't really planned anything in the beginning," B'Elanna admitted. "We were so busy, going back and forth from Avalar to the Liberty, I think we were the *most* shocked to find out about Alaine." She laughed quietly. "With my being half-Klingon, we honestly thought it'd be more difficult to conceive. But then she was there and like everything else between us, it was just that next thing to happen with us."

She paused, looking up at the same picture Kathryn spied. "But once we figured out that we were doing pretty well with Alaine, Tom and I decided to try for another. We talked about it then, and since we were considering how long it'd take us to get home, we decided we wanted more children. So, we worked on getting Kiarn. But again, Tom and I don't usually plan things too far ahead."

"Yes, you do tend to play things by ear," Kathryn nodded. "But practically speaking, I thought in the beginning that it might not be such a good thing to bring children into our situation--though we may well need them someday."

"That's a possibility," B'Elanna nodded. "But for us right now, Alaine and Kiarn, and this one, they're all we have left of a home. In spite of go through and what that puts *us* through, we're not sorry to have our children on this ship."

Kathryn sighed. "I hope someday they have more, though."

"So do I. Of course, we all hope we get home. I think about it a lot sometimes, when I see how much Voyager is all they know." B'Elanna motioned to one of the old pictures of her and Tom. "About a year ago, I remember Tom and I had been talking about things we would wish for if we could wish." She smiled. "We agreed on a lot of things, but there was one that I never really forgot."

"What was that?"

"That we'd love nothing more than to see our children running around on Avalar someday, and maybe even our grandchildren, and to grow old there."

Seeing Tom step in the door, she smiled wistfully at him. "You remember that, Tom?"

"Wanting to see the kids back home for real and not the holodeck? Yeah." He touched her hand and felt her fingers wrap around his. "But you know, as it is, we'd already have to put an addition onto the house."

"Well, as long as it doesn't block the view from the kitchen--"

"I'd never interfere with your kitchen view, Miss Torres," he drawled, chuckling at the mere idea.

"Good," she said with smirk. She knew exactly where his mind had gone. "So we could put an 'L' addition onto the bedroom."

"But how will the kids get there besides through our space?" Tom queried. "Be a shame to block off that back view."

"How about an atrium hall--all windows with a roof adjoining to the new rooms? It'd fit right around the rocks. And we could put a court in the middle, maybe?"

"Or maybe a second floor, above the bedroom?" he ventured.

She thought quickly, pictured it immediately--the roof pitch of a second floor would meet the main section of the house; they could easily make two bedrooms and a hall; a staircase could attractively descend on the back wall over the kitchen door.... "That'd work much better," she decided. "We should write that one down."

Kathryn laughed. "You two are too much! Maybe you should wait to get there before making additions!"

B'Elanna smiled at her. "There's nothing wrong with *a little* preparation, Kathryn."

"Or preventing trouble before it happens," Tom added slyly.

47995: 3.5 years ago

They spoke cheerfully, answering K'Karn's questions about human wedding even as their pulses sped and their eyes grew bright, hard on the scout ship they neared. They had been Maquis long enough that the adrenaline buildup was a second nature; they barely noticed their quickened pace, their straightened postures and hardened facades.

Once out of earshot of the park, they dropped the topic as quickly as they'd picked it up, shooting a glance to the Klingon behind them.

"Tell us what else you know, K'Karn," Tom said, ushering B'Elanna ahead. "We need to know everything you can tell us about the Cardassian plan if we're to do any good."

K'Karn did not doubt the man's intent, and had to admire their show of readiness. So, he related what little he had heard about the expected incursions into the Avalar and Tennethi systems as he

followed them to their ship. Jumping up into the belly of the Marseilles, all three raced up to the bridge without slowing.

Watching them as they threw themselves into their respective seats and their work, K'Karn mentally calculated the distance they would have to fly--and through what defenses the Cardassians would likely bear. Whatever pride and love for battle he had was curtailed by his equal instinct for stealth and surprise. When he mentioned it, he was surprised to find his cousins relatively unconcerned with that.

"A poorly executed mission will bring you no honor," he stated. "It would be the errand of a fool to attack them without more sizable offenses. You would be better to regroup and attack from--"

"Spare me, K'Karn!" B'Elanna snapped as she whirled the Marseilles' systems on line. "And the House of Torg says *I'm* too human! *Listen* to you!" Glaring back at him, she knew she'd insulted him: A scowl had already crossed his face. For a second, she was almost sorry for it, too. Almost. "There are people out there being burned alive--without honor, unarmed civilians and children. You might know the plans, but Tom and I have seen the damage. We've seen the results of their work. We're not even going to get there in time--whether or not the Taecen cell's able to fight back enough--but we have to at least be there for the survivors, who won't last long without assistance."

Tom was already plotting their course. "B'Elanna's right. We've got to go--now." He looked over at his wife, said more quietly, "I've got us clearance in five minutes."

"That's fine," she replied, fingers still flying over her console. "Sorry, K'Karn, if we seem like crazed mok'las right now. But this is our life; we've been doing this for a while."

"It is your heart you must answer," K'Karn approved. "Certainly, I will not stop you, only advise you to think through your plan. Never underestimate your enemy."

"We'd be dead now if we ever had," she replied.

As she continued her work without another word, K'Karn indeed found himself pleased. They were almost a week from Avalar, considering the route they needed to fly, and would likely arrive after all was done, missing any chance at battle. Yet they would go, hot with indignation and pride. They would at least try to protect what was left.

They go for more than battle, but to honor those who will die, he nodded to himself as they continued to talk to each other in preparation. *They may be young and perhaps unwise, but Miral must hear of these two. She must know B'Elanna now.*

"I'll send out an encrypted subspace message to the Liberty," Tom continued, "once we're clear of these Starfleet subspace relays."

"How long will it take?"

"On that frequency, two hours. --And they're with Captain Renalok."

B'Elanna growled. She'd always thought Renalok was an overcomplicated windbag. "It'll have to do," she said. "We don't have much other choice."

Tom nodded, consciously willing his clenched teeth apart. He could see Mila Morgan in his mind--a gentle looking woman with long blonde hair and a face like a lamb, out on the back hill of her farm, collecting wildflowers she dried and wove into wreaths...running, screaming as her skin was scorched,

her hair catching flame...

He shook his head stiffly, grinding his teeth and punching in a few more commands.

Pushing that thought away, he remembered that their cousin was still in the back of their bridge. Turning, Tom saw the Klingon standing with one hand relaxed on the handle of his mek'leth and surveying B'Elanna anew. Tom wished they had more time--for everything.

"K'Karn," he said, earning the man's attention, "it was great to meet you, but unless you want to join us, I think it's time to say our goodbyes until next time."

"You will fight well, Tom," K'Karn responded, then returned his attention to his little cousin. "B'Elanna."

Unwillingly, she stopped her work to look back at him. "Yes?"

K'Karn put his hand on her shoulder and stared down at her. "I will speak to Miral. She will know of you and your mate, and she will hear proud words from me. She will not doubt your honor, cousin."

B'Elanna's hands relaxed on her console as she took in the full meaning of the compliment. "Thank you," she said.

"Have you a message for her?"

She tried to think of something he could easily carry, but just as quickly shook her head, let out her breath. "Tell her I think of her," she said. She had a feeling her mother would understand.

With another sharp nod before removing himself to the side hatch, K'Karn regarded them both. His stare purposefully burned into them both as he said, "Qapla', cousins."

54902: Almost seven years later

"Oh God, that's it. That's it. That's the last one.... Oh, B'Elanna."

"You did it again, love. Who says the fourth time's not the charm!"

"Damn right it is. God, B'Elanna, look what you've done!"

B'Elanna threw her head back onto the pillow, finally, willfully, releasing her convulsive grip on Jenna's rough hands. "Well?" she gasped, caught another couple of breaths. Without realizing it, tears fell down her face, even as a flickering smile began to match her husband's. "Tom, is she...?"

He was smiling and nodding as he cut and sealed the umbilical cord. Glancing at the Doctor, who readily replaced him at that, Tom stepped around and lifted the tiny form up from his wife's trembling knee.

"She's perfect, B'Elanna," he finally said, blinking at the mist in his eyes. As the Doctor finished Tom's work, Tom placed their squirming, gasping daughter on her still swollen belly and took a cloth from

Jenna to begin cleaning her.

"Oh God, she is," B'Elanna breathed, reaching out to touch her newborn child, her other hand instinctively reaching up to take Tom's, which supported the baby. "And she just might have blonde hair, Tom."

He grinned. B'Elanna had mentioned that one. And true enough, the fluff on the tiny girl's head was certainly lighter than their other children's had been at birth. "Looks like it."

Taking another step toward the Doctor, who gave her a rare appreciative grin when he glanced up from his work, Jenna watched the two adore their newest child. It wasn't anything new to her, aside from the child itself. Yet looking at them there, knowing that in the morning, she'd bring their other children and their big happy family would gather around. It made her miss her own anew--and she missed them anew every waking day.

Jenna watched Tom wrap a warm blanket around his fourth child, then watched B'Elanna kiss the newborn's little head and caress her round cheek as she lead the newborn to her breast. With a blink and a little flinch, B'Elanna grinned at the quick take, and then looked up to her husband. He placed his lips to hers, holding there several seconds before whispering his love to her. Tom then grinned at B'Elanna's next question.

"Of course I have a name," he told her as he reached out for another diagnostic instrument. "Isabel."

B'Elanna smiled. "I like it." The infant didn't look at all like the Isabel they'd known, but it was a fine memory to honor all the same.

Tom glanced at Jenna. "Remember how she and B'Elanna were going to be pregnant together?"

"I do." Jenna nodded, feeling her eyes moisten at the recollection. She'd had a friend on Tinalat, Nora, who'd been like that to her. Having jumped into the Maquis right after the Tinalat massacre, she never found out what happened to Nora or her three girls. She could imagine the best and the worst of possibilities, and dreaded the worst well enough that she never tried to check. Knowing they had perished there would swiftly have replaced Lloyd's corpse with Nora's in her memory... " Best I get back to the babes," she blurted and swung around to leave. "Contact me when you want them to meet their sister."

The Doctor peered up from his work to see his nurse disappear. "Remind me to program more children and name them as meaningfully," he commented.

"I wan see Mommy!"

"Shh, Andre! We have to get to sickbay first."

"Bossy!"

"I'm the oldest. I'm supposed to be bossy--or else you'd just get in trouble."

"Bossy--Wan see Mommy an' Daddy!"

"Stop it, Andre. We'll see Mommy and Daddy in a minute."

"Okay, Awae."

"But what's it, huh? Knowitall!"

"I never said I knew everything. I'm just right when I do."

"So whadya you tink?"

"If you'd wait, you'd know, Kiarn."

"It's a girl," Jenna stated from above the three curly brown heads. Six eyes shot up to her. "Your momma's fine and very tired, as is your papa. --And they've only had a night's rest, so I'd like you all to be on your best behavior for them, else you'll not be getting my wonderful bribe later. I mean it, you three."

"Yes, Jenna," came the chorus from below, making the godmother smile and straighten.

Not a minute after their promise, though, the two elder Paris children shared a smile, making their toddler brother laugh...

"You little buggers," Jenna started, "I know you're up--" She didn't bother with the rest as Alaine and Kiarn took off ahead of her for the turbolift, Andre hurrying not too far behind. Jenna rolled her eyes and commanded, "Computer--suspend turbolift, authorization Harlowe beta-psi-two-eight."

Taking her sweet time to walk the rest of the way to the giggling, squirming, hopping lift, Jenna amused herself with the idea that there had arrived that day a fourth Paris child to rescue poor, beleaguered Neelix from. Even their cheerful resident Talaxian had his limits.

Kathryn had given up on breakfasting the Paris children long ago, though through some insane sense of camaraderie, she had offered to sit them overnight while she enjoyed some rare off-duty time with some knitting and crew reports. Realizing she had fallen asleep, the elder Parisites (a local joke) plotted and executed a brilliant invasion of the captain's lounge, spilling all the contents--woman, PADDs and yarn alike--off the back of the chair and across the floor. The resulting laughter woke the third child early, causing him to rouse straight into a tantrum. The harried captain deposited the brood in the mess hall not a hour later and was gone a minute after that. Harry Kim had grown well beyond being suckered into more than escort service. Chakotay--Jenna snickered at the very reminder--was a lost cause, and to his great luck already on duty. That left the Talaxian as the next to fall.

It was Neelix who'd begged for their Aunt Jenna to "...come and keep our *little friends* company? --How about a *delicious* breakfast? Your favorite? Corned beef and a poached egg, out of my own rations? Please?"

"Oh, but I'm certain they'd love to learn first hand your gastronomical mastery!" Jenna had laughed right back at him as she stretched in her nice, warm bed and giggled more to hear him stammer. In the background, she could hear the little monkeys rattling the pans and chattering nonstop. "--And I'd like some potato strings and applesauce with my breakfast, and sweet cream in my coffee, love."

Wrapping up her hair in a sloppy knot and throwing on her usual dress, leggings and flat boots, she sauntered off to the mess hall to collect the kids.

They soon put away the fruit, pots and utensils and tucked in the chairs they'd pulled so to play under the tables when their aunt ordered them. She replicated them a couple coloring pads and a

pack of waxes and sat them on the sofa.. Chagrined but relieved, Neelix had Jenna's breakfast ready with flowers on the table not a minute later.

Indeed, even Neelix had his limits--and Jenna was a happy woman every time he reached them.

If things worked out the way they'd been planning, there would be other limits to think about on Neelix's part. *I wonder where he'll go*, she wondered, and then figured he'd go about exploring that side of space he'd heard so much about and claimed to be curious about. She could see him staying with Voyager if he could. Kathryn would certainly have him.

Jenna knew well enough what she'd do for herself: Go to her mother-in-law's and get back into her own babies' lives somehow. She wondered how distant they'd be from her by then. They had once been so close knit; her house had been so under her thumb. In turns, she still regretted not going to a counselor like a sane woman might have, rather than deserting her children to her husband's mother. But indeed, she *hadn't* been sane, hadn't thought of anything but her own hatred and fury.

How humbling it had been when Voyager got the letters from home and all her children had written their momma, telling her about their lives and swearing their love and understanding of why she'd sent them ahead and remained with the Maquis. After that, she had increasingly longed for her children, painfully so when she'd let herself feel it and yet knew that no amount of crying would get them back any sooner. Since Voyager had completed that last jump and they all realized they may indeed see the Alpha Quadrant soon, she made a swear of her own that she would never turn away from that most important duty again and make every reparation she could to become a real and good part of their lives.

Jenna knew well, too, that she needed to make those plans. B'Elanna had been thinking hard on that next jump lately, sometimes to the point where it severely frustrated her. *And little wonder*, Jenna smirked to herself, *as transwarp and shield bubbles and all that want-not they fuss with is such a simple matter. --I think not!*

Taking another firm breath, Jenna stepped into the lift. "Deck five."

She imagined what her own five children must look like. *Tommy's twenty-two, graduating from college if Mother Harlowe had anything to do with his education. Patrick's just out of high school, and Laura, my pretty little one, she's just gotten fourteen years....*

"Knowitall!"

"Aunt Jenna said it was a girl, so it's a girl," Alaine persisted, arms crossed and eyes pinned upon Kiarn.

The boy didn't flinch. "Andwe's wight--You're bossy."

"Bossy Awae!"

Jenna drew a slow breath. *Alex and Lizzie were born so close together; they were so little, they probably won't even remember me, not know their own momma. And maybe it's for the best, that....*

"I'm the oldest--that's not bossy. That's smarter."

"Is not!"

Jenna finally stared down at the two. "Alaine, don't incite your brother. You know you're only egging

him on. And you, Kiarn: Stop being such a pest."

"I'm not a pest," Kiarn returned, his clever dark eyes suddenly set between fight and fear.

"You're getting her excited by calling her names," the older woman snapped. "I'd say that's pesky. --And Alaine, you're just asking for trouble by insisting you're right all the time." Jenna glared at the two. "Just be thankful you have each other and good parents to love you. It's a lot more than a lot of children have. *Try to act like it, would you?*"

Alaine blinked, glanced at her equally surprised brother before stepping nearer to her godmother, touching her hand. "Jenna, there isn't anything wrong, is there? Are you sure Mommy's okay?"

Jenna sighed and shook her head. "Your momma's fine," she assured, cursing herself. "Forgive me. I'm getting uptight. --Ah, here we are. Go on, get away from my black cloud." With a sweep of her hand, the children once again ran ahead of her once the lift doors opened.

Also happily disturbing her train of thought was little Andre, stumbling to his hands but propelling himself forward again without effort. Tall for a toddler with curly hair and clever dark eyes, he reminded her so of his namesake--when he didn't remind her of his mother.

I'll have to get the boy a good kicking ball for his birthday, Jenna grinned to herself as she swiftly followed the others. *A real one, no hovers or searchers--and wouldn't it be a treat if he was a natural at it....*

"Wait!" Jenna suddenly called and hurried to catch up before they got to the Sickbay doors. Quickly, she straightened Kiarn's shirt, then fussed with Alaine's hair--but sighed to give it up a few seconds later. "Eh, I'll leave that for your father," she said, then ran her fingers a bit through Andre's curls, parting them to the side. "Very well, now. Quietly. Your baby sister's in there, remember, and she's not used to your clamor yet."

"Yes, Jenna," returned the chorus in a loud whisper.

Taking a breath, the older woman gave a nod and tapped them ahead.

Just as she had left them, but straightened up and lightly rested, the parents still occupied the surgical bay. With her hair pulled up above her freshly-washed face, B'Elanna was dressed to go but still reclining. Tom looked as though he'd just changed and shaved. Their faces lit with tired smiles as their children entered the room.

With a look from his wife, Tom smiled broadly and bent to scoop up his toddler son onto his hip and kiss his three and a half-year old on the head before giving both a lift up to the bedside. After also receiving a peck from her father, Alaine hurried around to the other side of the bed, where a chair sat waiting for her.

Andre crawled up near to his mother first; B'Elanna opened her arm to let him lay by her, snuggle his curly head in her side, as the other two kissed her cheeks.

"Did Jenna tell you that you have a sister?" B'Elanna asked them quietly.

Alaine caught her brother's eyes quickly then nodded. "Yes, Mommy. What's her name?"

"Isabel," she answered. "She's very small and she's going to need a lot of care from Daddy and me. --And don't be disappointed that you don't have another brother."

Kiarn returned a sheepish grin. "I'm not--mostly." Then, on a sudden thought, he squinted at her, his small mouth curling up, then asked, "Mommy, are you a baby wepicator?"

B'Elanna's eyes flew open and shot up to her husband. He too had stopped at the question. "A *what*, Kiarn?" Tom asked on the edge of his grin.

The boy shrugged. "Seven said Mommy wepicates babies."

"Oh she did?" B'Elanna's mouth turned up. "Funny, for all my working with it, I've never been compared to machinery before. --It's a little different, Kiarn." Already she could see the boy's active mind imagining her producing from her belly ice cream sandwiches and stuffed animals. "Seven was trying to be subtle, sweetheart. Mommy is *not* a replicator. I'll talk to her and straighten that out."

Tom stifled his laugh as he turned around. "Just let me be there for that one, B'Elanna."

"Seven was wong?"

Alaine rolled her eyes. "You should have asked Jenna," she scolded and readied for his usual reply to her corrections. But a moment later, it was all forgotten when she saw her father return with a bundle in his arms. When her father came to her side to place the infant in her mother's empty arm, Alaine got on her knees on the high chair to get a good look.

Jenna sighed happily, watching the family there. B'Elanna, surrounded by her babies, shared a proud smile with her husband as the elder children craned close to greet their little sister. Tom's eyes shone as he told them about how the baby came into their world, just like they had before Isabel...

We need to go home, Jenna sighed to herself, then glanced to her side when she heard the Sickbay doors which open. She smiled at the faces that greeted her.

"I see the kids are getting to know the youngest Paris," Chakotay said.

"Like little angels," Jenna confirmed.

Janeway took in the view herself. "They are quite a clan," she grinned. "Those kids... I don't know how they do it."

"They always did like being busy," Chakotay said. "They're at their best when they are."

"True," the captain said and laughed quietly in afterthought. "But I have to admit, I never thought I'd welcome the day when Tom Paris would take over my ship--one by one."

Jenna giggled. "You think you've got problems?" she countered. "Those two whelps are going to outdo my personal best! I give it three more years and they'll have tied my record--unless you start doing your proper duty, Chakotay."

Chakotay shook his head as the captain chortled and turned quickly away to muffle it. "Jenna, of all days for you to get into it."

"I'm not asking you to get in it," Jenna returned. "I'm saying you'd better get *in me*, lest my record be tarnished. I'm forty-two, I should be having the time of my life and thanks to you, I'm withering away like week-old lettuce."

Chakotay wisely said nothing on that.

"The least you can do is some fast work on Aunt Kat here, else the Parises will indeed take over the ship! It'll be mutiny!"

"Just remember we outnumber you, Chakotay," Kathryn clucked. "--Starfleet, I mean...unless you let Jenna have her way, and then only time will tell."

The man remained patient, playing along with both women. Over the last couple of years, they had begun to take a vested interest in making him squirm--or at least Jenna had. Kathryn simply liked to have a turn at bat every now and again. In a way, he was glad she did. So, he played along with them both, telling his captain, "We're just friends."

"Bullshit," Jenna returned and goosed him. He jumped, much to her heightened delight. "Better watch out, Rocky. I've got my sights on you so long as Tom and B'Elanna are still aiming at my record. --And you don't run that fast, so be scared."

"I've run fast enough so far, haven't I?"

"Not all the time, love."

Janeway fought to control her snickers, knowing that she really shouldn't enjoy Jenna's wickedness as much as she did. "This seems like a very personal issue," she said with mock concern, "so I don't think I have any authority here. Just don't let this interfere with your working relationship with Nurse Harlowe, Commander."

Jenna crossed her arms, triumphant. "Yeah, or she'll have to resort to higher forms of discipline."

He laughed. "I'm not going to win this one, am I?"

Jenna winked. "Only if you take us both on."

"Children."

The nurse, the commander and the captain all looked towards the biobed, where five sets of eyes were pointed at them. The tiredly amused half-Klingon mother, however, trained down her grin as she gave them a look.

"I thought I told you not to tease each other in public," B'Elanna admonished, breaking her poker face upon her children's giggles. "Come here and say hello to Isabel."

"Gladly," Chakotay said and moved closer.

Jenna gave Kathryn a wink as she took her arm. "My poor old Lloyd would've spanked me hard for that one. Then again, I like them to fight me." She leaned close to the captain's ear. "Makes them ferocious lovers, you know..."

Kathryn just grinned and shook her head, wondering still how the diminutive woman had ever stayed out of trouble. *If I'd known her at my Academy days, I would've never graduated*, she thought wryly. At the same time, she knew she'd miss the lunacy someday.

Once his old friend was at the bedside, Tom leaned up to him. "I say you go for it, Chakotay," he whispered. "Give her the shock of her life."

"Which one?" Chakotay breathed back with a chuckle.

B'Elanna licked her lips, not daring to glance at the two redheads approaching the end of the bed. "Got a coin, Tom?"

"I got the reply from the Liberty," Tom told his wife as he stepped into the Marseilles' forward bunkroom.

B'Elanna turned from the mirror, still brushing her hair. The look on his face, pale and blank, utterly still, froze for a moment, made her heart beat off key. She'd seen that look before. "And?" she asked softly, knowing the answer, but having to ask it...

His words were emotionless. "Avalar's already gone."

B'Elanna's hand dropped as her eyes closed. She drew a breath and opened them again to find Tom still in the entry, unchanged in expression, though a muscle in his jaw was visibly flexing. Putting her brush down, she left the mirror and moved into his arms to hold him. "I'm so sorry, Tom. I wish we could have..." Even she couldn't suggest something, so she stopped.

"There wasn't anything we could have done," he muttered. "We were too far away and couldn't have stopped them if we hadn't been. Even the cell abandoned the planet, B'Elanna. They couldn't put a dent in the Cardassian offense."

She said nothing, knowing the result. She'd seen a few "planet flayings" herself, the first at Tinalat, and she and Tom had survived the attack at Rislos together, when they sprinted just ahead of the firewall, and ended up in a bunker for four days...

Well, at least something good came out of that, she mused. But they witnessed that devastation three more times after, the effects of the charring phaser wave the Cardassians used to follow up their torpedo blasts. So she knew what they would find if they did go there and that neither of them had any desire to see it again, especially when it was too late to make any difference. *Even so, we should arrange for somebody to go out and check for survivors.*

"Where are we headed, then?" she finally whispered.

"To Juvosic. Chakotay needs some hull components but he can't get away. Renalok's holding him up. I have the list."

"Okay." Sighing deeply, B'Elanna finally turned to ease his coat off his shoulders, and then set it aside. "Come to bed. We'll need our sleep if we're going excavating."

Nodding, Tom continued to undress as his wife finished brushing her hair. Minutes later, they slipped between the covers of their small bed. She turned towards him, holding him closely. Tom welcomed her with a warm kiss before snuggling her cheek against his neck; then he called for the computer to dim the lights.

He remained awake for some time after, long after B'Elanna had succumbed in his embrace. At last, his eyes closed and his breath slowed. He tried to ignore the visions behind his eyes, willed his mind to relax, thought about meditations and counting stars, twisted B'Elanna's hair in his fingers, felt her heartbeat against his chest...

Hours later, B'Elanna groggily awoke, feeling one of the arms she'd been holding yank away from her. She drew a breath as her eyes fluttered open and looked over at him. Cringing, his hand jerkily was pushing his pillow into the wall.

"No...no," he stammered in his sleep, wrestling his head from side to side. "I can't do.... No!"

For watching her alone, Tom wondered how he hadn't ever tired of it, yet every time he did it again, he figured it out pretty quickly. She had such an expressive face, a clever, full mouth and those dark eyes, which held more in them than ten Federation databases. He'd thought that about her the day he met her.

What also never failed to fascinate him was watching B'Elanna nurse their children. Even on their fourth, he never tired of watching their newest infant make a meal of its mother's milk, its little head bobbing against the soft flesh with every suck, and watching B'Elanna hold it, caress it, wince in a blink every now and again, but usually hold a strange, placid smile.

It was so plainly beautiful to Tom that he never tried to describe it, only watched with a small, knowing smile of his own. Every now and again, the parents' eyes would meet and those knowing grins would grow, but aware of what, neither really explained. It didn't need to be explained, anyway. Maybe just knowing they were happy--tired, but content, and often amazed even at that.

After bringing Isabel home earlier that night, B'Elanna napped with the baby on and off and Tom took care of their other and very excited children. Soon after, Jenna arrived to whisk them away and brought them home exhausted. After he'd bathed them and put them to bed, he and B'Elanna laid on their sides in their bed, facing each other as Isabel suckled. Just like every other time. She held their daughter's head steady against her, sharing looks with her husband.

How could anyone tire of that? he thought idly.

After a minute or so, Tom reached out and caressed their infant's fuzzy dark gold curls, amazed they'd actually gotten a fair-haired child. As much as B'Elanna had wanted it, he didn't expect it. Still, she had a full face and mouth--for what they could tell from experience--and big brown eyes: A blonde, ivory-skinned version of her mother.

Moreover, though tiny like Alaine had been, she was ravenous. The boys had nursed less vigorously that little one did. Kiarn and Andre had more often played with their food, took their time. That little lady devoured hers...

"Tom," B'Elanna whispered. He looked up from his daughter to see his wife's eyes widen then dart away. He could practically see her mind cranking faster--and not about babies, he quickly realized. "Do you think we could replicate a batch of the Marseilles' transverse emission coils and refit them to operate in Voyager's metaphasic shield array?"

He blinked, giving himself the required moment to catch up to that extreme change of topic. Then he did do the mental refit and nodded. "I think so. You might want to ask Joe. Why? What are you..." There he stopped. "You want to stabilize a transwarp field with our cloak?"

She grinned, stroked her infant's head tenderly. "It's a way to go about it without bothering with the

Borg again. I think it'll work: If we can get the coils to adapt to Voyager's metaphasic subspace output, we might be able to reuse those transwarp nodes."

"We've made trickier modifications."

"My thinking entirely."

"We'll have to run some tests--take the Cochrane, maybe?"

B'Elanna nodded, stifled a yawn. "Once Isabel's down, we'll contact Seven--and Joe should be getting off duty soon, so we'll have him bring her. We'll let the others in once we get some specs."

Tom nodded, drawing a good breath. The thought felt good, right. Looking once more to his lovely, brilliant, inspired wife, he leaned over and pressed his lips to hers. "This might be the one, B'Elanna," he whispered.

Her eyes lit up again. Grinning down to their daughter, who had only begun to slow down, she slipped her finger into the infant's tiny fist and said, "Guess we're going back, then."

He saw her mouth turn down. "What?"

She remained still. "Where are we going to go?"

"We'll figure that out when we get there," he said. She stared at him, but he only shrugged in response. "I'm serious. We don't know how things are politically over there now, even with a few contacts. When we get back, we'll look around, see what's happening."

"I don't like thinking we have nowhere to go, Tom."

"I know." Reaching out to touch her hand and their daughter's head, he found her gaze intently. "We'll find a place that's be right for us. We did before."

She nodded slowly, then carefully disengaged Isabel, who had finally dozed off. Letting Tom take her, lay her in her crib, B'Elanna leaned up from the pillow to watch him as she straightened her robe. "I wish we could go back to Avalar," she whispered. "I hope we can."

Tom only nodded at first. Once she was settled, though, he held out his hand. When B'Elanna took it, he helped her up and went with her to the main room. "Hopefully we'll be able to," he said, going to the replicator, "if the war's really over and the Cardassians are out of there."

"Even if it was, it wouldn't be --Juice please? ...We also have to choose the best place for the children, where they can have friends and security." She sighed on that truth. She'd never wanted to say it, and at the same time she wondered why their adopted homeworld mattered so much to her. Years ago, she and Tom had agreed--it was not worth the danger if it might affect any of the children. They'd told each other that for years.

They'd still called it home, however.

Taking the glass of juice from him with thanks, she sat in the chair he pulled for her, waited for him to join her. When she saw his quizzical look on his face, she laughed. "God, we're not even there yet and I'm already worrying about it."

"Well, with any luck," Tom returned, "we won't have to go to Bokora, like we'd planned way back."

She smiled at that. "Let's hope we're lucky, then. I never did like that idea as much more than a last resort. If we do have to resettle...maybe Grinara? It's close and neutral... For now, should we call Joe and Seven, or wait?"

"You're not tired?"

"Oh I will be," she assured him, "but not now. My mind's running too much to sleep. I need to get this idea moving now or we won't have to worry about ever finding a place to live."

Tom smiled. That was his B'Elanna.

"Oh God," B'Elanna choked, suddenly frozen in her steps.

It took several seconds for Tom to think to blink, and then to turn away from what they had walked up upon, to hold her arms as she swallowed down the lurch in her gut. He knew well by then that as tough as she could be, her stomach hadn't been included in the deal. Not that his was faring much better: His fingers rubbed her sleeves as he still held her arms, willing himself to breath through it.

He was shaking. So was she. They had expected the sight well before they gave up the pretense of scrap hunting, long before they gave in to their consciences and Tom brought the Marseilles about and rerouted to Avalar. They had seen it all before. They had seen it many times before.

It had become more difficult to see, not less.

At least they'd found adults that time.

Silently, they walked around the tableau, their boots crunching on the blackened earth as they came up to what once was a tree line. But a collection of long, sooty trunks and the skeletons of bushes and fence cables stood there now.

They tried not to breathe too much and did so consciously out of their mouths. But even their tongues were tainted with the acrid air, with that peculiar tinge of death, and it only grew worse as they came closer to what used to be the capital's outer perimeter. They continued forward, anyway. They'd picked up life signs there and some other survivors to the north asked if they could go there and see what was left.

"You! Stop!" came a female's rasp behind them. They obeyed, turning around to find in their eyes a filthy Aldebaran woman in soot-striped clothing, holding a coughing child, equally stained. "Who are you?" she demanded.

Tom went directly to them. The woman stepped back at his pace, though, so he slowed himself. "Sorry to scare you," he said. "I just thought you needed... I'm Tom Paris; this is my wife, B'Elanna. We came to help. The Fairneys sent us. We have medicine and some supplies--not much, but some."

"And we can get some more," B'Elanna said. "Our ship is just over there." She pointed to it, a form partially obscured in the fog of the recent mist of rain. "Just tell us what you need."

The woman regarded them both, then the ship, her child tight against her even after she nodded.

"Food. A bath. There are others in the area who've survived. We've been trying to...rebuild. Not everyone was as hard hit as here on the plain, so we're doing what we can."

"We were just in the ranges," Tom told her. "It's still bad."

"It's all bad," she replied, looked them over again, and then decided. "My husband has a broken arm and some deep cuts. They don't look infected yet. He got them after. I'm okay, but Amik..." She glanced to her child. "She's been coughing a great deal."

"Probably the soot, some radiation, nothing I'm unfamiliar with," Tom told her. "Respiratory problems are pretty common on the Maquis ships, too. The contamination rates should fade on their own according to our readings, but I can treat all of you in the mean time."

"You're Maquis?" the woman said and stepped back again. "You aren't from the cell here."

"They're gone," B'Elanna said flatly. "We don't know where they went."

The colonist closed her eyes a moment, caressed her child's back. "Fools. They got us into this, then ran away when it got tough." If she had it to spare, she might have spit on the ground. "But you're here. How?"

"We heard about the attack from an outside source," Tom told her. "I had a friend here." His eyes turned down before looking back to B'Elanna. "I'm going to get the med kit and some rations for them, see where the Liberty is."

"How long will it take for them to get here?"

"Another couple of days if nobody comes calling," Tom answered and motioned to the woman. "Can you go with her, see what else they need?"

B'Elanna nodded, brushing his arm with her hand as he passed her. "I'll COMM you if there's anything immediate," she said quietly and saw him nod back to her.

She turned back to the dirty survivor, her silent, weakened child. Though the woman seemed better off than the others they'd come across, they both looked like they had lost weight in the days since the attack, which wasn't surprising. She drew a breath to ask about what food they had, then gulped against it.

The colonist nodded to the Maquis' reaction. "You get used to it," she said and started them off, around the deadened trees and a stone wall that had survived the fires but in color. "We're just around the...way."

B'Elanna swallowed again, cringing at the taste. *No, I *won't* get used to that.* Still, she managed to reply, "Thanks."

The woman closed her eyes and shook her head. "No. Thank *you*. I'm tired, and this has been... I'm sorry if I haven't been--"

"Don't be," B'Elanna immediate assured her. "Hell is a good word for what you've been through. You don't have to be anything right now. Just tell us what you need. On that topic, if you want to leave, we can make those arrangements, too."

"Has anyone else asked to go?"

"A few."

The woman nodded to herself. "I bet I can guess who they are. But no, thank you. Uador said we might move if we can't repair the house, but we'd just go north, where there are more survivors. There aren't too many of us left here on the plain--ten or twelve."

"We picked up eleven in six different locations," B'Elanna told her.

"That sounds right. I'll point out their hou...what's left of their houses."

They came around on the rubble that looked like the remnants of a wide, paved path. B'Elanna then paused to stare across the expanse before her. Like everything else there, it was little more than a collection of grays, blacks and putrid pale yellows stretching as far as the horizon, at the foothills. Those mountains, amber-patched granite beneath a solid ashen sky, were the only sign of color left in the landscape. She and Tom had come from that range, from Mila's house. Now she was looking back at it.

B'Elanna's breath stilled.

The feeling in her heart when she spied that rise, looming brightly above the pall of Avalor's wasted plain, made her, for some insane and inexplicable reason, think that maybe K'Karn had a point when he suggested they find a place to live.

"Are you going to be gone long?" Alaine asked, watching her parents shuffle back and forth while they dressed. She hugged Andre close up to her. He meanwhile hugged his stuffed mok'la.

"Probably just today if everything goes as planned," B'Elanna answered, taking a seat between her and Kiarn to pull on her boots. "Jenna's going to stay here with you."

"That's right," Tom said as he pulled on his gray coat then hooked its buttons as he regarded the six eyes that suddenly pointed at him from the bed. "Now, the ship might get shaky for a while--but that's normal and nothing to worry about. Mommy and I are going to be on the Marseilles, making sure we keep from bumping too much. Jenna will try to explain everything that happens."

B'Elanna nodded, hugging Kiarn up close to her side as she also addressed them all. "So you listen to Jenna, be good with her today."

"No pranks," Tom warned. "No tripping or playing tricks--and no fighting. Jenna's going to need your help and so will Isabel, who won't know what's going on and will probably start fussing a lot because of that. Your mother and I are going to be very busy and won't be able to come back down to check on you until we're done. Okay?"

"Okay, Daddy," said the older two, only the barest mischief remaining in their eyes when they glanced at each other.

Andre looked up. "Me too."

"Good," B'Elanna said. "Now we're counting on you." With that, though, and seeing all three look

back up to her, she couldn't help but smile. "But Daddy and I know you'll do great."

"Are we going to be able to go home after today?" Alaine asked.

Tom and B'Elanna shared a glance then looked again at their children. "We don't know," he said gently. "Avalar might not be safe. But there are a lot of places we can all live that would be like it. The Alpha Quadrant's a big place. We'll have to see, Alaine. But then, we first have to get there, right?"

The girl's full mouth turned up. "Right." She quieted as her parents stood again to finish getting ready, collected what PADDs they needed and, lastly, looked in on Isabel.

Alaine had grown up knowing her homeworld was a long way away and loved going to the holodeck with her brothers to wander around the place, play at the lake and explore all the nooks and crannies of the rocks in the gorge all the way down to the plain. Once every week, they all went there to have a picnic lunch, usually in front of the house, but sometimes they'd find another place, too. Her parents told them it was a real place. Alaine wished on stars sometimes that she'd be able to see it for real, too, someday.

Thinking on that, the girl's little smile lasted until Jenna finally arrived; she kissed her parents when they said their goodbyes and took Andre with her to the craft table when Kiarn went to get his building sets.

Even though her parents seemed a little nervous--they always were like that when they did new things on the Marseilles--Alaine remained pleasantly anxious, and to ensure her good behavior by staying busy, she took to her coloring sheets, where she imagined big trees and hills, orange and gray rocks and a bright blue sky, just like what she knew.

"If I remember correctly," Tom said, holding his wife's hand as they came around the bend, "it's just...around here."

But it wasn't there. He furrowed his brow.

"Maybe a little further. Chakotay and I passed it a few times when we walked here."

B'Elanna sighed, nodded. Once she had told him to take her back to the hills, Tom had set his heart on finding the old guesthouse. It was far up enough, he asserted, that it was probably okay. For him, she cooperated.

Turning eastward, they came upon another incline. B'Elanna's heeled boots sank and slipped on the pebbled ground. But Tom was still holding her hand and pulled her up with him, keeping his own purchase with some effort. "Really, it used to be covered with grass and wildflowers," he told her. "Blame the Cardassians."

B'Elanna growled a little but continued without more complaint as she let her husband support her unsteady balance all the way up to the top of the rise.

There, they found it.

The structure was small, half black with soot. The windows had imploded; some of the support timbers were loose and some of the slates had been broken. The generous yard on the open step of the mountain was hard, bare and swept with ash. Some rubble from the sharp hill behind it had partially crushed an adjoining room of the house.

But the roof was of old fashioned red slate, rising from only a meter or so from the ground to a high peak on the main part of the house and formerly on the cross section. An anachronistic stone chimney rose uninjured from one side. As they walked around it, B'Elanna eyed the large windows in the front, and then the small, trellised porch.

It was simple, what some might have coined "a quaint little chalet." In that case, however, it was a chalet close to coming apart at the seams and sitting on the edge of a planetary massacre.

B'Elanna's mouth twitched at the corners. "I like it."

Tom nodded slowly. "Me too."

The breeze came down the hill, creaking the house somewhere within its weakened beams. Then they looked at each other, their eyes only beginning to reflect what they'd gotten themselves into.

"*Voyager to Marseilles, we're just about done here and waiting for your ready.*"

"Thanks, Joe," B'Elanna said crisply. "We'll have the cloak online in a couple more minutes. Start generating the field only after we've extended the photonic grid. --Tom, has the containment analysis completed yet?"

"Everything's checking out," he said calmly, his nerves settling quickly as their business stepped up.

Over the last three months, they had prepared, tested, retested, calculated, installed, prepared--and then tested some more. Everything looked good, and nothing in his mind or instinct was stirring to disturb his confidence in their plan. They could make that last jump--they *would* make that jump.

Tom started tapping on his console. "Harry, I'm transmitting our phase scans. I'm not reading any conflicts, but I want to see your numbers too."

"*I'm compiling the data,*" the ensign replied over the open COMM.

Tom grinned as the data came back to him. "So, what're you going to do first, Harry? Get yourself a real plate of seafood linguini or a real girl?"

Harry laughed. "*That's a tough question, Tom. Let me get back to you on that.*"

B'Elanna also snickered, but then told him, "Harry, I'm picking up some subspace irregularity in this projection. Kathryn, I suggest you shut down Voyager's shield emitters. We have the metaphasics online here. Let the Marseilles do the work."

"*That's going to make things choppy on your end,*" the captain replied with a hint of caution.

"We can take a rough ride," B'Elanna replied.

Tom clicked off the COMM and said aside, "Plus it'll give Isabel a taste for milkshakes right off." He then clicked the COMM back on.

B'Elanna coughed a laugh. "God, Tom! Now that's all I'll think about today!"

A pause followed on both ships.

"*I don't think we caught that, B'Elanna,*" came Chakotay's voice, etched with a big grin. "*Please repeat?*"

B'Elanna was still laughing as she returned to her last minute checks. "Not on your life, Chakotay."

A chuckle was his only reply. In the mean time, Voyager's shields dropped. Nodding to that, Tom tapped on a few more buttons. "Cloaking grid is online," Tom announced.

"Marseilles to Voyager," B'Elanna continued, "I'm expanding the grid. Take navigation offline and begin generating transwarp in t-minus 95 seconds...mark."

"*Navigation is offline,*" Harry reported.

"The grid is sealed," said B'Elanna.

Tom took a slow breath, all business again as he stared out the viewport of his ship, his finger perched precariously over his console. That familiar wave of calm and concentration that had been building before had now washed over him; he felt his senses heighten even as his body relaxed. Soon, his mind recreated the angles and speeds they would be achieving to enter the transwarp field and computed the adjustments he would need to make while within that field--a kind of mental triple check that always seemed to happen whether he willed it or not.

It looked good. It felt right. Nothing in his pilot's instinct told him otherwise, and that alone he trusted like any mere truth.

It was time.

"Going to warp...now."

Moving

55156: Nine days later

The Federation Starship Voyager made its entry into Federation space not too far inside the Beta Quadrant six-point-eight years after it left on a mission to capture the Maquis ship Liberty and rescue one of its agents.

Without exaggeration, their return was deemed a miracle by the experts when they first compiled the data that was sent. An old, illegal cloaking device on a small Maquis craft--originally a Barolian scout and once a bane to enemy ships in and around the DMZ--was extended to support and guide the Voyager during an otherwise unstable, Borg-inspired transwarp field, which had been generated on the larger ship. It had been a hazardous journey, particularly for those inside the Maquis craft--a Maquis sub-captain of infamous reputation and his half-Klingon wife, his comrade in arms. But the risk had paid off, setting both ships in Beta Quadrant only eight light years away from the Federation border.

The analysts were still shaking their heads when they explained the data to their superiors.

A rendezvous was arranged immediately. The closest ship, the Sovereign Class starship Disraeli, met the Voyager four days later, just as the latter crossed into Federation space.

Not five minutes later, Captain Kathryn Janeway, accompanied by her first officer, Commander Chakotay, her chief of security, Commander Tuvok, her chief engineer, Lieutenant Commander Carey, and her operations officer, Lieutenant Harry Kim, were all in transporter room two to greet the officers who came aboard to welcome them home.

The captain had to take a deep, calming breath to temper her excitement when the patterns appeared on that pad. But her glowing expression said it all when she moved forward to greet her guests, her colleagues, her peers. She could hardly speak without a laugh catching the edge of her tone as she gladly introduced her own entourage.

Certainly, their initial greetings had a decidedly unreal feeling about them: the open, sudden laughs and the clasped hands of greeting, followed by the afterglow, when both parties simply stood staring at each other, wondering where to go from there. Somewhere along the line, a chortle broke the silence, and then a renewed thankfulness followed it, along with some promised Federation news. Soon enough, even that wore down into simple relief and the final, stunning acceptance of reality.

They were home.

Finally, Voyager's captain gathered the presence of mind to offer a tour of her ship and a recap of

their discoveries and travels to the lower ranking officers, while she gestured to their superior. No reason, Janeway thought, not to start at the top priority and work her way down. Her officers could easily handle the others. Gesturing to the admiral, she led him out of the transporter room, into the corridor and to the turbolift.

"A cloaking device," he commented when the nature of their voyager home was immediately broached. "The one Starfleet had believed had been installed on the Marseilles indeed had been." The admiral was not pleased to hear it a third time. He held his hands behind his back as they entered the turbolift, then set off on an easy stroll through the wide corridor.

"Computer, deck five," Janeway commanded, then looked again at her superior. "The cloak was adjusted to form a transverse shield bubble around Voyager and stabilize the transwarp field we generated from an older Borg node," the captain confirmed, glad he got that out of the way first.

"Ingenious," he replied blankly.

Janeway looked up to the firmed face of the man beside her. "If someone tells you B'Elanna's the best at her trade, you'd be hard pressed to call them a liar. And I'm still trying to figure out how Tom kept the field stable in that inverse pattern...." Her words drifted off when she eyed a narrow stare pointed at her. The lift stopped; she didn't blink. "I wouldn't worry about the legal ramifications of the Marseilles' equipment now," she said, then nodded and stepped from the turbolift first when he politely gestured for her to.

"You believe this?" the admiral queried. "In spite of the good it came to, Starfleet can't ignore--"

"Tom and B'Elanna say it's burned out beyond repair," she interjected. "Both the plasma coils and tetryon compositor were irradiated by the increased output levels of the transwarp nodes. As it is, they have a couple months of work to get the Marseilles back to warp capability. It's why we didn't get all the way to the Alpha Quadrant."

He stared at her, not knowing whether to laugh or berate the straight-spoken captain. She had not only interrupted him, a forgivable offense after so much time, but she also tossed aside the issue he'd subtly tried to warn her about. The sheer illegality of the scout's 'former' capabilities didn't seem to faze her--likely because of distance. From their last contact and exchange of logs, he knew she had utilized the ship, its crew and its cloaking stealth on more than a few occasions--whenever necessary, in fact. This aside from some of her own maneuvers on Voyager...

But then he reminded himself that he hadn't come all that way to argue policy with Kathryn Janeway.

Unfortunately, there would be others who would. Even before Voyager had reached Federation space, hearings had been arranged. He hoped she was right and the device indeed was disabled. If they might simply take the apparatus out of the scout, several of their problems would be solved.

"In any case, I'd like to discuss that with them, eventually... I would have thought they would be there to greet us, seeing as it was their devising that helped bring all of you here."

Janeway offered a slight shrug as they turned into an outer corridor. "They went on off-duty status once the Marseilles' engines were stabilized. In fact, at this time of day, they're probably still in bed."

"They're asleep? They come home after seven years and they're sleeping? Did they know about the rendezvous?" He was truly surprised.

She grinned. "Admiral, with four children, one only an infant? I wouldn't expect them to be awake unless it was absolutely necessary." Janeway slowed a little as they came to the door. "For that matter, it was my decision not to wake up the circus when the Disraeli arrived. It's not even oh-seven hundred. The boys don't usually wake up until eight hundred--and when they do, the very universe is at their mercy."

"Even so, Kathryn--"

"Admiral," she cut in, aware of where he was going, "they're civilian crew. Their life is separate from Starfleet code and I respect that. Aside from their regular work, they have young children. Add their nonstop repairs on two ships for the past four days, plus the weeks of heavy preparation before that? --I'm willing to let them get some rest, no matter where we are." Looking up at him, she reached out to the door panel. "If you want to get off on the right foot with them, I would highly recommend you do the same. It's been a long time: Tom's pretty set in his ways and B'Elanna is no different. You have a lot of catching up to do, Admiral."

Though not a little shocked at Janeway's demeanor--*She's been away a *long* time*--he did allow himself a small smile at the truth of it. She'd always had a knack for cutting to the gist, a trait he'd always admired, even when it wasn't the most advantageous bearing in their current position.

"Well," he relented, "at least it won't be the first time I've had to get my son out of bed."

Janeway chuckled. "Oh, Tom's easy. It's B'Elanna who prefers to sleep in--infant or no infant."

"Tom always slept like the dead!"

"I think he grew out of that," she replied, turning to face the door.

The admiral noticed the move, but said nothing.

Their sudden silence was rescued as the doors before them slid open, revealing a little girl. She was dressed in an orange jumper and strange animal slippers; a mass of sable brown curls popped out of a slept-in braid and her fair brow boasted a set of softly arching ridges. Her eyes, sharp blue and unabashed, drew up the admiral's frame to finally meet his stare, staying there a moment before diverting to the other person there.

"Good morning," came her voice, a properly girlish chirp that also told the older man that morning visits were nothing out of the ordinary.

"Good morning, Alaine," Janeway said kindly.

The admiral's heart panged at the name, and he suddenly found himself looking beyond the door instead of at the child.

"Are your parents awake?" the captain continued.

Alaine glanced at the admiral again before answering. "No. Daddy woke up last night and so did Isabel for a while."

The captain face darkened. She paused briefly, drew a breath, regaining her former posture. "I see. We can come back later."

Alaine shook her head. "Mommy wouldn't like it if I let you go away," she said as she stepped back

and let them in with all the seriousness a six year-old could manage. "Come in, please. I'll tell Mommy. But please be quiet. My brothers are still asleep, too."

Janeway looked at the bemused admiral with a little grin and a shrug before leading the way into the Parises' quarters.

With that invitation, Owen Paris stepped into his son's home. His eyes roamed the main room, taking in every detail and making mental notes. His son's home for the past seven years: It was almost unreal and perhaps a little surprising, and then not surprising at the same time.

Perhaps the ceilings were Starfleet issue, but little else was: The deep blues and dark woods of the room were softened with the greens of plants flourishing by the starlit window under timed lights just beginning their artificial sunrise. A fluffy white throw rug dominated the center of the room. The space was neat, save a children's table covered with crayons and etching slates and a glass of juice on the table.

One door to the right was open, wherein he could see what was plainly a girl's room. The bed there had a colorful, puffed blanket on it, half pulled up to the pillow. The other door was closed. Between them were another small table set and several rows of shelves with PADDs and books. To the left, past a crowded but organized console desk, a door opened when the little girl pressed the panel beside it.

He could not avoid, nor resist, looking at the lumpy blue bed the girl approached. He could not see his son, however. What he did spy was a mass of dark hair like the girl's and an outstretched arm, its hand brightened with a glint of gold.

The form beside that more visible one, he knew, was Tom.

Alaine neared the bed, and Owen couldn't break his gaze as she pulled the blanket down a little, very gently, partially uncovering the woman he'd known but in letters and through hearsay and records, his daughter-in-law.

"Mommy," Alaine whispered, giving her mother a little jiggle, careful for her father and Isabel's sakes. "Mommy, you need to wake up now."

"Mmm," B'Elanna purred and took a slow breath. Her arm bent, reaching up to touch her daughter's cheek; then she took her small hand. Her eyes were barely open when she spoke. "Sweetheart, Daddy's been up; so has Isabel."

"I know, Mommy. I heard."

B'Elanna took another deep breath, still caressing the hand in hers. "Your brothers can't be up yet."

"Andre almost woke up, but I gave him his mok'la and he went back to sleep."

"You're a good girl," B'Elanna breathed, closing her eyes again, sighing resignedly. "Are you hungry?"

"No. Not yet. I had juice... Mommy, Grandpa's here."

"Hmm?"

Alaine bent closer. "I'm waking you up because Grandpa Paris is here."

B'Elanna's eyes opened.

Her daughter nodded as their eyes met again. In the corner of her eye, she caught a large form of red and gray. She turned her head and caught Admiral Paris in her eyes. He was staring at her.

Without thinking, she sat up.

Then she saw the man she'd waited years to meet return a look of shock at his own first impression of her, then quickly avert his eyes. B'Elanna stifled a laugh as she leaned over to pick her nightgown off the floor.

"Alaine, will you bring my robe, please?" she chuckled, seeing Kathryn also trying not to laugh as she shook her head and walked out of sight.

Soon, she donned the robe Alaine hurried over and tied it. With a kiss and a soft whisper to her husband, she slid out of the bed, into a pair of slippers and quickly to the bathroom to wash her face and hastily brush her hair. Silently, stuffing a yawn, she shuffled through her bedroom again, closing the door behind her.

Owen heard the door close and turned again to see his son's wife standing still at the door in a thin white robe, her hand just drifting from the panel. Alaine did have her mother's looks with blue eyes, he noted, not daring to look anywhere else.

B'Elanna found him still nearly as red as his uniform, which pleasantly surprised her. From everything Tom has said about the man, she would never have expected him to be so awkward about anything. *Well, that broke the ice.* She shrugged to herself then said, "Don't be embarrassed, Admiral." She gestured to herself. "After nursing four children, these are secret to no one."

Owen coughed a short laugh at that. "I suppose not."

Pleased that she'd managed a little smile from him already, she moved across the room and extended her hand. "I'm B'Elanna, Tom's wife. I'm honored to finally meet you."

"And I you," he returned, now impressed by the woman's ease, frighteningly familiar were it not for her looks. He glanced to the door, releasing her hand. "Forgive me if I seem rude, B'Elanna, but Tom wouldn't happen to be up, would he?"

"I'll wake him in a bit," B'Elanna replied. "We were up half the night and he really needs some rest."

"I might say the same for you," he pointed out, "with a newborn child."

"Isabel is almost sixteen weeks old. I've been sleeping more. Tom sometimes has trouble sleeping, so I don't often wake him." Certain in her words before, she then shrugged. "Regardless, I'll get him once we've made some coffee--and, yes, some croissants, Alaine."

The girl smiled.

Owen knew she wasn't telling him everything. What was instantly clear was that the good-natured half-Klingon was in control of whatever had shadowed Kathryn's face before and seemed but a mere truth in his granddaughter's earlier statement. But he knew Kathryn was right: He shouldn't push anything, should start out slowly, and not press their rules. This was his son's family, and he had much to become acquainted with.

"Of course, B'Elanna," Owen acquiesced and nodded to her gesture towards the dining table.

Despite her own advice, however, Janeway stared at her hostess. "It's been almost ten years since they've seen each other."

"And a few more minutes won't hurt either of them," she returned simply, leading Owen to sit before pulling another chair. "I'll make some coffee and have that ready when Tom gets up. He'll need it." She'd put the last of that definitively enough that the captain did not reply. B'Elanna nodded to her and continued, "Please make yourself comfortable. Alaine, would you like to set the table?"

"Okay, Mommy."

Within minutes and without another word, B'Elanna had fresh coffee brewing on a warmer in the center of the table next to a tray of condiments, compote and pastry as soon as Alaine had set out the place mats and napkins.

All the while, she did not stop her daughter from telling her extremely polite grandfather all about her brothers and her new sister. Though usually chatter that early did tend to raise her nerves, it was engaging her guest and B'Elanna was still too tired to entertain him herself.

After pouring three cups, she accepted the usual compliments with a slight grin and a nod. Her attention was rather focused on her father-in-law.

He's trying to be patient, B'Elanna observed, watching the admiral nod to everything Alaine told him from her perch on the dinette chair. He tried to answer all her questions, but B'Elanna could tell his friendliness was bated. He was fighting distraction. *Maybe I should get Tom before Isabel wakes, then*, she thought as she sipped at her much-needed coffee. She still sighed to herself, knowing what'd gone on very early that morning, also knowing Tom had probably paced the floors long after she'd fallen back to sleep, which was only a couple hours ago.

Drinking the half-cup she'd poured herself, she decided to go ahead and get on with her day. The boys would be up soon, especially if they sensed a gram of excitement outside their door. There'd be much to do and arrange and more still to talk about. Looking around her living room, she realized all over again how much they needed to pack with no idea when or where they'd be unpacking....

"Excuse me," she said quietly and slipped away from the table.

Owen followed her with his eyes, watching her move swiftly across the room. She pressed the door open. In a glimpse as she moved inside, he saw his son leaning over a crib on the other side of the bed.

Tom had on a dark, untied robe over a pair of casual trousers. His hair was uncombed. He seemed taller, somehow, than Owen remembered, even at that distance, and sturdier. Or maybe he'd expected to see the same young man he'd last known. Either way, the admiral reflexively stood as B'Elanna approached her husband, placed her hand upon his shoulder...

Then the door closed.

Kathryn watched the man's face fall, his posture weaken a little, and she couldn't help but sigh at the sight. "He'll be out soon," she said encouragingly, "once B'Elanna tells him."

Owen grimaced, shook his head. "Never thought I'd be this unnerved to see him," he muttered. "I'd thought about it for some time now."

"It's been a long time," Kathryn acknowledged, a little careful, then. "I'm sure it hasn't made it

easier, being left to wonder so much. But if it's any comfort, you've been thought about on this end, too."

"That doesn't tell me what to say, Kathryn," he replied.

"You'll do fine, Admiral."

Looking down, he caught her little smile, just beyond the lip of her cup before she sipped again, and he managed to return the expression. She was right, after all. He was just out of his element--in place and mood.

"Mommy and Daddy have your picture up on the wall," Alaine said suddenly and met her grandfather's eyes when they turned to her. "They do--in their room. So don't be scared. Daddy loves you--and he said he couldn't wait to see you again."

"He did, did he?" Owen grinned.

"Yes. I did."

Turning again, he saw his son in the door, still ruffled with sleep but wearing a loose shirt and trousers. He was barefooted. B'Elanna stood at his side, their infant daughter held steadily at her breast to nurse, a soft blanket draped over her.

Sharing a little grin with her husband, B'Elanna quietly moved away, back to the table, motioning Alaine not to greet her father just yet.

Tom's eyes were a bit dark--probably for lack of sleep--but they managed to brighten at the sight he likely thought he'd never see again. Then, the grin that'd crossed his mouth before grew into a full smile. He was so grown, Owen mused. Even the pictures didn't reveal so much as seeing Tom there, a father of four, husband, medical technician and pilot...

His father was older, his remaining hair fully gray, his body a bit slimmer, a little shorter. Though, that posture, that seasoned stance that looked both at ease and dictatorial, had not changed in the least. Most noticeable of all, his face held an expression--either age or need had put it there--that was totally foreign to Tom. It was pure, almost desperate, expectation.

But it was his father. He was there. His father had come to him.

"Dad..." He felt his hand twitch as he said it then coughed a little laugh. *I'm not going to shake his damned hand, here*, he admonished himself and walked across the room. Opening his arms as he neared, he hugged his father upon arrival, and then smiled when he felt the gesture returned. In that odd embrace, he realized his father wore the same cologne as he always had and his arms hadn't lost an ounce of strength. Tom laughed at the irony of that familiarity--and that it was a pleasant thing now. "Damn, it's good to see you."

Owen parted from his son to look at him again, or perhaps to steel a little distance. It had all been so waited for and yet so strange. His son's embrace had surprised him, the warmth of his greeting felt inappropriate for reasons he couldn't figure out. In response, he didn't know what to say, except, "And you, Tom."

Thankfully, he didn't have to say more, as Tom just shook his head and gave his shoulder a pat. "Don't worry about it, Dad. No shows, no tearful confessions, right? We'll just take things slow and easy for now. Letters can't say everything."

He was relieved. "I'm glad we agree."

Silence followed.

Owen shifted from one foot to the other.

"How about some coffee?" B'Elanna prompted and set a full cup in the place beside the admiral's with her free hand.

"Thanks," Tom said and moved to collect Alaine into his arms. "Morning, Banshee."

"Morning, Daddy," she said, kissing him before he set her back down on her chair.

"Alaine, have you shown your grandfather your pictures, yet?"

She smiled brightly. "Should I get them now?"

"Sure. Show him what a good artist you are." He turned a grin to his father. "Alaine makes some pretty nice houses--and fantastic mushrooms."

Alaine sighed impatiently. "They're *flowers*, Daddy," she insisted and jumped down to the floor. "I'll get them and show you, Grandpa. Later, Kiarn can show you his dough people, too. I make scenes for them to play on--maps and stuff. But I'll show you mine, first."

Once Alaine had scurried off, Tom gave their other guest a look. "So, what do you think, Kathryn?"

Janeway shrugged. "I'm working on it--after I get another cup of coffee." She grinned when Tom instantly refilled her cup. "That anxious, hmm?"

"That curious," Tom corrected.

"Tuvok will contact me when we've got our coordinates laid out."

"Which should be soon," B'Elanna noted. "They wouldn't hold us up, unless... What is our status, being Maquis?"

Owen looked up when he belatedly realized the question was directed at him. He blinked at her expression. Still holding her nursing infant closely to her, B'Elanna's face had melted into a blank concern, a total change of mood from before. Tom, too, was intent on the answer. Owen nodded to himself. Naturally, they were concerned about their freedom because of their past crimes. He had to admit he was glad they were not denying or trying to ignore it. At the same time, he suddenly realized that it had indeed been easier to forgive Tom from a distance, to come to terms with Tom's decisions. Judging from his daughter-in-law's statement, they still felt they were a part of what they left, even if it no longer existed. It was still their designation.

"As you already know," Owen said, failing to sound unofficial, "the Maquis factions were dissipated nearly four years ago. The statuses of those remaining Maquis had been finally decided upon last year. If they wished to remain Federation citizens, there were given pardons and let to lead normal lives. A few chose otherwise and went elsewhere. So there are no more legal ramifications for your former alliances."

Tom wisely said nothing on that--*Not so former, Dad*--but nodded. "Well, at least we won't have any trouble going back."

"Though, I'm certain your scout ship will be required to at least undergo several inspections and modifications before being released by Starfleet."

B'Elanna stiffened, shared a glance with Tom. "With all due respect," she said, "any modifications needed on the Marseilles should be done by Tom and I."

"I'm sorry?"

"Starfleet has no reason to hold the Marseilles for any extended period," Tom joined in.

Owen sighed. "It's an illegally gotten ship--"

"It was a derelict that B'Elanna and I asked Chakotay to stop and pick up while in the field," Tom quietly stated, "and the majority of it was fixed with scraps--none of which were Federation equipment."

B'Elanna nodded. "It's our ship. For Starfleet to insist on anything beyond stripping what's left of the cloaking device would be completely out of line."

The admiral's brows rose. More, he saw that his son, standing straight beside his wife, agreed. Neither set of eyes turned down. *Well*, he thought, *I might have expected no less...*

Alaine was returning, and as Owen turned his eyes away from the two, Tom drank down his coffee before moving to take Isabel for his wife.

"It can all be ironed out later," he said quietly to B'Elanna, who nodded, knowing well that it wasn't an issue for the children to hear.

Kissing his baby daughter on the head, and then propping her up on his shoulder to pat her back, Tom nodded to his other girl. "Alaine, show your grandfather the striped houses."

"*Your* favorites," she accused with a giggle and flipped through her coloring book. She glanced at Owen. "Daddy likes these best. Mommy likes the purple one."

Owen graciously looked down to Alaine's displays--her very colorful houses and wild gardens, appropriate for her age, and yet quite imaginative in the patterns and blends. Generous in his praise, he glanced up to see Tom and B'Elanna's appreciative grins, and then back to Alaine, his wife's namesake...

A little artist, he grinned to himself. It fits.

Meanwhile, Kathryn glanced up to see Tom and B'Elanna's gazes meet again; their expressions melted into a kind of seriousness that could be either thoughtful or angry. It was hard to tell with those two. Whichever it was, she knew those two well enough by then to know a lot wasn't being said, but would eventually.

There was some stirring in the last closed room, so B'Elanna finally broke away to get the boys up, unwilling at first to give up the stare she'd shared with Tom.

The captain tipped her cup to drink again, turning her attention back to the admiral and his newfound family. At least that part was going well. Knowing that, she could get back to the business of getting the rest of the way home, and she set down her emptied cup to finally start it. She had a family to get back to as well, after all.

Owen was wise enough to retain his seat at the dinette when the "Parisian reveille," as Kathryn wryly called it, began in full swing.

Once Kathryn left, Tom took Isabel to change and dress her, then bring her back into the main room and lay her under a playset for the time, batting some of the toys around himself to get her going before standing again. Meanwhile, Alaine went back to her room and Tom followed for a moment before returning with a pair of socks for the refresher.

As the infant grabbed the wheels and started to coo and kick, two rambunctious boys with hair like their mother's cropped close on the napes came running like lightning out of their rooms and into their father's arms as he turned and knelt to greet them. Tom hoisted them both up backwards like two sacks in his arms. They roared and squealed with delight, kicking as their father carried them back to the bedroom. There, B'Elanna waited, arms crossed but her mouth turned into a slight and knowing grin.

"Time to get dressed and meet your grandfather," she told them, "and I'll replicate some waffles for breakfast."

"Wit kiwi jam?" Kiarn asked, wide-eyed when Tom put him to his feet and turned him around.

"Yes," she obliged. "Waffles and kiwi jam for everyone. Now let's move."

Ushering her older son ahead, she disappeared into the room, Tom not long behind, Andre still writhing and giggling in his arm.

One minute later, Alaine reclaimed her seat at the table and smiled at her grandfather as she laid her hairbrush on the table. She'd gotten her stockings and shoes on, and now reclaimed her juice while she waited for her parents to return. Occasionally, she'd look over at her little sister, who was contentedly smacking a spinning mirror on the wheel bar above her as three different and occasionally loud conversations rose and ebbed without any sense or pattern in the other room.

A few minutes after that, Tom appeared with Andre, who was now dressed, had his hair combed and was holding onto a stuffed animal unlike one Owen had ever seen. The father disposed the boy on the grandfather's lap, introducing the toddler as he turned back for the bedroom. A couple minutes after that, Kiarn introduced himself, staring at the older man as Isabel squealed behind them and B'Elanna started breakfast.

"You're like your picture," Kiarn decided aloud, "jus' older." He shook the tail of Andre's stuffed creature and growled loudly, making his brother laugh.

"Mok'la's hungee!" Andre announced, looking back to his mother.

"Mok'la will be fed in just a minute," B'Elanna replied, otherwise undisturbed as she tapped her instructions into the computer. "Alaine, Kiarn, come help."

Tom had disappeared, Owen suddenly noticed. Alaine scooted off her chair to help her mother dispense the plates and serve breakfast. B'Elanna lifted Andre from his grandfather's lap and into a booster seat, turned to cut up his food, then gave him a kiss on the head and his plate. Kiarn ran around to get his plate from his sister then happily crawled up to his seat, thanking his mother as she went back to the replicator once more. A moment later, growling emanated from the booster seat.

"Mok'la doesn't eat waffles," B'Elanna called behind her. Andre immediately pulled the stuffed toy away from the plate and picked up a square of his waffle.

Finally, the quarters quieted to the sounds of utensils and Andre kicking the base of the chair. Behind him, the infant whacked a rotating rattler, gasped another laugh.

"Are you hungry?" B'Elanna asked the admiral when she looked his way again.

"Oh, no. Thank you, but I ate on the Disraeli."

With a small smile and a nod, she replicated a few more croissants and set them on the table, then took one for herself. Her eyes roamed the table before settling on Isabel for a long moment.

She seemed to be waiting, nibbling on the pastry, sipping her coffee. A couple times, she picked Andre's cup back up for him, rearranged his food and told the other children not to eat so quickly.

Tom returned, shaved, combed and dressed, draping a long coat from his arm across the back of his chair before giving his wife a kiss. Putting her cup aside, she checked on Isabel, then disappeared to the bedroom.

"Hope we're not overwhelming you," Tom grinned as he took his daughter's hairbrush and pulled apart her braid while she continued to eat. "B'Elanna and I usually get up at the same time--and a little earlier. We're a little off the routine lately."

"Yes, Kathryn told me you and B'Elanna have your own clockwork."

Both Tom and Alaine chuckled at that. "Kathryn's had the pleasure of seeing some busy mornings."

"When Mommy went to Sickbay to have Isabel," Alaine explained, oblivious to her father's brushing her hair while she ate and talked, "Aunt Kat watched us." She giggled again. "Remember when we woke her up, Kiarn?"

"Yeah," the boy snickered. "Aun Kat said we were wicked gemins--"

"Gremlins," Alaine corrected. "And then she crawled up off the floor and growled like a bear."

Tom somehow held back the laugh that mental image called up as he worked Alaine's hair into a long, thick braid. Kathryn still hadn't let them off the hook for that one. From time to time, while Alaine and Kiarn continued to relate their more recent adventures on Voyager, he glanced towards his bedroom door. Done with Alaine, seeing that Andre was fine, chewing at his waffle pieces with his cup dangling in his other fingers, and then seeing that his father's cup was still half-full, Tom reached out for his own coffee and downed it.

"Kiarn, Alaine, keep an eye on Andre and Isabel. I'll be right back." Tom squeezed his father's shoulder as he moved past. "Be back in a minute."

"Go right ahead," Owen said, oddly enjoying the children's gossip. That time, he didn't even notice Tom close the bedroom door behind him.

Tom found B'Elanna as he'd expected, finishing dressing in the bathroom, her face made, hair loose. She glanced up to him in the mirror's reflection as she tied her tunic at the side. In that glance, the strangeness, the relief and their tiredness shone through.

She blinked; he nodded.

"You okay?" she asked. He hadn't slept well in days and the strain of it was showing. She hadn't slept very well, either, and not only because of Tom's disturbances.

Tom nodded. "I will be," he said and moved to embrace her from behind. He closed his eyes as her arms covered his. "It's just weird, B'Elanna, having my father out there in the dining room."

"I guess it is, seeing him after all this time and so...willing." She continued to watch her husband. His eyes didn't open, but his mouth flickered in a grin. "We knew this would take some getting used to, that it'd be hard to leave Voyager."

"Yeah, we did."

"So, we'll get used to it...maybe my family, too."

Tom opened his eyes to see her still staring at him. "Yeah," he said softly, "it'll be nice when everything settles down again, won't it?"

"You got that right."

"And it's only begun."

Giving his arms another squeeze, she released them. Reaching over, Tom took her brush out of the drawer and with the other touched her hand. Wordlessly, she let him lead her back to sit on the bedside.

She glanced back as he lowered himself behind her. "If we can just hold things together for the time being, before we get settled..."

Her words drifted off as Tom began to brush her hair, though he did nod. "We will. I promised you that before, B'Elanna, and I meant it." He drew a deep sigh as he let his fingers go through her thick locks, drawing them out over his palms, and then returning to the brush. "We should talk with K'Karn," he added quietly.

B'Elanna nodded. "Good idea."

He drew another breath then pulled her hair aside to lean into her neck, kiss her cheek and embrace her again. He sighed deeply.

"Me too," she whispered.

"Hope you don't mind our working," Tom told his father as he and B'Elanna escorted Owen through the corridor. "We still have a lot of work to do on the Marseilles."

"Not at all," Owen said graciously.

B'Elanna looked back to him with a pleasantly--*amused*--knowing look, which she shared with Tom before turning ahead again. "So, what did you think about Jenna?" she asked. They had just dropped

the children off with their friend, who desperately needed the children to distract her then, she'd been so excited to get home. As a result, the admiral had gotten a good taste of Jenna's particular personality.

Owen took a moment to collect the words. "Interesting lady, very...energetic. --This was the friend you had mentioned in your letter, Tom?"

"Yeah," Tom grinned, not surprised by his father's reaction to the woman in question. "She's been as much of a sister as Chakotay's like a brother. We've all been very close for...what is it now? Over eight years."

The admiral nodded to the second name. "Yes, I do like Chakotay. I hadn't expected to, even if his Starfleet record spoke very highly of him."

"He was a great captain, too," Tom told him. "He looked after us like his own--all of us."

"Yes," the admiral nodded. "That would not surprise me. So, the Marseilles has been kept in the shuttle bay all this time?"

Tom as B'Elanna shared another glance. "Just this way," B'Elanna replied.

It was a note of interest for Owen to finally see it--though even he could not say it was for solely personal curiosity. He could never ignore the long list of offenses that ship had been involved in, offenses that spun in his head as he followed them to the shuttle bay.

He stopped when he took his first good look at the sleek, two-decked craft that loomed in the corner like a mystic monument to a war only recently past. It was a ship with quite a reputation, and its appearance did little to dispel it. The Marseilles, named for Tom's gamier days in the academy, was a fine collection--collection being the proper word--of equipment, and surprisingly, it wasn't shoddy. Its two broad, thin wings folded for docking, its artillery ports situated just above the 'elbows' and with small nacelles tucked under the stern, it had the appearance of a silver bat perched on two stout, triangular feet. The port hatch was open.

Staring at it, he tried not to associate that list to his son or his wife for the time. He forced himself to remember it was a long time ago, for them and for him. It wasn't an easy task, however, when Tom and B'Elanna went ahead and casually hopped up into their ship, chatting between each other and beckoning him in with them.

As if nothing were out of the ordinary.

Drawing a small breath, he followed and immediately noted to himself how the demeanors of his son and daughter-in-law changed once they entered the Marseilles. Suddenly, the parents the admiral had met first were now all business, on task and efficient as they continued repairs where they had left off and grateful to him when he asked to have look around.

"Sure, Dad. Make yourself at home," Tom said over his shoulder, then bent over a power flow analysis with B'Elanna.

The little engine room where they were working and the two forward cargo holds were nothing out of the ordinary, had Owen expected such a clean space. Somehow, he'd expected a rougher appearance in the little craft. Rather, all its spaces were very well kept--and well equipped. Though most of the systems were on standby, the small bay hummed contentedly as its owners started working on it, promising a powerful resurrection. Owen could already tell the ship had been an ongoing labor of love

for them both.

Up an open stairway, he found the upper deck hold inside the back hatch no different. From there was a short, well-lit corridor. At the end was wedge-shaped bridge. It was simple, efficient. Moving aft again, he peeked into each of the seven openings. On the port side, three of the four doors revealed only supply cabinets. The last was a small galley with a portal window and a thin table and bench below it. The back wall boasted a replicator. On the other side of the corridor were two bunkrooms. The doors to them were open.

Inside the door to the forward sleeping cabin hung a landscape picture, possibly the world they'd briefly lived on years before. The double bed was neatly made with a soft woven blue and brown tasseled cover and large soft pillows in matching cases. There was a thin dresser with a wall mirror on the door wall. To the rear was a cubicle bathroom and, next to that, an oddly constructed door--access to the second bunkroom, which looked more like a converted closet.

On his way out, he noticed a portrait of a crew beside the door. Looking closely, Owen found Tom and B'Elanna. He had her legs pulled over his as they casually embraced, on top of a stack of equipment--which on close examination looked like the assembly to a shield array. They seemed patient as they posed for the picture. Voyager's strange little nurse had her arms flung around the former captain--now Commander Chakotay--who futilely tried to look a little dignified. Others were there, many that he didn't recognize, some he vaguely did from files and from a brief passing on Voyager. One boasted a football under his heel and a gleaming smile. Another man looked prepared to kick the ball away from him.

It was years ago when that portrait was taken, 2371, the inscription noted. Tom still had that odd coat, but his clothes were rougher for wear. B'Elanna wore leather trousers and boots that nearly covered them, an equally worn blouse and vest. Younger too, they smiled with some evidence of amusement, eyes sparkling even at a distance.

As if nothing were wrong...as though they had things to laugh about.

Exiting the room, Owen left to tell his son he wanted to check in on Kathryn.

B'Elanna was the one answer him. "Oh, okay. Go right ahead. We'll catch up with you later." Tom had already gone into the guts of the ship to pull a few dead coils, but echoed her sentiments when she crawled in the hatch a little to tell him.

The admiral left them to their work.

What Kathryn had to tell him when he asked, was nothing more than what he had already seen. They were dedicated civilian crewmembers, exceptional parents, talented technicians, and the finest of friends to her in those lonely years.

Certainly, there had been tension among them in the beginning, but it was simply because they didn't understand each other. Time and second chances took care of that. She didn't know what she'd have done without their ironic loyalty, their utter support--even when they debated with her. Kathryn shone with her pride in them, said she would miss them and their children dearly.

Owen nodded to it all, smiled--and truly was pleased with what Kathryn had to say. But it answered nothing. Not really.

"Mr. and Mrs. Paris?"

B'Elanna looked up from around the panel. She was on her knees beside the impulse assembly. "Lieutenant Fellows?"

"Yes, Ma'am. Commander Pagal sent me to give you some information you and your husband requested."

Tom, hearing, crawled out from the hatch and grabbed a cloth to wipe his brow as he stood from the hole. "That quick, huh?"

B'Elanna had already tapped the PADD on by the time Tom got behind her to read. Immediately, their greedy eyes searched the document.

Then they slowed...stilled.

Tom drew a breath as B'Elanna scrolled back to make sure she'd read it correctly. He gave the young officer a nod. "Thanks, Lieutenant."

The man left. They read it again.

Tom turned on his heel. He grit his teeth, drew a deep, tense breath. He heard a growl emanate from his wife; he shut his eyes when he heard the PADD hit the bulkhead.

"Our friends..., our ship," Tom said, "now our home." He laughed, bitterly for the first time in a long time as he turned a stunned look to his wife. "I sometimes wonder if they do this on purpose, or if they're just too stupid to see how incredibly selfish they are."

"And the minute we make our demands, we'll be the selfish ones," B'Elanna added.

Tom was quiet. Very quiet. B'Elanna held his eyes and waited it out.

But any further reaction he might have voiced faded behind his sigh. "Plan two it is, then," he finally muttered. "If Dad's right and our citizenship is restored, I guess Oslon will accept us."

"We could find work there," was her only reply.

Silently, they returned to their repairs.

The repairs on the Marseilles, though extensive, were secondary to their preparations on Voyager itself, in engineering and navigation, plus taking time with their friends and the packing of their quarters into the Marseilles--and all of that secondary to the children, who despite their "helping" were busy and curious enough in their own right. Tom and B'Elanna drove through their duties for a full three days with little rest and less divergence. But nobody seemed to regret the comfortable distance, especially Owen. Aside from leading them into conversations he wanted to have but felt some trepidation about, it also let him study his son anew and examine the woman he'd chosen for his own.

He found them complex: Knowledgeable, extremely hard working; good-natured and open at times,

silent or cryptic in others. Neither explained their mood--and it did not seem as though they felt compelled to. They went about their business the way they liked, and Voyager's crew did not interfere. They were respected. They were very well liked.

They were normal. They still seemed...distant.

With the children and between each other, however, they were honest and warm, always touching, always affectionate, often joking and talking and explaining. Alaine and Kiarn took their lessons with as much energy as they did their play and chatter, leaning determinedly into their PADDs much like their parents did while Andre looked curiously on. Tom eventually gave the toddler a puzzle to work with at the coffee table so he and B'Elanna could finish their reports.

Owen could do nothing but watch with a raised brow.

On the other hand, the children did not go without firm discipline when required. One correction of the older two came for a practical joke Kiarn played on Alaine, paying off in her swatting her brother with far more power than she realized she had. Not surprisingly, the little boy cried out and hit her back--hard.

B'Elanna rushed in at the screams, thinking they'd fallen, only to find them on the floor scrapping. Grabbing both by the shoulders to separate them, she took them out to their father, who'd likewise dropped his work to see what'd happened.

Tom quickly checked them over then looked up to his wife as she tersely explained what they'd been up to.

Alaine growled and glared at her brother. "But Kiarn started it!"

"Not tat bad! Alaine--"

"Enough," Tom said shortly. The two looked at their father, separately pleading. Tom's eyes narrowed. Their mouths pressed tightly closed.

An eerie silence filled the family's quarters.

Across the room and behind his PADD, Owen could hear the children gulp.

To his ironic surprise, the children got the correction from the mother. Tom simply, soberly, got up and sat back to watch B'Elanna pace before the two and explain her ire and disappointment, and then sanction them both, which she didn't seem to mind adding to when Alaine whined. The mother had obviously been unnerved, as much as she might have been already.

"We have these rules because we don't want either of you to be hurt," she continued. "That would make your father and I very upset--because we love you and worry about you. To find you fighting like a couple of Trakal rats is very upsetting to everyone. Do you feel like you need to run around more, get all this bad energy out?" Her dark eyes pinned to theirs in turns. "Well?"

"No, Mommy," Alaine said. Kiarn echoed her.

"Are you bored? Do you have nothing better to do? Your father and I can assign more schoolwork if you are."

"We'll do something else, Mommy. We're sorry." Alaine turned a woeful look to her brother. "Right

Kiarn?"

Kiarn nodded slowly, swallowed. "Yeah. We're sowry."

B'Elanna drew a breath then let it out. "If this happens again, you'll have no holo-cartoons or jinala sets for a week, not just a day. Otherwise, this will never come up again. Those are your choices. Do you understand?"

Both children guiltily peered to their father again. Tom quietly told them, "I don't know why you're looking at me. Listen to your mother, or we'll be having a talk of our own."

They silenced again. They obviously did not want that second talk.

Afterwards, when Alaine and Kiarn slinked off to their bedrooms to find quiet toys, B'Elanna reminded her father-in-law, "They're usually good, but they do have a quarter Klingon blood--which isn't a bad thing, but they can get out of control. I guess that can be the case with kids in general, but they've got a little more stamina than most." She sighed, but then shrugged it away to go back to the reports she and Tom had been working on.

An hour later, things were back to normal. The sanctioned children were still pouting, but otherwise all right as they colored and read, and Tom and B'Elanna were tired but forgivingly pleasant. They never mentioned the incident, but went on planning their packing. After a while, B'Elanna went to the dining area.

"Kiarn, Alaine, come help set the table," the mother said and both children anxiously scrambled up to the cabinet.

Turning, she shared a wink and a grin with the father, who had been packing the rest of their books into a storage case.

"The changes are stressful for them too," Tom told his father aside. "We've been expecting them to act up more, actually. They always do when something big's happening. They're pretty strong kids--a little too strong in one way, though."

"I noticed," Owen commented. "They're very active."

Tom nodded. "B'Elanna's scared to death of what'll happen once we get them off a ship and out into a yard. Of course, then they'll burn off more of that energy, too."

The grandfather looked back over to the children, busy in their chores. Well-behaved and neat, rather handsome, one wouldn't have known there'd been a problem.

Well after dinner, as the children finally slowed and the parents started yawning, they gathered for stories before bedtime. Tom offered the children to pick out what they wanted and laughed when Alaine brought an old one of hers. She still liked it--mainly because she'd picked up most of it. Proudly, she knew it by heart.

"Why don't you read it then?" B'Elanna suggested as she took a seat near the end of the quickly crowded sofa with the infant in her arm. Reaching out, she etched aside a lock of Alaine's hair. "You and Kiarn are both getting pretty good at it, you know."

Alaine giggled. "I can't read the funny words, Mommy."

"Then I'll read them to you," Tom said, "and you can join in. Kiarn, I think you know a few. --Andre, come on up here, big guy."

"I know it," Kiarn insisted. "But tey sound funny."

Tom laughed as he got Andre comfortably on his lap. "Yeah, I guess it does sound funny. But not everyone speaks the same language, Kiarn."

The boy peered down at the page and pointed. "Okay, what's tat?"

"Le bonheur?" Tom grinned and glanced at his father, then winked at his wife as he held her gaze for a moment. "It means happiness."

B'Elanna's returning smile was as knowing as his own.

From there, they pieced through the story, quiet but cheerful and, more than anything, together and perfectly comfortable about that.

Owen recognized the story by the title--for its brevity, it'd been one of his wife's favorites, long ago. Yet he did not think as much on that as he saw again how disquietingly normal those people were, his son and his quickly made family. His son, so long lost and finally so near, felt further away from him than ever.

Time, he reminded himself, watching the family share the story and each other, all piled up on the sofa, the children cuddled up like puppies around their proud parents. Watching them silently, Owen regretted that their lives would be disrupted as he knew they would.

In time, he thought firmly, *they'll adjust, as will I.*

The reunions with his son and with Captain Janeway had gone far better than he could have expected, and it was gratifying to meet Tom's wife and his grandchildren. All of them had exceeded any expectations he might have had...save one or two. Regardless, Owen felt a sense of relief to return to the Disraeli, which would take the lead to Earth, leaving Voyager to fly in on her own. Kathryn had requested it and Owen had approved whole-heartedly. Captains, particularly one who had been through what Janeway had, deserved the right to bring their ship home without assistance. The added advantage was that he would have a little time to take everything he had learned about his son and his family in.

There were no sighs or tears in that goodbye and certainly, none of the hurt or animosity that had scarred their last parting was present, either. A few days would see them together again. They would continue where they left off, they agreed. So, simply, pleasantly, from the transporter pad, he told Tom and his family, "See you in a few days. Good journey to you."

"Until then, Dad," Tom returned with a slighter grin, offering one last nod. When his father dematerialized, his stare turned down. Finding his older three children, he gave them a grin and pointed with his chin to the door. "How about some lunch, then some holodeck time?"

The children ricocheted through the doors, Alaine scooting through them before they had opened completely.

Taking his wife's fingers in his own, Tom reached with his other hand to their baby daughter, caressed her cheek. She would be hungry soon, too, he knew.

"What do you think?" B'Elanna asked.

Tom shrugged. "It'll take time," he answered quietly. "He's trying. I want to, too... Damn, I wish it wasn't going to be so hard."

"What? With your father?"

He shook his head. "No, that'll just take some getting used to." Sighing, he entangled his finger in Isabel's grip, shook her hand lightly. "No, I'd hoped somehow when we heard the war was over that we'd be able to go home. I wanted to give you that."

"It was out of our hands," she told him, truthfully though marked with an equal disappointment. "Even if we'd been here, there's nothing we could have said that'd have made Starfleet change its mind. We probably would have made it worse, knowing us."

"I know. But I still wanted it... Damned policy."

"We shouldn't have expected much better."

"Shouldn't have, maybe. But we did."

She nodded, but didn't bother with the rest. It would only go in circles they couldn't solve. All they could do was try once they got there, and they knew that. Doesn't mean he won't feel rotten about it, though, she understood, yet knew it was best they just kept moving, and see what they could get out of what they did have.

She tugged Tom's fingers. "Let's go. The kids should be at the lift by now."

"Okay." Once outside the transporter room doors, Tom slid his hand down to B'Elanna's waist, squeeze her gently. "Maybe I wanted Dad to be the one to tell us, though I can understand why he wouldn't."

"He did seem...careful," B'Elanna commented. "He never managed to tell us what it's going to take to get the Marseilles through that inspection, either."

"I would've liked to have known that, too," Tom agreed, more certainly that time. "Even if he doesn't know, I can bet he has an idea. But I can also bet he doesn't want to talk about issues like that with us yet--with me. But damnit, I don't like not knowing."

B'Elanna watched the muscle flex in Tom's jaw and understood completely. Having their ship taken away for what could turn into weeks was almost as bad as hearing about their homeworld had been barred from them. The latter was still hard to talk about, the previous just insulting.

"They can't legally hold the Marseilles forever," B'Elanna said. "Or at least Kathryn said they shouldn't be able to. We'll just have to make them know we're waiting, maybe get some help."

Tom nodded. "Oh, I will," he said surely. "They won't forget we're waiting--for the ship and for them to change their mind about the colonies. We'll work this out."

She grinned, turned her eyes ahead again as they continued down the corridor. "Good."

"I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you, which shall be the darkness of God."

Tom collected her in his arm as she read, caressing her hair with his cheek as he looked on. Their glasses were empty; the children were well asleep. Their main room was bare but for the seat they shared and the dining table, which would be beamed to the Marseilles with the other last minute items.

"As in a theatre, the lights are extinguished, for the scene to be changed with a hollow rumble of wings, with a movement of darkness on darkness, and we know that the hills and the trees, the distant panorama, and the bold imposing facade are all being rolled away..."

The candle they lit had burned itself down in the house they had been forced to make for themselves. Quiet time: Their last hours on Voyager, where they had lived for seven years, where or near to which they'd had their four children, where they'd kept so many friends, many of whom were also soon to part for their own lives and homes.

In the morning, they would go to transporter room two and beam down to the grounds at Starfleet Headquarters, to the celebration that had been planned. From there, they would go to Tom's father's house, to stay temporarily during the Marseilles' inspection in drydock. The same day, Voyager would go in for a refit. In a couple months, Kathryn's report hearings would begin--a normal process considering the extraordinary journey she had taken.

"...--Or as, when an underground train, in the tube, stops too long between stations, and the conversation rises and slowly fades into silence..."

In but six hours, they would transport down to Earth, a place they had never expected to set foot on again well before their diversion to the Delta Quadrant--and hadn't necessarily wanted to but for their friends' sakes and for their soon to be impounded ship.

They had no idea how long that next diversion would keep them.

Neither of them could sleep that time.

Snuggling closely to him, she continued, her clear, quiet voice the only sound remaining in the painfully empty room...

"...and you see behind every face the mental emptiness deepen, leaving only the growing terror of nothing to think about. Or when, under ether, the mind is conscious but conscious of nothing."

He awoke to silence, to his familiar ceiling with a ray of sun shooting across his bedroom, brightening the cream colored walls to a brilliant yellow. It shocked his eyes when he first opened them. For an instant, he imagined himself late. With another moment of consciousness, however, with another breath as his eyes adjusted to the light, he remembered that the hour had been planned and that his house was a full one again.

My son is here with his wife and family.

He slid from his bed and moved to the bathroom with the same thought replaying itself a few times over. In a home Owen once swore his son would never reenter, which his wife had become hysterical about; the house he'd lived alone in since his Alaine's death, filled occasionally at meals and afternoons when Moira and Adam came by with Brian, or Kathleen every Sunday....

Now Tom's here...

He wondered while he washed and shaved what he should do with them. The quandaries that had only half formed in his mind while on Voyager resurfaced all the more strongly now that he was faced with what to do next.

Even after the reunion party, he didn't know what to make of them.

The reunion... While he dressed, Owen had to grin at the memory, not yet twelve hours old. It had been planned well ahead of time to collect as many people as possible to greet the returning crews, ignoring the status of those former Maquis for the present and going out of their way to bring some of the families to Earth for a visit. It turned out to be an enormous--and hugely successful--event. So many families, finally come back together, children to parents and siblings, and vice versa, friends long separated, former comrades, husbands and wives.

Most notable to Owen was his daughters' greeting their brother. Moira forgot any manners she might have learned and threw herself at him, Kathleen with only a hair more tact a moment later. As he watched, Owen painfully recalled the last time they'd all been together, or at least within speaking distance...

B'Elanna, already reunited with her proudly dignified Klingon cousin, greeted them warmly. In return, Moira had no qualms calling her "Sis" right off, which immediately raised a question in translation from Representative K'Karn, much to Tom and B'Elanna's amusement.

Soon after came the Janeway family's reunion. The three women hugged each other in unison as they cried uncharacteristically, and then just as quickly reigned themselves in to only need to stop themselves a minute later. Then they laughed at each other's efforts. They barely knew what to say and so gave up and embraced again.

Kathryn's first officer, on his cousin's arm, approached to meet them, as did her other senior officers, also escorted and warmly greeted. Putting her hands on Harry Kim's arms, she bragged aside to his glowing parents how Harry had been such a helpful and sociable friend, as well as an excellent officer.

Tom and his family were also there for the rounds of introductions, but he couldn't resist using the moment to roundly tease Kim in front of his parents: "Oh, he's a great officer all right--bucking for lieutenant material right off, too," he drawled with a wicked grin. "First I find him trying to sneak off with my wife, and then he runs right back out and bags a hedonist."

An uproar of laughter erupted from the group as Harry patiently, though laughing a little uneasily, explained himself to his flabbergasted mother and wide-eyed father. "You'd better explain your prison record while you're at it," Tom added mercilessly, his face set with perfect innocence. "They're going to know eventually." Even Owen had laughed at that. His son always had been mischievous. It was odd, but good, to see again.

Not long after, Jenna, who'd broken out in uncontrollable snickers as Tom tortured his friend, heard a yell from across the way. Turning sharply at the sound, she gasped to see a ruddy-haired ensign sprinting towards her, followed closely by four other young people. Owen grinned. However well-trained by Starfleet, Ensign Harlowe hadn't settled down much during his academy career--and proved that Starship life hadn't tempered him, either, when he snatched his diminutive mother up with a yell and spun her around.

Predictably, Jenna burst out in tears, wailing out in relief, "Oh, you darlin' scoundrel! I *knew* you'd be gorgeous!" as she kissed him repeatedly. Tommy put her down only so she could be overtaken by her other four children. He let his little siblings go to it, tears shining in his eyes as he caught those of his older acquaintance. Owen returned the smile.

Then, Tommy saw his first mentor coming towards him and laughed aloud. "God, Tom, you've not changed!" The two embraced firmly. Tom took the first opportunity to nag the younger about his rank, and Tommy the second for that gray coat of Tom's, still faithfully worn. "What a sight you were when you first wore it, too. I'd say that's a hell of an improvement."

Tommy charmingly greeted his old friend's wife, "So you're the one Tom was tripping over his tongue about all that time back! He had it bad, you know. --Looking at all these kids he got out of you, I can say he still does!"

"I didn't believe Tom when he told me there was more than one Jenna running around," B'Elanna laughed. "I'm officially frightened." After shaking his hand, she let Tommy introduce his brothers and sisters. On her knees kissing Lizzie, Jenna was too beside herself to do it. Recollecting them, she and Tom then introduced their children...

Barely looking in the mirror as he splashed on his aftershave, Owen felt a swell in his heart to think on how impressed he was with his son, in spite of what side of the "wedding" he stood on. Tom had acted so maturely, so confident, at ease with his old friends, the Starfleet crew, their families and the other dignitaries there, as did his wife.

It was as if it really didn't matter who they were, who they had been, what they were doing, only that they were there. Perhaps that was it.

Even so, once the initial thrill and introductions grew into a comfortable camaraderie and closeness, Tom and B'Elanna needed only share a look at their children and then each other before nodding silently.

Their eldest was yawning and unconsciously kicking the leg of the chair she was sitting on. The infant was already well asleep. The boys, though still running around full steam, were starting to get churlish, the older one choosing to tease his sister, to which she reacted with an odd growl and a swat of her hand. B'Elanna told them firmly to stop. Both did--the girl crossed her arms, frowning, and the boy visibly grit his teeth and spun away.

The parents then shared another, very knowing look, brows raised in unison.

As his wife slung the cradle strap over her shoulder and adjusted her baby daughter's blanket, Tom got the younger and protesting boy into his arm, then told the elder two it was bedtime. They came to the table where some of the higher ranking officers, some of the crew and their families had taken to. They quietly told his father they'd be heading in, and then said good night to their friends and his sisters. Owen told them the house was open, but if they didn't mind, he'd stay a bit longer to talk.

"I'm sure you remember where it is?"

Tom grinned a little, gave his father's shoulder an affectionate pat. "You bet I do. Thanks, Dad." He looked at Janeway, sitting nearby, still holding her mother's hand. "See you at Sandrine's--Thursday, five, right?"

Kathryn smiled. "We'll all see you there. Sleep well, Tom, and you too, B'Elanna."

They only nodded, got their older two children near them, then bid but a couple more farewells to Jenna, then to K'Karn, who beamed out soon after they said farewell. They also addressed their Maquis friends while walking slowly off the grounds. Minutes later, they disappeared at the gate without looking back.

They had walked away as if nothing was ending, as if nothing was changing, Owen mused as he looked after them. Perhaps they had all already said their goodbyes, or perhaps their planned private party would be better closure.

Somehow, though, their departure had concerned the older admiral. He didn't know why. Their quiet expressions, their sober voices, as they had on Voyager, continued to play in his mind when he did come home. They were already settled and to sleep when he got there.

The next morning, as he treaded through the garden to the edge of the yard, when he looked out onto the sea, he felt it again. Yet that time, the scene was decidedly different....

"I'm gonna catch ya!"

"Not if you don't run faster!"

"Let's catch Mommy!"

"You'll have to run even faster for that!" the mother laughed.

"Get her!" they both yelled.

Tom had his newborn daughter in his arm and Andre's hand in his, walking along the wet shoreline while B'Elanna and the older children ran ahead, fast and strong in the wet sand. She sprinted along the ebbing water, skipping out toward the disappearing waves, hopping to a stop and turning to see her elder two yelping as they caught the water.

Not a one of them had shoes on, Owen noticed. But it was unusually warm that day, a not so odd weather pattern in winter. They always had a brief warm up at around that time of year.

B'Elanna danced with them into the foamy skirt of the sea, letting her children finally catch her--then they all jumped back as another wave replaced the last. The children laughed and teased their mother, which she cheerfully rejoined and set them all off again while the wave pulled back.

Tom laughed with them, watching them, letting Andre run ahead a little and fall to his hands. Catching up, the father waited, ready to help his son if necessary. But the boy pushed himself up to take off again--only to trip again to his hands and knees in the wet sand. He didn't seem to mind making a mess of himself. Tom maintained that only by scraping off the boy's hands with a thumb before letting him go, grinning all the while.

Eventually, B'Elanna turned back as Alaine and Kiarn continued. Nearly breathless, she returned to

face her husband.

They said nothing--they didn't seem to have to. Tom's hand wove into her hair as he bent and kissed her openly. Two arms wound around and she gently caressed the infant, who had reached up to touch her mother's breast. In that manner, the couple continued as the waves circled their feet.

Owen continued to watch them, almost like a spectator at a play. Once more, he had to remind himself that the man out there, ankle deep in the water, kissing his wife, was Tom. Tom: whom he'd forsaken, whom he'd cursed, whom he'd forgiven, whom he'd not seen in nine years.

He felt a pang in wishing Alaine, his Alaine, could see her son then, could have known that young family. She would have worshipped them.

She would have had coffee on the table and croissants and jellies, possibly some music playing softly, when they came down from their rooms. The house would have been polished like a gem and a huge bouquet of white and coral roses would have decorated the brightly appointed buffet. He could see her arranging them in the vase with springs of cedar, setting out their best flatware for an ordinary breakfast, see her serving coffee as her smile, her laughter, lit the room...

Owen could see her, in his mind, with her soft golden hair, her pure blue eyes shining with elation, her strong, thin arms lifting one of her grandchildren up to smell the flowers, or hugging them close and kissing them excessively, until they wiped their faces and she laughed at them. He could see her pouring from the white china kettle in the breakfast room, chatting with B'Elanna and asking her all sorts of questions and offering help with settling. He could see his Alaine down on the shore playing with Tom and his family, as much a mess and laughing as gaily...

He could hear that laugh of hers, like a song, echoing up into the yard...

Owen drew a deep breath then exhaled deeply.

Tom and B'Elanna parted, rubbing their noses affectionately as Andre put his sandy hands around his mother's legs, burying his curly dark head in the skirt of her long tunic. They looked down and smiled at him; he laughed back and said something, whereupon B'Elanna nodded and took Isabel.

Nudging him, she watched Tom take off after the other kids and laughed as he let out a battle cry. At their eminent invasion, Alaine and Kiarn squealed with joy and scurried away. At that, B'Elanna started back up to the yard with Andre in tow. Her step was light, even in the slipping sand.

When she came to the steps and set the boy off a bit ahead of her, she looked up to Owen without surprise. "Good morning," she said, leaning down to help Andre up a step. Andre wasn't accustomed to stairs, and being tall for his age, he was rather clumsy.

"Good morning, B'Elanna," he returned, the glanced out to the shore. "I might have imagined Tom would find the beach first thing."

B'Elanna grinned. "It'd been so long," she told him, "and he'd never expected to see it again--the real thing, I mean. When we woke up, he mentioned having a walk." She then laughed and gave the admiral a careless shrug. "But with three mobile children, I guess you know what that turns into. --Andre, slow down, sweetheart."

"Okay, Mommy," he said and slowed down more to pick up and squish a ball of mud in his fist before moving on.

B'Elanna only shook her head.

As she followed her son up the steps, one by one, Owen also watched, amused. "Funny how toddlers can find just about any mess they can get into."

"That just about says it," she agreed. "But it's our third go on toddlers. We're pretty used to it now. When Alaine was his age, we were always worried she'd get sick from all the mess she used to make, until Jenna told us we were being 'typical first-timers.'"

"I heard she'd been quite a help to you two."

"She was."

In the sudden lull of conversation, Owen glanced down to the boy again, making steady progress but curious about whatever his chubby hands could find in those steps. Owen reminded himself to sweep them later.

"Andre Paris," he said thoughtfully. "Nice ring to that. Is it a name from your family?"

B'Elanna looked up again. "Andre? No. He's named for an old friend of ours."

Straightening as they finally came to the top of the steps, B'Elanna set Isabel in her waiting carrybed, then led her son to the old-fashioned water pump Tom had suggested. As she pumped out some water into a clay basin below, grinning at Andre's amazement with the ancient device, she looked over the garden again.

"Tell me about him?"

B'Elanna blinked and looked over at Owen. "Who? Andre Rodrigo?"

"Yes."

"He was one of our friends in the Maquis," she told him, taking in the slight wince that escaped the admiral, but not addressing it. "A nicer guy you'd never have wanted to meet, really. He was to have taken Tom's place on the Liberty after we left. Tom trained him."

"Left? But wasn't the Liberty destroyed in the Delta Quadrant?"

"He wasn't with us. He had to go home to his mother on Jaros-three."

"No, I mean, when you said you left the Liberty. You and Tom...were planning to leave?"

B'Elanna shrugged. "I was pregnant with Alaine," she replied. "Though we might not have planned to leave Avalar as soon, Tom and I planned to retire from the Maquis once I was at about four months. Obviously, we never got to that point." She stopped there, seeming to think of that for a moment, her eyes turning down. But she shook herself from whatever had crossed her mind easily enough, then set herself back to washing her son. "Anyway, that's where we got Andre's name. --Right, Andre?"

"Wite!" chimed the boy as he dunked his hands again in the cool water, splashing them around.

But Owen wasn't finished. "You would've stayed there--on that planet--knowing it was unsafe?"

"It's home." B'Elanna released the pump handle and Andre scooted off again. Watching him, she

added, "We would have left if the action had turned our way." Turning, she took the handles of the carrybed in her strong fingers, turning a smile down to Isabel, who was kicking idly as she chewed on a stuffed animal, then out to her boy again. "Andre, let's go inside and get you some dry clothes. Come on, I mean it. Go to the door and I'll open it."

"Get Mok'la?"

"Yes, sweetheart, you can get Mok'la out, too. Come on, now." As her son dawdled there despite her call, B'Elanna turned a curious look to the admiral. "You know, I still don't know what to call you. Tom calls you Dad..." She left the rest open for him.

"Whatever you're comfortable with, B'Elanna," he said generously. "I don't have a preference. Adam calls me Owen."

She nodded. "Okay...Dad. That feels all right for me."

Owen grinned, assenting. But the smile faded slightly. "I am sorry your father couldn't have been there last night. I did send word via subspace."

B'Elanna drew a breath. "It's nothing unusual, not having him around," she told him, not hiding her disappointment but resolved all the same, "and I could see why he would have accepted the study. He couldn't have known then that we'd be back; even if I could have written him again in time, I wouldn't have asked him to wait around for us. Besides, K'Karn said he might bring my mother to see me, so it's probably better he's not around right now."

"I will try to make some arrangements, however. I know Captain Friedler and she would of course give him leave."

"Thanks. But please don't do anything. He knows where to find me--and how to ask for himself."

Owen gave her a nod, yet still planned to send another request when it seemed appropriate to do so. It was the least he could do, after not stopping the man from joining the Brydlrean Study, an ongoing project deep within the Beta Quadrant. First thinking his neglected daughter was dead after receiving her letter, which had been more a closure for her than a reassurance for him, B'Elanna's father had then been unable to return a letter in time when Voyager made contact with Starfleet. Finally believing that Voyager would not return for decades, the he had made sure he could be found while remaining occupied well away from the daily reminders of his own failures.

Understanding that need acutely, Owen had wished him well.

"Well," he finished, "the assignment will be for only another eighteen months. Maybe then."

"We'll see. Subspace is fine for now. I've sent him some pictures." B'Elanna let an appropriate pause pass, calling out to her son again and stretching out her hand, before changing the subject. "Why don't you go out and play for a bit while I get Andre dressed and set Isabel down. Bring Tom up in about ten minutes? I can get some coffee going and Tom will make breakfast."

"Tom will?"

B'Elanna grinned. "Oh, no. Tom's definitely the cook in the house. I'm hopeless."

"Now, that can't be true."

"No, I mean it. All I can make that's not replicated is coffee and soup."

They had come to the back door, and Owen reached out to open it for her and the toddler, who immediately crawled up the steps and ran inside. "That's odd," Owen said, frowning his brow to recall his son's own words to him the night before. "Tom told me you're quite the chef."

B'Elanna rolled her eyes and started inside. "That idiot," she muttered. "Go play with the other children, *Dad*."

He smiled for a moment after her as she continued inside, then realized what Tom had really meant when he extolled upon B'Elanna's extraordinary culinary skills. Chuckling to himself, he looked westward once more.

The sound of the children's voices drew him back across the garden and through the yard. Returning to the fence where he'd stood before, Owen was drawn in by the view all over again.

Tom was running landward, his daughter and son in giggling pursuit. He swerved towards the water only to veer back, deflecting their dual assault before running to the grasses again. Then, taking a dive, he crash-landed into a dune of sand, turning over only to be plundered by the four and six year olds.

Owen laughed as they did, but did not join them as B'Elanna had suggested. Instead, he took a seat and watched for many minutes, trying not to wish again that Alaine were there, trying not to mourn her anew while Tom gleefully tickled the rambunctious youngsters, and teased and adored them as they rolled with laughter.

He tried to enjoy it more than his conscience wanted to allow--and succeeded. He could feel his smile creasing his face, pressing his eyes. *So, this is freedom.*

"Owen?"

Still grinning, he turned and held up his hand to the woman who had come up behind him. She took it, gave it a squeeze. "Look who came home," he said proudly, gesturing with a jerk of his head.

"Yes, I see," Alynna smiled, accepting the seat beside him. "I met B'Elanna inside and she told me you were out here. She said to tell you coffee's on."

"She works fast," Owen commented with a nod.

"Yes. Tom got himself quite a fine lady."

Below, the play continued. The children were nearly out of breath for laughing and scrambling away from their father, who lunged after them, catching one before the other ran around and pounced on his back.

Alynna laughed. "Good thing Tom's not lost an ounce of his energy."

"You should have seen their routine on Voyager," Owen told her. "I was surprised they slept two hours a night. They handle it pretty well, though. Should be interesting to see how they get used to life off a ship."

"Have they made any plans?"

"None that they've discussed with me. But we haven't talked about that yet. Too soon for that, too much catching up. Not to mention their scout's at the Sonoma drydock pending further investigation."

Alynnna drew a slow breath on that confirmation. "How did they take that?"

Owen paused. "As well as can be expected, I suppose. But they knew it would happen. They were Maquis and so was their ship. I think they're gladder that they didn't have terms to fight."

"Who's in charge of the inspection?"

"Peozet. He'll be thorough, but he's good at his job and fair enough."

Alynnna sighed and moved to her feet. "That doesn't make it any easier. It's their ship..." She cut herself off, shook her head to let it go. "At least they're home. The rest can be worked out. I'll call Admiral Peozet, see if there's a way to speed it up."

Owen did not stand when she did, nor did he move when Tom below shoed the kids away for breakfast. They scurried up the sandy steps, saying brief hellos and good mornings before passing both adults by to wash up in the pump. Tom followed more slowly, but steadily as he saw who was waiting for him at the top.

In person again for the first time since his court martial, Alynnna couldn't help but notice how handsome Tom Paris was, how healthy he looked and how much he was still like Alaine as he strew his fingers through his thinner but still scruffy hair.

"You need a haircut," Alynnna told him devilishly as he climbed the stairs towards her.

Tom smiled warmly, bridging the distance between them to give her a kiss on the cheek and a firm hug. "Good to see you too, Aunt Neckie."

Alynnna laughed aloud as she squeezed him back. "I can't believe you, Tom!" She put him at an arm's distance, giving him a good look up close. "Here you are all grown up and you still want to call me that?"

He snickered. "You'd prefer Alynnna?"

"Yes! I hated that nickname... Well, most of the time, I did. You know your mother got you kids doing that to annoy me. Anyway, you're too old for it now."

Tom gave a slow nod and seemed to think for a moment. When he turned to his children, his grin curled to the side. "Alaine, Kiarn? Come say hi to your Aunt Neckie."

Alaine giggled. "Oh, I remember Aunt *Neeeckie!*" she sang out and giggled. Taking the older woman's hand with a little nod and a full introduction, she then said politely, "A pleasure to meet you, Aunt Neckie."

Alynnna rolled her eyes a little, but smiled genuinely. "It's good to meet you too, Alaine--and you, Kiarn. I've waited quite a while to meet the two of you." She released the girl's hand and glanced at Owen, who was trying hard to hold himself out of stitches as the two children escaped to the back door.

"Neckie," he chortled, getting to his feet with some effort. "I'd forgotten all about that."

"And I'd tried to," she returned dryly.

Tom watched Alynna smile after the children, noting how she followed Alaine so closely, almost sadly, then. *You bet she's got my mom's eyes*, Tom told her silently when the admiral's lips turned up at his little girl's giggle. "But just think, Alynna," he said, breaking her attention, "I have four kids--you'll never live it down, now."

"Four kids," she breathed, shaking her head with the irony as he took her arm to escort her in. "Your mother would've been beside herself--loving every second of it."

"I hope somehow she is," Tom replied.

Alynna looked up at him, sincerely surprised at his half-told admission. "You think?"

Tom's mouth did not turn down, though his stare drifted slightly aside. He gave her arm a squeeze. "It's been a long time since we've known each other, if we ever really did."

She nodded. "Yes. I'm anxious to catch up, myself. I can't stay long this morning, but maybe we can get together after dinner tonight?"

"I'd like that."

Alynna grinned and nodded again, wondering if that would be true by the end of the night.

"What?" B'Elanna breathed as her hand, holding her wineglass, slowly floated down to the well-waxed antique table. She looked at Tom. He looked back at her, mirroring her shock.

"Daddy, come pay wit us!"

Tom glanced back at his son. "In a minute, Kiarn. Why don't you get your puzzles ready and then I'll come."

"But you said--"

"Listen to your father," B'Elanna told him. "We're talking about something important to us. Be patient. Please." The boy growled a little, but did return to his sister and little cousin. A moment later, he was back into their game. B'Elanna turned her stare back across the dinner table. "Where are they?"

"Danula-two, with his brother," Alynna answered, reminded of her own dislike of letting the Osols go there after the husband's release, even if it was the only permissible place where they had surviving family, which neither wanted to be without.

"Danula-two?" Tom breathed, shaking his head. He knew the Academy extension base and the land around it. "She must be miserable there. Aside from the family, there's nothing there for them."

"He's got to be climbing the walls for things to do," B'Elanna agreed.

Owen leaned back in his chair when the conversation started, secretly damning his friend for bringing

the matter up so soon. Alynna had told him of her revised mission, begun several months after they had heard from Voyager in the Delta Quadrant, her work to have those who were unfairly convicted of treason during the war released and recompensed as well as possible. It had resulted in some scandal for the Federation, but even Owen understood it was the right thing for her to do. She'd had more than sixty sentences overturned for circumstantial evidence alone. The case with the Osols was one of those cases.

However, to bring it up during Tom and his family's first real dinner at home... Moira and Adam had come to cook and Kathleen took time out of her work to attend, too. It was a real family dinner, the first they'd enjoyed since Tom was in the Academy.

The table and food had turned out beautifully and everyone had dressed well. Even Tom had set aside that duster of his for a well-tailored suit, and B'Elanna had donned an attractive cocktail dress, pinned her thick hair into an elegant twist.

They talked about the children--the children talked a good deal--and his daughters caught their brother and sister-in-law up on everything that had happened with everybody since Tom left. Tom explained his various positions he'd had on Voyager and B'Elanna answered questions about her engineering work and research. In all, their conversations had been busy but relaxing, and reassuring for Owen that they indeed had begun again and well. Then Alynna had to bring up that old business.

Well, they should know about their old friends, Owen corrected himself, *but it would have been nice to keep the subjects at home tonight.*

"But they are safe," Alynna continued. "Their twins are about Alaine's age."

B'Elanna looked away, to the centerpiece of flowers Kathleen brought. "We were planning to have our babies together," she told them. "Her due date would have been a couple months after mine..." A tiny grin twitched at her mouth. "...and she said we'd both be clueless together. We were both so nervous. Well, no, she was more comfortable about it."

In the same quiet vein, Tom added, "And she got two in one her first time out. I wonder how she bore them." He smiled gently at his wife. "I'd promised to help deliver them--though I think I was doing as much research as you two were."

"I remember! All those PADDs we grabbed." She shook her head, her grin again fading. "Twins.--What are their names?"

Alynna needed a moment to recall it. "Helen and Niscol."

"Niscol," Tom repeated thoughtfully. "That was Azro's father's name."

Alynna grinned. "They were lovely children--dark hair, big, maroon eyes."

"Like their father," B'Elanna said.

"And Starfleet took them away from their parents because...?" Tom suddenly wanted to know. His face had darkened with the seriousness of Alynna's confession.

Owen stiffened and glanced to his daughters. They looked slightly uncomfortable, too, though the younger did look interested.

Suddenly realizing that she'd turned the night's topic on its ear, Alynna turned a quick look back to

Owen. "Maybe we should--"

"Alyna," Tom cut in, recapturing the older woman's attention, "the Osols were our neighbors and good friends, as was everyone else on Avalar. We want to know what happened to them. A lot of that information is still classified, I know, but we still want to know what you can tell us."

B'Elanna also caught the admiral's eyes. "We lost all our friends and everything we had that was ours that wasn't on the Marseilles. We have a right to know. Better we get it from you than some report."

The admiral sighed, set down her drink before looking plainly back to them. You did start this, she told herself. Might as well finish it, whether or not Owen likes it at his table.

"When the Cardassians overtook the DMZ with the Dominion's help," she told them, "some of the Maquis who'd managed to get away stopped through en route to the Federation border to collect what colonists were left on those worlds." She did not flinch at Tom and B'Elanna's reactions, their pained expressions and off-cast gazes. But she in some respect understood what they felt. She had seen a similar look greet her at the Habnor Penal Facility. "Your friends were found in one of the Maquis bunkers on Bianlos-three. --You remember it?" Both nodded numbly. "When they were found, she was helping to organize supplies, and he was found outside guarding the perimeter and sending a coded message to one of the Maquis captains. At the time, the Federation was scrambling for its own defenses and the proper time to separate the innocent from the guilty wasn't always taken. They were imprisoned for treason and terrorism, their children sent into temporary custody. The Osols claimed their innocence, but things were busy then and getting worse by the day. I know it sounds uncaring--"

"We read about the war with the Dominion from the Disraeli's files," B'Elanna stated.

"Good," Alyna replied, sincerely glad she didn't have to go into that part of it. It was even more unpleasant than what she was already explaining. "To make a long story short, a couple months later, I came across the formal protest Mrs. Osol had written. I recognized the name of your world, got curious and looked into the matter. I discovered that all of those in the Bianlos bunker had actually been colonists from Avalar and Jinara, dropped off there for their safety. They were only defending themselves from what they thought was a Cardassian attack, but had never committed direct treason."

Tom and B'Elanna were quiet, taking slow, deep breaths to retain their composure. Their turning eyes, shared glances, seemed both to picture the scenes, like remembering the field of battle, the horrors of a war they once lived very close to and fought vigorously. They seemed to see with that small explanation every moment of their friends' fate, and the fates of the others.

The more they seemed to think about that, the more they paled in the table's warm candlelight.

"Excuse me," B'Elanna said and stood.

Tom followed without a word, taking her arm gently, leading her out into the hall.

When Alyna's eyes met Owen's again, they were full of her apology. His mouth twitched downward and his eyes turned away.

"Oh God, Tom...poor Isabel," B'Elanna's echo was heard soon after, and then Tom's thick reply, "I know," before their voices faded down the hall.

At the table, the remaining diners hardly looked at each other, except for the poorly pleased stare

between the admirals. Kathleen picked up her fork, but did not eat. Adam drew a long sip of his wine, glancing back at the children. Finally, Moira stood with a polite grin to them all. "I'll just see if they're all right," she told them kindly and left as well, gesturing to her son in the adjoining room to stay put.

Moira didn't have to go far. They were sitting on the velvet bench on the far end of the hall, hands clasped together. B'Elanna was shaking her head numbly; Tom's eyes were lost on the floor. Lost in their own world. She was almost surprised to see them there. She'd half expected Tom to leave the house. The children, she then reminded herself.

Seeing his sister's feet tentatively nearing, Tom only looked up to the opposite wall. Possibly a hundred different memories flashed behind his eyes as he regarded that bare view. A minute later, he opened his mouth.

"Where'd all the pictures go?"

Caught off guard, Moira had to actually look at the wall before remembering. "Oh, Mom took them down--ripped them down, really, when she had that fight with Dad."

"When she and Dad separated?" he asked.

"Well, it was a pretty big fight," she said, then realized her brother didn't know the details. "Mom got a little overzealous and trashed the hall--tore everything off of it. It took a few weeks to get all the glass up. Every time we thought we had it all, we'd see another shard."

Tom grinned sadly. "I always wondered what would happen when she finally blew her top. She never did around us. Held it in."

B'Elanna breathed a slight, ironic laugh. "Like mother, like son."

He squeezed her leg. "What'd they fight about?" Tom asked

"You," Moira answered honestly. "It'd been a lot of things building up, but Mom told me she just couldn't take him cutting you out of the family after the court martial. It was the final straw." She turned to face them, leaning on the still wall, crossing her arms. "I was pretty pissed off with you, then."

"I was pretty pissed off with myself, too."

"I'm not anymore."

"Neither am I." He looked up at her. "Fact is, I haven't been in a long while."

"Yes. You've grown, all right, but you're still angry." She eyed him. "You're still that rebel, a Maquis, aren't you? You're still angry with Starfleet."

"You expect me not to be?" he asked. "It's one thing to arrest and hunt down the Maquis. Though that was worthless of them, I can understand it. But the colonists there, they'd survived so much... If you knew the Osols, or anyone else on Avalar, you'd feel like I do. The other atrocities that happened out there...No, I won't go into that. Not now."

"If you'd been here," Moira countered, "you'd have seen how paranoid and frightened people were. Earth was almost invaded, Tom; they attacked at one point. The war was hard on everyone."

"In other words," B'Elanna said quietly, "Starfleet had to become like the people they'd put down."

"We were defending ourselves."

"That's how the Maquis formed, too," Tom returned, but then sighed. "But there's no sense in debating it. I hate talking about policy--one thing about me that'll never change. All I'm saying is that B'Elanna and I have the right to be angry about our comrades and about the colonies. The Osols and those others were not Maquis--you can take our word for that. They were supportive because the Maquis were the only people who'd defend them on their own ground. But they never fought until they had to for their immediate survival. You would've done the same."

"I guess." She allowed the pause to sit, a little concerned by her brother's seriousness. Only an hour ago, he'd been buoyant and charming, a father and a husband glad to see his family again. With but a mention of their friends in the former Demilitarized Zone, he and his wife had become quiet and determined...almost as if they were there again, in the war. The problem was, it suited them as much as their other mood had.

Tom sighed. "I'm sorry, Moira. I don't expect you understand what happened out there. B'Elanna and I found out just before we got back that Avarar is off limits. We can't go back."

"Really?" Again, she was a little surprised. "I wonder why."

"Because," B'Elanna said, training herself down even as she spoke, "since the Federation reclaimed the DMZ, they didn't want old loyalties to form between the 'former' Maquis and colonists. They want to keep the area clear of any activity."

Tom laughed bitterly. "The official reason is because Starfleet wants to provide an unofficial buffer between the regions. Avarar's only one light year away from the Federation--and more than three times that from Cardassian space. Even the Romulan Neutral Zone's only a light year across."

"Maybe in time, they'll change..." But Moira stopped as soon as both looked to disagree.

"We have no home, Moira," B'Elanna stated sadly, plainly. "We made one on Voyager thinking we'd be there a very long time. We never expected to be able to get back to Avarar when we got back without some arrangements. But we wanted to try, hoped we could go home."

"Some people had tried," Tom added, "but they were removed."

"In a way, it's worse than thinking it's under Cardassian occupation." B'Elanna smirked. "Then, at least we'd know it was unsafe and stupid to risk going back. Now it's safe, but Starfleet's still punishing us for wanting to be there, to stay there."

"I don't think they're punishing you," Moira said.

"But it feels like it," Tom returned.

Again, his sister paused, wondering if to ask would even make any sense, or if they'd even know... "But at least you are free to move somewhere. You can make a home anywhere as long as your heart's in it."

B'Elanna grinned. "Why don't you pick up and go to an available colony? --I'm serious."

"So am I." Moira moved to sit beside her. Her eyes were not accusatory, rather was curious. "I want

to understand you--especially you, Tom. I couldn't imagine you wanting to live on some rugged outback colony. Maquis pilot was easier to understand than that."

"Answer B'Elanna's question and I'll tell you."

"Why I don't leave Earth? It's simple, really. This is my home."

"And Avalar's ours."

"But you were there only a few months before you ended up on Voyager. You can't tell me that Avalar was any more a home than San Francisco was. You grew up here."

Tom grinned, shook his head again. "No. I was born and raised here. I didn't grow up for a long time after that. --I know what you meant, Moira. But...we were wanted and needed there at the time. None of the colonists really cared who we were or what we'd done before. Everybody was starting over, and being a part of that was really satisfying. I never belonged to San Francisco, or Earth. I always wanted to get away. Avalar was the first place I'd ever wanted to remain, for the rest of my life, with my wife and kids and...forever."

"Can't you find that at Oslon?"

"Maybe," he admitted.

Moira turned her head from side to side, then even more amazed at her brother's simple, unrepentant resolve. "Of all people to find a place and settle down--you'd be the last person I'd have suspected. Even after reading your letter to Dad those years ago, I'd always imagined you as moving."

"Considering what I used to be like, that's not surprising," Tom replied, letting his stare roam the empty wall again. "I don't know if I could put it into words. You'd have had to be there. I mean, we were running back and forth, from the Liberty--Chakotay's ship--and Avalar, for only about three months." His eyes turned away, down to his wife's hand, still entwined with his. "I once told Kathryn Janeway that I'd packed a lot of real life into a little time. That was an understatement. The longest B'Elanna or I spent in either place at one time was those last couple of weeks we were there. Usually it was only a few days, then we'd head back to the Liberty for a few days..."

"To fight more," Moira said.

"To do whatever Chakotay needed us to do," B'Elanna clarified; then she grinned, "which was mainly keeping that decrepit bucket in one piece."

Tom laughed. "Boy, do I remember *those* conversations."

"You should. I let everyone know about it." Still grinning, B'Elanna looked at Moira again. "Like Tom said, we don't expect you to understand. Sometimes I don't understand how we came to feel so strongly about it. I was never 'given to the land,' so to speak, before we got there, either. But somehow..."

B'Elanna stopped mid-sentence, perking her ear towards the stairs. A few seconds later, the echo of a peal sounded and she stood up. "I'll be back."

"We should be getting the other kids down, soon, too," Tom told her, standing from the bench when B'Elanna turned to go up the stairs for Isabel.

Moira nodded as well. "Yes, Brian's also well past his bedtime. I'll put him down on Kathleen's bed 'till it's time to go, because I still want to talk to you about this."

"Okay," Tom said. "But I don't know if Dad's up to it yet. He seems like he wants to avoid all that."

"What do you expect?" Moira queried. "You're a high-ranking Maquis with a lot of experience and he's an admiral with as much pride in his his way of life."

"I won't push him, Moira. Talking about it with him right now would only make him uncomfortable. I don't think he's ready to go that far. He sure wasn't on Voyager."

"Well, I still want to know."

He took her arm as they headed back to the dining room. Just like Mom, he thought, grinning affectionately at her, knowing she truly did only want to know them. That was enough for him. "Ask me some other time and I promise to tell you."

She smiled. "I'll hold you to that, you know."

"Yeah, you will. I haven't forgotten how nosy you are." Without another word, he went back into the other room, explaining B'Elanna's absence, then went to play puzzles, as promised, with his children.

A couple hours later, after the children were down, as the adults settled themselves in the living room, sharing the quiet and calm, it was almost like the Maquis subject had not even been broached. Moira, upon seeing how her father had indeed cheered again with the return of the earlier evening's family-related conversation, remained patient and let the time pass.

But the more she looked at her brother, his easy but quiet demeanor, the more she had to force that patience upon herself.

The topics turned from Tom's medical training to Moira's latest medical paper for the Hebner Journal. Kathleen brought up one of her students who was aspiring for medical school and asked if Moira would like to talk to him. Then it was back to the children again, about their schooling and different programs at the colonies. They spoke of home schooling, which to a degree had been Alaine and Kiarn's education to that point.

From there, the conversation quieted naturally; Moira waited still. Owen looked over at the clock. Alynna continued to sip at her wine. She passed a compliment to Kathleen, who'd replicated the bottle. Adam's eyes fell on a painting by the front window. Tom and B'Elanna had curled up in their seat, content to have the stillness. Moira watched them.

Their fingers were loosely entwined; his arm was draped around her. Tom did look older--and of course, he should after nine years. But there were creases in his well-taught eyes that she didn't quite expect, a turn to his mouth that held so many words, poised to be expressed but willingly contained behind a certain sagacity she couldn't quite place.

Actually, Moira thought him more handsome than he had been when younger, and he was gentler still when he looked at his wife, B'Elanna, who was far friendlier than anyone expected and was just as reserved as Tom had become. She had surprised Moira a little, too, with her grace and easiness--though the younger Paris sister did not doubt for an instant that the petite half-Klingon engineer had at least as much strength as her brother. Four children in seven years with a busy career on Voyager was enough to cement that idea in Moira's head.

Yet there, on the ivory brocade sofa, B'Elanna looked as pampered and good-natured as a lady could be, snuggled up in Tom's arm, sharing a silence and contentment belonging only to those who had seen so much and survived, as they both had.

So Moira continued to wait.

Finally, the admiral pushed himself to stand.

"I've got an early start tomorrow, so I think I'll turn in," he told them and again praised his daughters for dinner. "See you in the morning, Tom, B'Elanna."

"Sleep well, Dad," Tom said, echoed by B'Elanna, unmoved in his arm.

"Alynnna."

"Good night, Owen," she said, setting down her glass. "I think I'll be leaving soon, too."

"See you at HQ tomorrow, then." With one more salutation to his son-in-law, the admiral walked quietly out, allowing himself a yawn as he left. The thrum of his steps could be heard in the hall, then the creak of the stairway banister when he used it to pull himself off the landing, then his slow, rhythmic ascent.

Moira grinned, turning her brightened stare to her brother. He caught it--and caught on. A minute later, when she heard her father's footsteps fading off in the upstairs hallway, she spoke again.

"Okay, Tom. Dad's gone. I'm asking."

B'Elanna looked at her. "About what?"

"She wants to know about Avalar," Tom said then glanced around the room.

Across the table, Alynnna's gaze had awoken, and she took up her wineglass again. Sitting on the floor before the coffee table, Kathleen's brows raised with curiosity. Though not so much so, Adam, too, turned his attention back to the center of the room.

"We haven't heard many inside accounts about life on the colonies during that time," he said.

B'Elanna continued to eye her younger sister-in-law. "Do you really want to hear about this? I mean, to Tom and I, we accepted and wanted the life we had then. But at the time, you and I would have been enemies."

Moira nodded. "I know--and I promise not to play court. I just want to know what happened to you out there. Please?"

Tom considered it one more time, looking at his sister's earnest face. If anyone would understand, would really want to... He laughed quietly. "God, what first? So much was happening then."

"I remember your letter to Dad," Moira told him. "The first one. I read it to him and Kathleen."

"Good. I'd rather not have to explain that again."

Her stare drawing down, B'Elanna knew what else thankfully shouldn't be rehashed. She knew, however, it would come up again if they went through with Moira's request. But Tom seemed willing

enough, and though she was no storyteller, she never minded remembering that time, in spite of it all. They could keep their hopes alive in few others ways just then, and she needed that hope once again, now more than ever.

So, she drew the first breath, smiling wistfully...

Nestmaking

"I don't know how it happened, really. But I guess you have to understand first how different our lives were there--how different we were... We were just married, trying to find our own way in all of it, and survive. Mainly survive. The fight could be...rough. And Avarar... Tom had been there before, and...well, his memories of the place weren't very good. But he'd started healing there, too. --You don't mind me talking about that, do you? ...Anyway, we sort of ended up back there by accident, and we didn't even realize at the time... It just...happened."

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"Here."

B'Elanna looked over to Jenna's hand, outstretched with a cloth inside it.

"For your eyes," Jenna said, eyeing the younger woman. "They're pretty tired."

B'Elanna nodded. "Well, I *am* pretty tired." Taking the cloth, she placed it over her face and leaned back on the makeshift table they'd erected just outside the house. For the time being, it was their dining room. She tried to ignore--tried to resist rejoining--the noise nearby. Tom and Chakotay were fusing the new beams to the side of the house, preparing it for the slates they had yet to collect.

They'd begun repairs on the house soon after the Liberty had arrived. The crew had immediately set about handing out rations, medical treatment and what equipment they could spare to the surviving colonists, freeing the ship's captain, nurse, engineer and pilot that afternoon to a little off-time work with their own repairs--starting with the walls. They wouldn't finish. They had to leave in a couple days. But at least they could leave knowing they'd done something substantial and saw that their new neighbors were provided for.

Jenna watched her friend take the moment, drawing a breath of the warm, sooty air of that depressed world. "How bad is it-- Tom, I mean?" she asked.

"He's barely slept since we got word." B'Elanna pressed the cloth onto her temples, pulled it away to stare up at the bright azure sky. It was so clear and dry, she noticed. Maybe too dry.

"Perhaps this isn't the best place for the two of you," Jenna offered. "It's a wrought of pain for Tom, and there's so much work that needs to be done. I know how you hate distractions, and this'll be one

for certain if you take it on."

B'Elanna grinned. "Like I told Chakotay: This is our home now, Jenna. We made the decision."

"We, or you?"

"We," B'Elanna replied, sitting up again. "Tom needs this as much as I do. We need to make this place right again, to... How can I put it?" Looking out onto the plain, she pointed with a flick of her dirty fingers. "You look around at Avarar, and you see burnt land, and think about the dead here, about Mila."

"You're right. I do." Jenna's steely stare followed where B'Elanna's gaze had gone. "I know what happened here...to poor Mila. God, I hope it'd been quick, just a rush, you know? I was in it myself on Tinalat, saw my Lloyd... --But you know all that." Closing her mouth, she unconsciously ground her teeth. "Perhaps it's only me. But I just can't see how Tom would find any peace here--or you any contentment. All the death...you can't wash this kind of pain away."

B'Elanna nodded, understanding. "It was my idea to stay," she admitted. "But Tom and I agreed on it and he brought us up here. We look at this place and we see...ourselves." She shrugged. "Both of us, Jenna, feel something holding us here. I don't think I can make you understand--"

"Oh, but I do," Jenna quickly responded. "I do. I know I'm the fool that advised you to start making these sorts of decisions in the first place, but you're so young to *take on* this much more pain already, when you've only started settling yourselves inside. And you've only just married a few months past."

"Four months, actually."

"Details, details. You'll lose track soon enough."

B'Elanna's lips pursed into a grin, and her eye caught the men coming around the corner, as dirty as she and Jenna were from digging up the rubble. Even at a distance, though, she could tell Tom's eyes looked a little brighter, probably with the satisfaction of exertion without added stress, of *creating* something, or planning to, of making something for their futures that they could see and touch...

"This isn't pain, Jenna. This is trying to do something about it."

Suddenly, Jenna laughed. "Heavens, you sound like Tom when you talk like that!"

"I do not," she returned, wiping off her face, looking at the dirt that came off. "God, I wish it'd rain again. Look at this."

"A little dirt's good for the soul," Jenna said proudly.

"Well, I just wish it looked better on the skin."

"My, you're a felid little thing of late! Since when did you give a damn about getting dirty? You never minded all that warp soot as much, and it's harder to get off. Dirt's your friend, love. It grows a hell of a lot more than plasma residue."

"I'm used to engine soot," B'Elanna replied.

Jenna looked at B'Elanna askance. "Well, a good plot of dirt's far more useful--and a lot sexier, trust me on that."

B'Elanna smiled and shook her head. "I won't even ask."

"Best you don't!" Jenna chuckled, then said more loudly as the men neared, "Might give 'em inferiority complexes."

"I'm not biting," Tom said immediately.

"La! That's not what B'Elanna tells me!" Still giggling, she hopped up to give Chakotay a squeeze. "Having a break at it finally?"

"For a while," the captain grinned, curious but not nearly stupid enough to ask what was behind her brazen smile.

Tom had reached out to B'Elanna already, maneuvering her into his open arm. "Want to have a walk before we get to those beams?"

B'Elanna smiled and took his hand, setting aside the cloth as she slid off the table. "Let's go."

"Let go!"

He shook convulsively as his arms flailed, and it took all her strength to hold him down to the makeshift bed on the kitchen floor. He thrashed and cried like an animal, tears streaming out of his eyes, jerking back violently. B'Elanna finally got a hold of his wrists, only to lose one hand.

She saw a light in the corner of her eye, then Jenna's voice-- "Do you need an--"

"GET OUT!" B'Elanna bellowed and grabbed Tom's hand again. "Let me handle this! --Damnit, Tom!"

The light disappeared, and in a moment, B'Elanna was surprised that Jenna actually listened to her. *Well*, she thought as she struggled to pin him down, *she does know he's my husband. All mine...*

"NO!" Tom screamed as his hand flew back around.

B'Elanna wasn't quick enough that time--his palm wheeled across her mouth, whipping her head aside. She growled and reeled back, slapping his face audibly. "Wake UP, Tom!" she shouted, more unnerved than hurt, then smacked him again with a crack.

Tom's eyes popped open.

Breathing in labored gasps, he was otherwise still. Soon, his breath slowed.

In the usual manner, he stared blankly for a moment, coming back to that room, that present... Then his gaze turned to his wife, who still knelt beside him, staring back as she caught her own breath. He took another moment to collect himself before noticing the red spot on her face, the blood on her lip... Immediately, he sat up, reaching out but not touching her. "Oh my God, B'Elanna."

"It's nothing," she said, wiped at her mouth. She looked at her hand. It wasn't bad. She shook her head again. "You were still out and didn't--"

"The hell I didn't," he whispered and brought her close. Kissing her chin and mouth, he embraced her softly. He let out his breath when her arms tentatively wrapped around him. "I am so sorry," he

breathed in regret, then clenched his teeth. "Maybe it'd be better if we slept apart for a while."

B'Elanna pulled back enough to look at him. "I'm a tough girl. I can take it." She placed a finger to his lips when they opened again. "You're my husband and you can't help this. I sleep with you whether you like it or not."

He almost argued, but seeing her stare, well prepared for any complaint, he instead bent to softly kiss her cheek. "If you insist. Thank you."

When he moved back again, she leaned over and turned up the stasis lamp, drawing down shadows of wrecked room. Tom had promised her it would be the second priority when she'd tried to make the blackened kitchen a little more livable, to no avail--that after a whole day's work on the framework of the house. In spite of their plans, she didn't like looking at the decrepit room.

B'Elanna turned back to him, and knew with that glance that her husband's condition had worsened. The shadows under his eyes, that vacant look, spoke more than the whole planet did. Since K'Karn warned them about Avalar's destruction, that look had progressively taken over Tom's handsome features as his sleep grew to little more than a series of disturbances.

"Tell me about your dream, Tom," she whispered as she drew close to him again. "Tell me what you saw."

Tom sighed, touching her chin, his gaze apologizing again even as he found the words. "Let me get the regenerator."

"No, it's fine." She stopped him from asking again. "Tell me now."

"She...spoke again." He shook his head, exhaling hard through his nostrils. "I'm really getting sick of this."

"But they mean something, Tom. Your mind's trying to work it out."

"I don't know which to be more scared of."

Her responding grin was but a partial one. "Tom," she said, moving into his gaze, "don't be scared. You don't have to be. Please, tell me."

He stared thoughtfully, as though preparing to begin, but then he stood and went around the counter to their portable replicator, from which he ordered two coffees. Straightening, he turned again, mugs in hands, to see B'Elanna looking up at him. She was kneeling on the makeshift bed, hands on her knees. Her hair sat in clumps around her shoulders. Her nightgown was wrapped fitfully around her slim body. Her eyes were lit with concern.

Her lip was red but not swollen, but he still felt the guilt of hitting her, even if he'd been asleep and he wasn't in his right mind. Then again, it was what *wasn't* right that concerned him.

He returned to their bed, sitting before her as she took the steaming drink he silently offered. He drew a slow sip of his own, watching her swallow, watching her watching him. He lowered the mug, not averting his gaze, then sighed heavily.

She said nothing when he stood again to get the regenerator from his medkit. *Maybe if he doesn't have to look at it, it'll be easier*, she told herself, willing her patience as he touched her chin once more and activated the device. Once he had healed the cut that he'd inflicted, his eyes glancing up to

check hers several times as he did, he took up his coffee again.

"Better?" he asked.

"Yes. You?" Her eyes bore into him until his lips parted. She didn't ask again, but continued to wait. Finally, he drew a breath to speak.

"She wanted me to come with her," he told her softly. "She tried to...take me with her."

B'Elanna's brow rose a bit at that. That was a new thing. "Where did she want to take you?"

"To where she had been. I guess back to wherever they...did that to her. She was burnt, looked the same as...when I saw her, and we were on the ground. I...I remembered the feeling, when I saw her. I felt like my heart was coming out of my chest. But when I was looking down at her, like I had, she reached up and...told me she wanted me to come back to the ship with her."

She resisted the urge to touch him, for the time being. She could tell it was scaring him all over again, living the dream out in words. His eyes somehow revealed what was passing behind them, but kept glancing her way as if to prove again that he was indeed awake.

"But you said she tried to take you with her," B'Elanna prompted.

"After I said I didn't want to go. But she was pulling me, like a kid begging to go on a ride, and I couldn't get away."

He drew another long sip from his mug, as good a reason not to elaborate further, though he knew B'Elanna would have his words soon enough. She was getting better about that; he in turn had made an effort to share the details of his vivid nightmares.

They'd started their "sessions" not too long after they'd gotten together. They shared the akoonah, too, with Chakotay's help at first and much to his initial amusement. B'Elanna was as much naturally inclined to trowel the depths of her soul as Tom was. But she'd never hit such a bottom, never experienced anything that would drive her to such a solution.

Still, her curiosity, watching him use the akoonah, often during calm times and in the bunkroom they'd shared, or on layovers at Riva or Kieno-three, made her ask. Not long after, she gave it a shot--a couple abortive attempts at first, yet with her lover's patience, she was encouraged by it, even curious to go back and try to figure out the bizarre visions the meditations inspired. She and Tom had shared their experiences there with each other since.

The talk of dreams, the real, descriptive talk that B'Elanna had always sought but never could get out of Tom before, came out of that. B'Elanna, more often than not, wanted to know everything. She wasn't bothered by the fact that she'd woken up as well. She never had trouble going back to sleep. However, she was bothered from the first time she'd witnessed his disturbances, how such demons could implant themselves in such a soul, Tom's soul. But she never forgot the importance of his trusting her with them, even that first time, when she barely understood.

"She's never asked you to follow her," B'Elanna quietly commented, echoing her thoughts. "Maybe it's because we're here, because in a way you've followed her."

Tom shook his head. "But she was *here*, and wanted me to go to the ship where they did what they did to her."

"I wonder why."

"I didn't want to know," he returned with a humorless laugh and drew another long sip.

She eyed his dismissive posture. "Tom, you can't make it go away by ignoring it."

"Damn it, I know that," he responded, but then sighed again. "Sorry."

"Don't be," she said. "I'm not the one who has to deal with what you do. I know you're not taking it out on me. --I know, sometimes it's tough on us both. But I know you don't mean it."

He nodded, and she couldn't help but notice how old he looked just then, in his averted stare, his strong, careful fingers caressing the mug, his straight mouth closed but poised on the edge of words he wanted to say but didn't dare.

B'Elanna didn't prod him that time. Rather, she let the silence sit another minute, letting the warm liquid sink into her empty stomach. Finally, she asked, "Do you want me to get the bundle, Tom?"

He considered that, shook his head. "No, I'm too raw still. It's still too close. Tomorrow morning." He turned a tiny grin her way. "But there's something else we could do together..." He chuckled as her eyes widened at her first guess. "Unfortunately, that's not going to happen right now, either. But...would you read to me, like you did the other night? It really helped clear my mind a little."

The admonishing look on B'Elanna's face melted into pleasant surprise. "I'd like that," she said softly.

Handing Tom her mug, she crawled to the temporary bed stand--a funny looking leprechaun with a tray on its head that Jenna had brought for them when she and Chakotay came, for no reason but for cheer. From that table she got her PADD, and settled back in her place beside him.

"Are you sure we're not needed?"

Chakotay grinned at the two across the table, though he was sure Tom knew he was concerned--and if he didn't, Chakotay knew B'Elanna would enlighten him. "Take a break. We won't get any directives for a few more days, though we do have to get back and argue about it. But I think we've done everything we could for the other colonists here."

"More than they ever expected," Tom said. "Most people here thought they'd be left to fend for themselves."

"They still need a good water reclamation system and new replicators; a new power grid," the captain added. "But at least they have clothes, rations and shelter, some supplies. Even so, I think this place needs more work than the Liberty does right now--"

"*That's* saying something," Jenna remarked then reached across to pat Tom's hand. "Get some rest, Thomas. You need it--and so does B'Elanna."

Tom glanced over at the opening to their home, into which B'Elanna had disappeared a minute before. *She's been up to something...and I can't say I regret it.* Bringing his stare back to Chakotay's, he caught the worry then, found his suspicions confirmed. Worse, he knew more than any of them that he needed more time, that his bad sleep had drained him.

So, finally, he looked at his friend again. "Thanks, Chakotay. I owe you one."

"We'll see you in about a week."

Not long after, Tom held his bundle under his arm as he and B'Elanna waved off Chakotay and Jenna, who dematerialized a moment later. Alone in their yard, surrounded by dirt and building materials under a sun that was still rising, he took his young wife's hand. "C'mon, we'll clear a nice spot by the lake."

B'Elanna nodded, starting as he did to the hill trail they'd found. Winding steeply around clustered boulders all the way to the next plateau, it still needed to be raked off and reinforced in some places, but she knew they could do that in little time, and it'd be worth it. They already used the lake on a daily basis. "Sounds like the perfect place. Maybe we can go for a swim later?"

"I wouldn't mind that," he said, giving her a look that needed no explanation--his fingers had already given the curve of her hip a firm stroke, a common prelude to opening the covering there.

B'Elanna laughed and shook her head. "Do you think of nothing but sex, Tom Paris?"

"On a deserted planet with a beautiful woman I've claimed as my mate? What do *you* think?"

"Okay, I'll let you live."

He chuckled as he helped her up over a large rock, knowing even as he did it that she didn't need the help. He just liked doing it. He was glad she allowed as much assistance, thanked him with a quick squeeze of his fingers and a brief smile. His own smile lingered, however, as they made their way around the next turn. "Thank you."

"For what?"

He shrugged, hugging her in his arm. "For being with me."

She gave his waist a squeeze. "My pleasure."

"Egad, lady! I'm not here to kill you!"

B'Elanna's eyes went wide at the thought of what she was doing--holding a rock high above her head, ready to smash the skull at the scruffy old man who'd crept up behind her as she was laying out a yard border. Sighing off a terse breath, she lowered the rock. "Well, you shouldn't sneak up on people like that."

"I'll remember that!" the man laughed, rocking forward on his feet and crossing his arms. "You've got the reflexes of a rabbit, the way you swung around. --You gals got too good of hearing! My wife was like that, too."

"Who's here, B'Elanna?" Tom asked as he came around the corner. His hands and arms were black with the soot of the tritanium girders they were preparing for the new bedroom's framework.

She only gestured with a wave of the hand that dropped the rock, giving a little shrug.

"You've got yourself a feisty little lady there," snickered the man as he patted B'Elanna's arm

affectionately--then repealed the unconscious gesture for her responsive stare.

Tom grinned and wiped off his hand. "Tom Paris. This is B'Elanna Torres, my wife."

"Alfred Schiller," the man replied, shaking Tom's hand, then offering the same to the woman. "I live down that way about a kilometer."

B'Elanna's eyes lit with recognition. "I've seen your house--the brownstone on the old road, right? How long have you been rebuilding?"

He snorted. "Since it happened, of course. A few of us went underground when we heard the fighting start up, just in case. Damn lucky we did, too."

Tom nodded soberly. "I'm sorry for your loss," he said quietly.

"Yes, I know. The Losaels talked about your work around the flats, the supplies you and your sect friends brought. That helped." He drummed his fingers on his still crossed arms. "You're Maquis, right?"

B'Elanna straightened, moved closer to Tom. "That's right. Is that a problem?"

"Well it's good and bad, really," Schiller answered as he eyed the two yet again. "It's nice to know some wise eyes are settling on the planet again and aren't bringing weapons. --Yes, I've run some scans with what I've got left, just to see what you and your friends were up to." He grinned as the lady's soured look. "The bad part is that some stupid, coward Maquis got us into this mess in the first place--killed at least two years of crops, my whole vineyard, wrecked a wing of my house and the shed. Not to mention, all our friends are dead, burned away and left for manure."

He'd been watching the two as he spoke, and his small eyes noted how both of them paled, how one lost his posture, the other one stiffened, when he spoke of the dead. "You were a friend of Mila's, I've been told."

Tom nodded. "She was my friend's cousin. She let me stay here for a few weeks last year when I was out of it."

"She was a good girl," Schiller confirmed. "Well, it's enough to some people that you might be trouble down the road--I'm just warning you. Still, you've been very...quiet, coming in here and laying root."

"And we plan to keep it that way," Tom told him. "We don't want anyone to have a reason to follow us in."

"So you use the cloak. --Yes, I noticed you dropping it when you came in the other day, just before you landed in that hold of yours." Schiller chuckled. "Boy, if rebel's not bad enough, the Fed's going to really hate you for adding a cloaking device to your ship."

"We don't belong to the Federation," B'Elanna replied, "so we didn't need their approval."

"But when they get wind of it, their stomachs 'll churn, anyway." Schiller pulled a long breath through his nostrils, rocked on his feet again. "Well, from what some of the people say about you two, I guess you're safe enough."

Tom couldn't resist chuckling. "Glad we've met with your approval."

"We just don't want the Cardies back this way any time soon."

B'Elanna nodded. "You won't get any argument from us on that. I give you my word, Mr. Schiller, we're only going to live here from time to time and we want to help where we can, if we can. We won't draw any attention."

"But why Avalar? Because it's an old target?"

"Because it *was* a target," Tom corrected him. Taking B'Elanna's hand, he gestured back to the table in the yard. "Would you like to have lunch with us? Maybe we can talk some more about this? --Since you're our closest neighbor, it wouldn't be right not to get to know one another." He grinned as the scruffy, middle-aged man raised his brows at the thought of food. Probably a farmer like most the others on the plain, his wiry frame probably masked a strength that could rip down a tree if he thought to do so.

"Lunch, hmm? What's on?"

"We have some French bread and chili," B'Elanna offered, seeing Tom's charm and feeling as thankful for it as she ever had been.

"Spicy?" Schiller asked. "I like spicy."

Tom and B'Elanna shared a smile. "Welcome to our home, Mr. Schiller," Tom said, and gestured him to come with them to their table.

Finally, the rains came again. It was desperately time for it, as the dust turrets had begun to rise again with even the sparsest breeze, bathing all it touched in grayish amber. Schiller had told them a storm would come, and thankfully, they'd listened to his forecast. B'Elanna had reinforced the roof just in time.

It pittered and pattered little echoes through the slope-roofed house, pouring off the eaves in rivers draining into the yard. Or at least B'Elanna could hear it--there were no windows in that kitchen.

Yet the relief she felt for the precipitation was muddled. Inside, it was another night spent, once again, trying to recapture the sleep forsaken when her husband awoke struggling--yet again.

Watching him try to relax, she wondered why she wasn't angry about it. Certainly she might have been, having been deprived of her much needed sleep after days of unrelenting work. But instead, it tore her heart to see him paler every morning, to see him trying so hard only to wake again and again in terror. At the same time, she felt even more needed--an odd dichotomy she wasn't compelled to choose between yet.

So she laid on her side, watching Tom fight to drive another round of hell revisited from his mind as he stared up at the scarred ceiling, wondered if she might get the medicine bundle--for herself. But she was too tired to think too seriously about moving.

"B'Elanna, I'm scared."

It had come from his lips so simply, so suddenly, she'd almost not heard it. Blinking, taking his words in, she touched his arm, rubbed it with the tips of her fingers. "I'm scared for you."

"I wish I wasn't giving you such a reason to be."

"I know," she said, offering him a little smile.

He felt his heart beat harder to see it. "B'Elanna... You don't have to try so hard."

"It's all I can do, Tom. I like being able to do something about things, not sitting by helplessly waiting for them to solve themselves. Even when I know I can't do much, I will try."

Tom's lips turned up a little, too, for that. "You have no idea how un-helpless you are."

"Sometimes it doesn't feel like it."

"Then you'll just have to trust me. You help me a lot more than you know."

The rain picked up again, and his gaze turned down a little. "What?" she asked softly.

"You can keep trying, as much as you want."

She shifted herself closer, moving her arm around him, her head onto his pillow. "I think I will," she whispered into his ear.

Feeling her arms squeeze him, closing his eyes, he willed himself to close his eyes as the rains outside picked up again, listen to the drumming on the new roof, let its natural rhythm hypnotize him. "It's good to hear that, isn't it?"

"Yes," she answered, tucking her head into his shoulder. "It certainly is."

B'Elanna furrowed her brow and put her fists on her hips as she watched her husband rake over the plot they'd cleared that morning. "What the hell is that?" she asked, motioning to the odd little blooms popping out from the black dirt.

"When Schiller and I went by Mila's old place this morning, I saw these starting to grow back," Tom said, the excitement barely contained in his voice as he smiled up at her. "It's caltola--broccoli, sort of."

B'Elanna squinched her nose. They were repulsive looking blooms, gray and blue with orangish leaves, and that wilted, possibly from the transplanting.

She sighed. Tom was obviously happy about it, happier at his work than she'd seen in a while. Most of their work had been purely practical--replacing brackets and wall joints and their power relays, not to mention the slate, which had given them a few headaches in addition to the usual. Then there was their helping to fix some other residents' homes. The most enjoyable thing they'd done on the house so far had been to fix up the yard and plant some trees, make it decent to look at. Then Tom had turned his extra time to making a garden--even if he laughed at himself for it, as he knew he was no gardener.

B'Elanna wasn't entirely convinced about that part, though. Tom often spoke of his mother, and B'Elanna knew well the portrait he had of her looking up from a lush bed of yellow and white roses. B'Elanna had thought, and commented once, that her expression was so much like him in that intensity and that curious little grin, and even her mussed blonde hair.

His mother had been the one to teaching him how to "muck around in the soil" when he was a boy. Tom remembered that time fondly, remembering also how she had loved him so unconditionally, had given him support when no one else would. *Maybe he associates it*, she thought, managing a smile for the dirt-covered man in their new garden. It was no secret he was loving it, and she had to admit to herself he, though filthy...

Jenna had a point: He looks pretty good in that dirt.

Despite her natural reaction to observation, she had to ask, "You really think it'll grow?"

Tom stood from the plot and moved to take her small hands in his dirty ones. "But that's the point, B'Elanna," he said softly, a gleam pervading his tired eyes as he gazed down to her. "They were *growing* in Mila's old yard. Without any help. They weren't completely destroyed."

B'Elanna's eyes slowly widened, as she realized the meaning of it, and her smile matched his soon after.

Tom leaned down and kissed her, rubbed his dirt-brushed nose against hers. "You told me so."

She giggled. "You bet I did," she replied and put her arms over his shoulders. "Okay, then, I'll bite. We're going to have a great garden--and you can say you told me that, too, if it makes you feel better."

He squeezed her. "But you always bite, B'Elan-NA!"

"You deserved it, you rogue," she purred and kissed away the swell of the nip she'd given him, fighting off her own laughter as he chuckled and rocked her in his embrace.

She took a step back, smiling up at him, shaking her head a little at him. Still grinning, still close to her, he gestured with a turn of his eyes towards the house.

She rolled hers, but accepted his hand when he slipped it around her fingers. "Lunch then?"

"Sounds good."

Yet they had barely passed the rickety front door, which Tom thoughtfully ran his hand across, when the transponder went off. They looked at each other. A few moments later and with but a nod to each other, they went to change their clothes.

As they traversed the land up the rain-washed mountainside, they decided between each other that it had gone well over the past couple weeks. They had arrived to the coaly planet to help people they knew would be in great need. With the Liberty's help, they'd been able to not only offer relief, but also choose and begin to set up a new home base for themselves.

Their first stay on Avalar had ended, but they'd begun their new schedule, their new lives, and hopefully, their healing.

With a hand around her leather-belted waist, slipping casually down on occasion past the curve of her back, they made their way back to the cavern they'd drilled out for a docking hold. It was around the rise from the house--far up the hill and on the north side of the mountain. They figured they wouldn't mind the walk.

From time to time, as they walked through the path at the top of the rocky hill, B'Elanna looked up at him, and he saw her concern, her love, even her need. He could see those things there so easily somehow, more with every passing day. His reaction, too, was less amazed, but always made him draw a breath, smile a little, reassuring her somehow, or perhaps telling her that he understood, and was thankful.

She was there, he knew, and things would continue to get better. Avarar would grow again, the Cardassians' efforts there would be proven in vain, and his dreams would return to pleasant ones. She would feel a sense of accomplishment in having made that happen, and security in having a home that was undeniably theirs, as would he. Soon enough. Someday. They'd make it work.

For the meantime, though, they had jobs to fulfill.

"What the hell?! Get those magnetic constrictors on line -- NOW!"

B'Elanna growled loudly and smacked the COMM. "Chakotay, this piece of garbage isn't going *anywhere!*" she screamed as she dropped herself into an open conduit near the core. "Those second rate coils you forced me to install are no better than a lump of shit in the dilithium chamber! This filthy bucket wouldn't know its...."

Three decks above, the captain turned a pained look to his friend as the barrage of curses filled the air. Tom's eyes didn't move from his panels as he hurled the Liberty through another set of evasions, though a knowing grin had touched his lips.

He knew this was coming, Chakotay correctly thought. Beside Tom, his young trainee was looking nervous and excited. He glanced back to his captain at the string of curses that continued her tirade as if to see if it was normal.

"...like to thank you a whole hell of a lot for calling me away from my Cardie-charred house to let me take care of *this* fucking mess!... --Damnit what NOW?!"

Chakotay grit his teeth. This was not how he wanted to start his day. "What do you recommend, B'Elanna?"

"I recommend you blow them to hell, *Captain!* --Son of a bitch!"

Tom perked up when he heard the sizzle and boom over the COMM, but soon was relieved to hear her still cursing up a storm at that added trouble. The constrictors were offline, the warp core was beginning to vent... Tom blinked, pulled another turn, then tapped on another panel and read quickly... "B'Elanna, vent the drive plasma full blast and I'll make it count!"

A moment of silence followed.

"I'm on it!" B'Elanna suddenly called back, and then began to yell another set of instructions to her people.

Chakotay furrowed his brow then caught the ceiling as another blast grazed them and Tom yanked the Liberty out of yet another line of fire. A puff of smoke popped out of another panel and he looked at Tom's new direction. "What are you up to?"

Tom grinned. "Krammic, think you can squeeze a little hydrazine into the hole?"

Catching on, the captain almost laughed. "Do it, Krammic. --Tom, you scare me sometimes." Another graze upon their shields was followed by a sudden shift, and Chakotay held on tighter.

"I'm good at that, aren't I?" replied the pilot as he reeled the ship around for their next volley, grinning inwardly at that feeling of inverted g-forces. Somehow, that feeling never lost its appeal to the pilot, though he knew it didn't quite appeal to everyone on board. Beside him, he saw Rodrigo watching concertedly. Tom's grin grew, but he kept his eyes on his readings. They could only hold it so long...

The open COMM still spurted B'Elanna's curses, but he could hear--then see on his ashen console--that she had begun to vent the drive. He knew also that she hated every moment of it. But at least their plan would give them an escape.

With a nod from Chakotay, Krammic set up the shot and started rerouting. A slow, bloody smile crossed his face, then-- "They're slowing!" he announced.

Tom watched as the radiation washed over the Cardassian vessel's shield bubble, finding deficiencies, and then melt into the cruiser itself. He slowly let out a breath as he waited, as the red and blue streams sizzled across the hull, stopping their fight as quickly as it'd started. They'd gotten their spoils of the raid--nothing greater than a little quick burglary and the destruction of a depot, then knocking off a few of the fighters that followed them out. But they hadn't counted on anything as big as the cruiser that dropped out of warp and nearly on top of them..

Thanks to the Liberty's engine problems, the Cardassians would be busy for a long while, treating not only themselves, but also their systems, which weren't exactly keen on activated hydrazine gas. As they flew further and further away from the stilled ship, he knew that the Cardassian crew was likely beginning to feel the effects of the radiation. When Krammic announced the cruiser had powered down, Tom set the Liberty back on their original course at warp-three, the fastest he could manage.

Then he imagined what the radiation was probably doing to them...

"Rodrigo, take over," he said suddenly and left his seat. When the younger man obeyed, Tom pointed for him, "Just keep us going at these coordinates. When B'Elanna clears it, punch us up to warp-seven again."

"Easy enough," Rodrigo answered with a nod, settling himself into the chair and wiping off the console. "But I think we need a new housekeeper, Paris."

Tom breathed a small laugh and looked over to tactical. "Krammic, keep your eyes open. I picked up another ion trail just outside the sector. It's probably the Ralinot, but just in case, try to patch through to them before we head in there."

"Good idea, Tom," Chakotay said, then followed Tom with his gaze as he passed him by. "B'Elanna probably could use some help. Check for casualties while you're there."

Tom glanced back his thanks to Chakotay, who followed him out into the lift landing behind the bridge. Seeing the captain's face, Tom turned his palm to what he knew his captain would ask. "I'm fine," he said. "It's just...well, frying them like that was a little...close, you know?"

"It had to be done," Chakotay said simply.

Tom wanted to argue that, but knew he couldn't. A pause was all he could manage in retaliation. Then, "I'll go see if Jenna's overburdened."

Chakotay nodded, but took the pilot's arm in afterthought. "When we're done out here and back to camp, I want you and B'Elanna to go home. Driga's taking his sweet time planning these offenses lately, and--"

"Chakotay," Tom grinned, "I know B'Elanna talked to you about giving us off time. I'm glad she did...and thank you."

"Still bad?"

Tom blinked slowly, and kept his eyes down after. "It could be better. I won't lie and tell you it's purgatory fixing up the house and helping out the others there. That's been great. But once we stop working, it's...hard to sleep."

"All the more reason you get what rest you can--get yourself centered again--because we'll all need it when we get to that next level." Chakotay had recaptured the pilot's attention with that, and he held it soberly. "It's going to pick up again soon, Tom. Starfleet's been quiet for a while, as have our informants--and you probably know what that means. Everyone's been predicting a Federation offensive, now that the attacks around Ronara and Moriya have made things messy for them. I'll need you--and B'Elanna--in top form when that happens. More than that, I'm concerned about you. I remember what you saw."

Tom gave him a single nod. "When we get near Xorlen, we'll leave."

When the lift door slid aside, Tom turned so he was in it, then disappeared without any more words. Chakotay sighed after him. He'd honestly thought that the trouble would not return, would only continue to get better. But then he reminded himself that it'd barely been a year since Tom broke down in front of him, that after a few years of hell on his conscience. Chakotay had to remind himself that progress didn't guarantee peace. He knew that for himself all too well.

Returning to the bridge, he glanced at Rodrigo. Tom had been training him for a few months by then, and Chakotay had to admit he'd been as good a replacement for Tom as they could have hoped for. Despite his reasons for joining their fight, he was impenetrably good-natured and willing to work. Chakotay had liked him instantly, as had everyone else. To add to that, Rodrigo learned fast and well. He never shied from the challenges or the stress, and was always careful. Even there, he was already rechecking their coordinates and running some internal diagnostics.

Chakotay grinned at the young man's protocol. Tom had obviously taught the kid Starfleet procedures for working a conn station. Not ironically, it gave the captain some peace of mind, as it was something he could predict and gauge, unlike many other Maquis matters.

"Hey Tom!"

The pilot turned and grinned at Rodrigo jogging up to him. He closed his med kit, leaned up against the table he'd just finished stitching someone up on. "Hey, Andre. Who's manning the conn?"

"Pierce," the younger man answered. "I wanted to say you did a great job today. That spiraled inversion you did--I'm starting to understand how you pull it off."

Tom smiled, never minding such a compliment. "Well, it's a trick I think you've got the speed for. I just wish we had a holodeck to practice on. I could have you doing the move in your sleep within a week."

"Too bad you can't lift one of those, huh?"

Tom laughed. "Yeah, that would be nice--but where would we put it?"

Andre chuckled as well then gave his teacher another look. "You and B'Elanna heading back to Avalar, then? The captain mentioned I'd better rest up for full shifts for a while."

Tom nodded, shoved his hands into his coat pockets. "Yeah, well, B'Elanna and I still have a lot to do on the house."

The young man's gaze turned wisely at that. "It's good you and she found a nice place to live. --No, I mean that. I think it'll do you two good to have a place to get back to. I know I'm thankful I have one still."

"I guess you miss it, too," Tom commented. "You'd never really gotten out much before Chakotay hired you. Must have been nice, since it kept you there so long until now."

With a slow nod, Andre turned to also lean on the table, his large, brown eyes drawing the memory on the opposite bulkhead. "I remember every morning my mama going out the front door with her kits and chisels--she's a landscape sculptor. Papa...he was a design engineer. Or he was before the colonies split with the Federation." With a sigh, he added, "But every morning, I'd see her walking off in the fog, and she almost looked like a ghost or something...unreal, you know? And I remember how the yard used to flood when it rained, and my brother and I would run outside and jump in the puddles."

Tom smiled. "My sister and I used to do that same thing in San Francisco. Our mother took about a hundred pictures of it. We really got in a mess... It rained a lot there. Same way on Jaros?"

"Depends on the season. But it is truly, naturally beautiful...sublime. I am very lucky they haven't attacked my homeworld. Anyway, I have lot of simple memories like that--and for some reason, they make me love my homeworld even more."

"There doesn't have to be a reason for that," Tom said.

Rodrigo accepted that with a blink, then said, "You and B'Elanna ought to stay at your new home as much as Chakotay will let you. I see how you work, you put everything into the cause. I don't wonder why Chakotay trusts you like he does. But you and your wife need to be able to own and dig your hands into something you can love together. It's good for you. You should belong there, to that place."

Tom chuckled. "Thanks Andre. I'll see about that promotion to captain next time I'm on the bridge."

"I'm not joking," he insisted. "You've been happier lately than when I met you. It's good for you."

Tom had to stare at his earnest friend. *Happier?* he mused. *With all the work and not a decent night's sleep in weeks and clearing all the rubble... Rebuilding, being with B'Elanna, helping the others recover, doing something...*

"Maybe." Tom pushed himself from the table and gestured with his chin to the door. "Come on."

"Where are we going?"

"I want to show you some coil adjustments B'Elanna made on the Marseilles. We're thinking about trying it on the Liberty, to make those spiral inversions a little easier on the hull." As they started out

together, Tom began to explain the force ratios produced by the maneuvers, though it felt to him like a staid lecture after only a minute or so. His eyes were locked on the deck throughout the trip, and he knew that half his mind was on what he and B'Elanna should get to first--mining the slates or finishing up the frame for the bedroom...or the kitchen, which B'Elanna really did want to see cleaned up...

"It's a lot to remember," Rodrigo said.

Tom blinked himself back into the present, gave the younger man a nod. "Yeah, but you'll have to know them by heart one of these days," he told him, "so study those PADDs I gave you."

"I have been, *Professor Paris*."

"Good," Tom grinned. "B'Elanna and I need all the delegates we can get."

"Hmm, he's still a bit on the tadpole side," Jenna commented as she eyed Tom taking Rodrigo through another lesson, the young darkly handsome man following every flight-related gesture and word, even responding with corresponding gestures on his own. Circling the shuttle bay, they were on their fifth lap around the *Marseilles*, their pilot language more grandiose by the turn. "He's been a happy pet for you and Thomas. Does he roll over and chase his tail as well?"

B'Elanna giggled and looked up from her work on an isolinear juncture. "He's a good pilot and a nice kid."

"Kid?" Jenna laughed. "He's not three years your junior!"

Her lips twisted inward. "Yes, but he acts like it."

Jenna pulled herself up on the same perch B'Elanna was sitting on, a row of cargo cases at the back of the bay. The girl looked serious in her tooling, and rightfully so. Nothing irked B'Elanna more than something she couldn't tear apart and fix for good, but had to make do on temporary measures.

It was her biggest problem, Jenna believed, and not just with her engines. "Yes, true enough."

"But he's got talent and personality," B'Elanna added as she drove a new chip into a bearing and took out a spectrometer to adjust it. "Tom seems to think he's got what it takes. We'll need good replacements for a while."

Jenna snorted. "In other words, we'd best keep out of trouble while you're gone."

"You'll be fine. Chakotay isn't solely dependent on us."

"He needs you two all the same." When the younger woman brought up her eyes at that, Jenna grinned and placed her hand on her arm. "But your health and happiness come first, B'Elanna. Chakotay will never regret that. He knows your worth more than anyone else, but he loves the two of you, and is smart enough to let you go. Don't regret it yourself, no matter what might come about."

B'Elanna put aside her tool to take Jenna's warm hand. "Thank you."

"Hey, Señora Torres!" Rodrigo called as he dropped a ball on the cargo deck. Tom was crawling up into the back hatch of the *Marseilles*, probably finishing up the last of their supply packing. Freed

from school, the younger man was ready for some fun. "Come have a game!"

B'Elanna looked over the deck, where a few of their friends had taken off their jackets to join in. Since Rodrigo came on board, kickball had become the crew's favorite tension breaker.

But the moment she considered getting up, she knew she wasn't in the mood. "No thanks, Andre," she told him. "I have this unit to finish up. Next time."

Atara was passing by, then, a predatory smirk on her face. "Come on, B'Elanna! --Or you, Jenna! With a mouth like yours, you probably have a hell of a kick."

Jenna spat a laugh. "I'm a good farm girl, alright! I'd knock that ball 'cross to the next galaxy if I wanted to, leaving but a hole through you!"

"Thought so," Atara quipped.

B'Elanna gestured to the others. "Go on, I'll watch this round."

With that, it began again, and B'Elanna found her spirits lifting even as the teams formed. So often they were fighting, it was good to see everyone getting together just for the fun of it. Rodrigo was a great player, she knew, and didn't disappoint as he swerved around the first "enemy" blockade and struck the ball into the opposing cargo bin.

Cheers went up and challenges followed. Chell was already there--and lost his offensive as soon as Larson charged and passed--only to be shoved aside by Leopov, raising a chorus of laughter as another goal was served. Rodrigo, chuckling wickedly, gave the slighter man a friendly pat on the shoulder, then whispered in his ear. Larson grinned and nodded.

"Incoming!" came a Celtic yell as Jenna flew past the men and blocked the enemy throw. "Come on, Lover--show me whatcha got!" she called to Rodrigo, who happily took her on, blocking her easily with his height alone. But before she could rally, Larson came up behind Jenna and nipped the ball from between the both of them. "Hey, it was my turn!"

"Teamwork, right?" Larson called back as he swerved around Leopov a second time, feinting to his repeated blow.

"Screw teamwork!" Jenna snapped, her fists landing on her hips. She cheered despite her disgust when her team managed point--even if it was an easy one. "Okay, now give that thing-- Bah! What's this, the frellin' boys club? Gimme that pigskin, y' treacherous bastards!"

B'Elanna laughed. Jenna had launched off again, not determined to win, but just to get the ball back. By then, even Atara had gotten in the spirit of joshing her, and about fourteen players were on the "field," joining teams at random and continuing a game wrought more with teasing than tactic.

On the other side of the deck, Tom hopped out of the scout and grinned at the scene. His eyes were still shadowed, his skin pale, B'Elanna knew well that nothing could have prevented him from appreciating a good game among their friends. Her own smile warmed to know it was still true.

Then their eyes met across the bay, and B'Elanna lowered the juncture she'd been fixing. His intent expression said it all: He was anxious to go home, too tired to play, too needy of rest. She felt the same. He gave her a little nod, and she returned it, then tapped her wrist badge. "Torres to Chakotay."

"Chakotay here. What's going on? Another game?"

"A pretty good one. You should come down. --Look, Tom and I are ready to set off. Is there anything else you need before we go?"

"No. That about does it. You finished the ISO plug?"

"I'll give it to Jonas before we set off."

"Fair enough. I'll contact you two when the plans come in. Take care of yourselves, okay?"

B'Elanna smiled. "You do the same. Thanks, Captain."

Sliding off the cases and landing solidly on her heels, B'Elanna maneuvered across the field, swerving around the action as she snapped the last bearings together on the small unit in her hands. She did not slow until she was at Jenna's side. Taking her arm, she leaned close and hugged her in an arm. "We're off."

Jenna forgot about the game for the moment, following her friend to Tom's side, where she said her goodbyes as well. B'Elanna gave her the juncture and told her who to give it to. Jenna made them swear to be careful.

Minutes later, the game paused to clear the deck. The Marseilles engines fired up, its engines as clear as a chime as it lifted and gracefully exited through the force field.

Watching with the others, and after palming the juncture into Jonas' hand, Jenna took a step forward, her eyes steady, her arms crossed, as she watched the scout vanish into the stars.

But when the doors closed, and the force field was deactivated, the game began again--starting with Jenna slapping the ball away from Rodrigo's hands.

It must have rained several times since they had left. They knew it had the moment they stepped down from the Marseilles' side hatch.

The moss looked to be in preparation to cover the ground. There were traces of its green everywhere, dots of life glistening with dew. The mere sight of that increase of chartreuse scrub made identical smiles grow on the two tired faces that found it. The orange sun on that warm morning illuminated the growth as far as their eyes could reach.

There were even grasses, starting up between some rocks.

Feeling so light after a week on the cold, dark Liberty, and in the Marseilles on their journey back, Tom took a deep breath. He drank in every millimeter of their new homeworld; let it sink in. It was a strange sort of happiness, knowing he was at a place he was calling home, being able to put that cold, dark place out of his mind for the while. Free.

Looking down to his wife, he knew she felt it, too. Her eyes shone in that bath of sunlight; the slight turn in her lips a show of vindication. It was indeed coming back... "Let's go home."

B'Elanna nodded. Feeling her husband's hand on the back of her hip, she started them down from the cavern. Seeing the sprigs of life on the ground made her want to run down to their yard, see what was

there. But she kept her present speed, having learned not to do anything more than walk with the boots she was wearing. The mountain soil definitely wasn't as stable as a solid deck.

As they came to the last rise before the descent to their land, their walk steadied into a comfortable pace up, then over and around the side of the small peak, and finally onto the wider path. Walking easily as they came to the first flat, Tom's hand slid casually down to B'Elanna's behind, caressing the taut leather there.

A grin crawled to her lips. Though he was teasing as much as appreciative, that gesture of affection was so subtly exciting to her, she couldn't help but conjure a reply.

"Like the view down there, Mr. Paris?" she queried, raising her chin but keeping her eyes stubbornly forward.

"Damn right I do, Miss Torres," he grinned and moved his hand around the soft circle again, letting his fingers fall momentarily into the valley as he did so.

"But do you have to do this while we're out here?" She spoke only half-seriously. He was without a doubt stirring her up.

Tom laughed. "Who's going to see us? Besides, you're just asking for attention when you dress like that." He gave her bottom a light smack, loud on the leather and just enough to stimulate her nerves.

"Hey!" She shot a look of mock outrage up at him. "I didn't ask for that!"

"No," he replied smoothly, "but those trousers sure did. And don't get me started on your boots." With that, his hand crept down as far as his reach allowed, stroking all it could reach...which did enough for him in his own right.

He didn't even know where his flirtatiousness had come from. Exhausted from a lack of sleep, tired from flying back without a break knowing they had a lot of work to do, frustrated with the problems on the Liberty, he'd barely felt inside himself lately. Plus, they'd promised Schiller they'd host another meeting when they got home, so they had those preparations to make, too.

But sometimes, no matter what their situation was, Tom couldn't help but look at his wife, no matter what she was wearing, and become as lusty as a teenager at a Betazoid wedding.

B'Elanna shook her head and averted her eyes forward again, silently thankful to whatever powers there were that her husband was acting more like himself, at least for the while. Bad sleep had made him quieter, less inclined to tease and flirt like he so often did. For what nights they *had* actually slept on the Liberty, it was yet disturbed, or alone.

Thus, she didn't mind his attentions one bit, especially knowing what they precluded. To ensure it, she held her head high and smirked, ignored him in just the right way--to lure him back for more. She wasn't very tired, after all.

"What I wear is practical enough," she replied tartly.

"And incredibly sexy."

"I don't dress to fulfill a sex quotient, Tom."

"You don't have to," he purred. "Regardless, I'd take you right here and now if you'd let me."

Her grin grew, turning wry as she wished the house were closer. "What makes you think that I'd stop you?" she taunted.

Suddenly, her bags were ripped out of her hands and she was turned in mid-stride. She barely heard his own cases hit the ground as his mouth landed on hers. A moment later, she squealed as her feet came off the ground and the trail and their cases were deserted. "Tom! What the hell are you doing?!"

Coming around a rock face with his squirming, furiously laughing wife in his arms, he leaned her back on a flat, sloped stone and followed her down. "I'm waiting for you to stop me," he told her mischievously.

Seeing his sultry gleam, her own eyes shot open and she looked around frantically. *My God! He's serious!* "Here?!"

Tom pressed her against the slab and kissed her fully, parting her lips with his tongue. His hands slid over her lithe body, then up again to pull open her vest and blouse as his mouth closed sensuously on her lower lip, biting slightly. Her breathy moan was all the confirmation he needed. Pushing her garments aside, he soon found her hot skin under his fingertips, felt her tremble beneath his sweeping touches.

"I miss you," he whispered, low in his throat, as he pinched her nipples, quickly tightening them and making her gasp. He ground his hips against her, letting her know what was waiting under his own coat and trousers. "I want you--here and now."

B'Elanna growled, pulled his gray coat open. "Hell with it," she breathed and claimed his mouth again. Jerking open his shirt, she yanked it and his coat off his willing shoulders. With another tug, he lowered his arms to divest himself of the clothing.

His hand snaked around her waist immediately after, holding her as he hiked her up a little higher on the slope. With his free hand, he grabbed the back of her vest, blouse and brassiere in a fist and swiftly pulled them back and away, baring her to the morning sun.

Groaning at the sight of her there, genuinely desirous but a little shocked at his suddenness, panting slightly from both, he buried his face between her breasts, turning his head to greedily nibble at one as he went to work on those boots and trousers that'd somehow caught him in the right mood.

B'Elanna threw back her head, holding him in place, and tried not to moan too loudly as her lover, her friend, her husband, continued to relish her. The sun poured over her increasingly bared body while a slight breeze sent tiny shivers over her sensitized skin. She couldn't help but recall at that point that they'd never really done it beyond the safety of darkness or privacy, with so great a risk of being walked up on. But the slick, hot rock was soft against her back and that orange sun was glorious...and what he was doing to her....

It was both liberating and scary as hell. She loved it.

"Oh, God!" she gasped, sucking in another breath directly afterwards. Her boots were gone, jerked unceremoniously from her small and dangling feet. Her trousers were peeled away a moment later. Her hands, strung through Tom's hair, reached low when he pressed his face against her. Done with their duty, his hands flew back up to grab her hips. With a nudge of his shoulder, she blindly put her leg over it, then the other around him, then let out a feral moan as her entire body lit up. In return, he growled with satisfaction, slowing his ministrations, though not stopping for an instant.

Tom still didn't try to figure out what put him in that mood.

Neither did B'Elanna. She didn't bother with such things during such times. Rather, she purred and gasped as she caressed his hair, then with more direction as she felt her responses climb.

Arched upon the slate, her feet braced upon his back, she suddenly couldn't give a damn where they were. Nor did she bother holding back anymore, but groaned aloud and rocked into his well-taught motions. Knowing well what it'd do for her; she let him take his time, let herself get caught up in the delicious aura of pleasure he was driving through her, let her skin drink in the radiating sun, the breeze caress that warmth. Her eyes opened for a moment, closed again, and the memory of that deep blue remained behind her eyes even as her mouth dropped open, and she heaved for air.

"Oh god, I love this," she moaned. "Mmm...I'm...close, Tom."

"I know," he whispered then continued even more slowly than before, savoring her.

One of his hands left her hips, and moved so he could stroke her center, then gently enter her. "Oh, yes," she breathed, and as felt the familiar twinge begin to ripple through her core. Within a few more seconds, she bucked, gasping, clutching his hair and crying out to him. He continued until she was panting, even whimpering as her legs slid off his shoulders and her fingers finally relaxed.

Having toed off his boots earlier, loosened his trousers, Tom finally rid himself of them and rose to brace his erection against her. Meeting her muzzy gaze, he kissed her gently, caressed her glistening body, guiding her path as he slid her down the rock's slope. Trembling with arousal, he continued to pull her down, slowly, his intense gaze locked with hers until he had filled her. There, they paused, and both slowly let out their breath at the feeling, the completion of their joining.

Again her legs wrapped around him, and she rubbed her heels encouragingly on his inner thighs. He touched her hair, caressing her temple with his thumb. He kissed her again, very softly, then moved steadily into her, propping himself up slightly as he drifted his fingers over her responsive skin. He watched her eyes, pinned to his between slow blinks, watched her parted lips quiver, caught on words that didn't matter, and heard her breathy moans escape her. It aroused him all the more, her primal sound, all answered each time he thrust and felt her muscles grip him. He drew his touches specifically to inspire her sweet moans again, and was not disappointed. Tenderly, he smiled, grinding into her, then covering her.

Her fingers, meanwhile, had begun to work their way around him, her short nails tracing around his ribs, her other thumb circling his nipple, flicking it. She nibbled and tasted his jawline, more hungrily as he began to move with more intent, producing the little growl she always expected and grinned at. For a man not Klingon, it had a very natural tone to it, like a lion's purr, which excited her for reasons that were beyond her. She lumped it into the category of natural physical reactions she'd inherited and let it be so to simply enjoy them. As she sampled him again, relishing in his sounds, she drove her sharper touches around his nape and down his shoulder.

Their eyes, then their open lips, met again, and Tom increased his tempo. A minute later, he slipped his hand between them to elicit another well-known reaction.

Groaning her approval, dragging her breath, she clutched him, finding in his expression that intent stare she'd known from the day they met... *When was that?* That look bore into her, searing her memory, as did how his eyes twitched with every thrust, his open lips murmuring yet not speaking, the lean muscles of his shoulders flexing slightly, the feel of his hips grazing against hers, and his touches, circling, and another grinding thrust, and again, again...

"Ahh! --Oh God, Tom!" She grasped his shoulder with a trembling grip, his waist with her legs, and rode the orgasm as he fed it, over and over. Hot with the sun and with him, bathed with the sweet breeze and in her release, then with his, she smiled even as she cried out, and moaned her love for him.

He followed her soon after, molding to her as he climaxed, groaned loudly when her still quaking muscles strung him along, driving lightning through every nerve in his body. His fingers tightened in her hair, arching her head back as his face buried itself in her neck open mouthed. In a few more concerted motions, he brought them both down then all but collapsed upon her. Her legs slid shakily down his hips and thighs, finally falling away to the stone.

There, they remained, unmoving aside from their labored breathing upon the mossy rock, now marked by them, the sun and air slowly drying the couple's moist bodies.

Soon, he slid them down further, pulling her legs around his side to cradle her in his arms before settling them on the warm, smooth amber stone beneath them. She hung on loosely, her head tucked into the curve of his neck, her hair sticking slightly to his chest. She nestled herself there as she kissed away a bead of sweat at his collar, tasting him. Still breathing deeply, she melted into his embrace, closed her eyes. He nuzzled a kiss in her hair, closed his eyes as well.

Their clothes lay all around them. They didn't move to retrieve them.

With a small, sated grin, she whispered, "I could get used to this."

The first thing she noticed when they opened the back hatch was the blackness of the ground--and the stench. Schiller's terse explanation of the capital city was dead-on: Nobody wanted to venture there for a long time for good reason. Not only had the Maquis activities there afforded the surviving colonists a certain amount of bitterness--a fact that Tom and B'Elanna felt keenly--but because of the structures, standing like charred sticks in the remnants of a campfire, and because, ironically, not all of the bodies had been irradiated.

Over a month later, the smell was still pungent, the water rotten, the cement permanently stained with silt where it wasn't crumbled, holding the acrid moisture.

The city looked surreal in its pummeled state, deader than anything else on the planet they'd seen, its coaly crowns on former buildings perched lopsided in the air, as if hanging onto its last thread. The entrances, cracked open, revealed nothing but more blackness. The streets were but paths of rubble leading only to more of the same.

It was silent, except for the wind. The wind blew the soot into deep hollows of emptiness.

B'Elanna covered her mouth with a cloth as the haze of dust passed, squinted to see what their sensors had told them was there.

Tom pointed. "Over there."

She nodded. "I see it."

"Let's make this quick, okay?"

"Oh, I don't plan to stay here *any* longer than it takes."

"Glad to hear it."

When the air died again, they got moving, carefully hopping down the barrel steps of their ship to make their way across the broken square, taking out their laser drills and wrist lamps as they threaded through. Prepared for the worst, they ventured about a meter inside of the structure, taking more scans before heading in all the way. Once it was cleared and they were inside, they got straight to business, praying all the while that they would find nothing but what they needed. They were not always so fortunate.

A few hours later, they had succeeded in transporting a few of the cannibalized I-beams and junction components into the back of their yard, having left the power nodes and other salvaged parts they found in the Marseilles. What couldn't be distributed to the others, they agreed, could easily be used on the Liberty.

The tritanium beams, they knew, would be much wanted, as everybody seemed to be rebuilding. Schiller told them almost every survivor's house had been damaged or weakened, not to mention their outer buildings. So they used the last of their day's wits figuring out how to divide those portions, and who would get what first. Eventually, unwillingly, they decided they would have to go back to the capital for more.

As the sun finally set in the hills beyond the gray and amber plain, they made their way up the back path to the lake with a portable diamide lantern. There, they took their time, bathing thoroughly in the warm water of the spring, almost guiltily for washing the dust of the city off in those clean waters. They knew they might have used the shower in the Marseilles, but the water was too inviting. It felt too good to feel guilty about it for long.

Tom leaned back on the shore while B'Elanna scrubbed her hair--more vigorously than usual, he noticed. "I think when we're done pulling out parts from the capital, we should level it."

She raised her brow, but nodded after giving it a thought. "Think the others would mind?"

"I'll ask around tomorrow, but from what Schiller tells us, nobody really likes the place. It's nothing but a germ trap as it is. Once we get the rest of the circuits and undamaged beams out of there, whatever else we can salvage, it won't be of any use but a reminder."

"True," she said, spying his downward look, quickly recovered. But his shrugging it off wasn't as much of denial as it was acceptance in that case, she could tell. So, she left it alone, went back to scouring her scalp.

Tom leaned his head far back, letting the warm night air dry his face. It felt good to be clean and comfortable--and to close his eyes without worrying about what was behind them for a while. "Anyway," he said in a deep breath, "I think we could put a lot of use to those beams, especially framing the cavern. Then we could install that signature scrambler like we'd talked about."

"It won't take long," she agreed, "or any more equipment. Maybe we can start that when we come back next time."

"Sounds good."

She dunked her head once more to rinse it, then guppied over to him and turned around. "Braid it?"

Tom smiled and sat up, then reached back for her hair tie. "Sure."

She felt his hands sink into her hair, pulling apart the wet locks with an ease that always surprised her. She'd always kept her hair short in the past for her impatience with it once it came to her shoulders. But Tom never had trouble, managed it into smooth plaits that helped it dry straighter, and loved every second of it.

Good enough for me, she grinned to herself, snuggling herself between his legs, and feeling a little giddy when he wrapped his legs around hers to hold her still. "So, Mister Paris," she asked suggestively, "got any more beams you've got designs on?"

"I think I might find a cavern or two to reinforce." She giggled and eased herself nearer to him still, maneuvering cleverly despite his legs' hold of her. He grinned and tied off her hair, leaning up to her shoulder to kiss away the water drops there. "Of course, I might be willing to do a survey or two in the mean time."

"I suggest a full excavation, Tom," she purred, and sighed contentedly as he continued to drink the spring water from her skin.

"Just let me get my tools out," he breathed.

"...And what there is to conquer by strength and submission, has already been discovered once or twice, or several times, by men whom one cannot hope to emulate - but there is no competition - there is only the fight to recover what has been lost and found and lost again and again: And now, under conditions that seem unpropitious. But perhaps neither gain nor loss. For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business...."

B'Elanna lowered the PADD and looked at her husband. His stare had floated outward, but settled on her once more when she stopped. His eyes looked so old, she noticed, not for the first time.

Only hours ago, he had been as jaunty and passionate as a man his age should have been. Then, he seemed more like a chastised sage. He had admitted he couldn't pull the two moods together without a good deal of effort. He didn't even know if he should.

"You okay?"

A small, knowing smile found its way to his lips. "Come to sleep, B'Elanna," he said softly, touching her pillow. "I'm okay now."

Schiller grinned up from his crouch at the garden's edge when he heard the laser activate and drive into the metal. The little lady and the tired man were determined to get at least the framework done on the bedroom that had to be completely demolished after that accepted that the rubble was just that. Within hours, they had already begun to set the new outer frame in place and solder the cross-connects. No complaint, just work.

Well, maybe there's some use in having some spitfire back on the land, he grinned to himself, trimming off some spare caltola leaves.

He'd agreed to watch the place and the crops he'd taught them how to cultivate while they were gone. Though it'd rained a few times since they left, he'd had to bring water down from their lake to keep the young blooms thriving, which made him wonder... But he waited until the two busy bees

were ready for a break, and then joined them at their yard table when they asked.

Tom took a cloth from his pocket and wiped his forehead, then his neck, grinning at their neighbor. "What do you think?"

Schiller looked at the skeleton of the addition as if for the first time, perusing its lines and location. It was bigger than the original, coming closer to the rocky slope than before. "Looks okay. I'd reinforce those rocks if I were you."

"We were planning on it," B'Elanna told him, then took another large drink of water. Swallowing, she poured a bit more down the lean muscles of her arms, patted a handful on her neck. "We'll do it after we're able to beam out the rest of that rubble."

"I'd do it before the walls go up, though. Just in case. You're on the mountainside. One bad storm and you could have trouble." He watched her nod, not troubled in agreeing with that. Schiller leaned up on his forearms to regard the two. "Your know-how with systems and such might be useful here, you know. We've got some water problems. Others higher up on the plain don't have enough. Our lousy replicators only do so much, and not much at all for the organics."

Tom thought about that. "Avalar used to have a pretty good irrigation system, if I remember correctly."

"Eh, that's gone, Tom, and we don't have the power right now to generate it, anyway." He eyed them yet again. "You wouldn't be willing to host a little to-do up here would you? Get to know your neighbors better and what's going on? I think you could help out a lot more if you could get everyone on, let's say, neutral territory--give them some food and some time away from it all."

Tom didn't mind as soon as Schiller suggested it, but B'Elanna's shoulders twitched upwards at the very mention of bringing everyone else up onto their land. When she looked up at her husband to communicate that, he shrugged.

"I might be able to replicate some food," he suggested, as simply as he could manage, "clean up the yard. It sure wouldn't hurt--them or us."

Considering it and his noncommittal stare, B'Elanna grudgingly nodded, shrugged, too. "Fine," she said.

"So, what do you think is next?"

B'Elanna cringed. "Do you really think we should do this so soon?" she asked, looking at the trays they'd assembled. Arms crossed, perched a little forward on shoes she rarely wore, she fumbled with her blouse sleeves. "And why do we have to do this... *garden party*?"

Tom grinned. "Because we're the only ones with a decent replicator."

"I wouldn't call it decent."

"It's better than anything else that survived here, as far as Schiller says. Besides, we're the new ones."

B'Elanna shrugged and looked over the plates again.

They were neat and nice--much nicer than she was accustomed to of late--and supplied with more food than she was used to seeing in one place. Their yard and what was done with the house was as neat as it could be--even if the kitchen where that food was replicated was still a wreck and their building supplies had been stacked inside the covered frame of what would be the new bedroom. She hoped nobody would venture in to see it like that... Then, she wondered why she cared what they thought.

Oh course, it wasn't hard to figure out. She was nervous as hell, in a way she'd never felt before. She didn't bother to hide it, either, when she stared over at Tom accusingly. "I know nothing about entertaining or parties. I wasn't raised to do this kind of thing."

Tom grinned. "Well, I have some second-hand experience, and you're more charming than you think. We'll get through this." He went to her and took her hands, rubbing her palms with his thumbs. "It's okay, B'Elanna. They're not here to judge us, only get to know us--and we should get to know them, too. You agreed to that. Trust me, I'd rather not have to do this, either, but if we're going to live here, even it's part-time, we should get along with them."

She growled anyway. "I shouldn't have let Schiller tie us up in something like this so soon."

"It'll be fine," Tom repeated, and bent to kiss her brow. He grinned gently on her skin when she pressed to him, holding on.

She watched from her husband's side her friends, most of whom she'd known since girlhood, mill around Mila Morgan's old guest house, taking in the food--good stuff for replicated--and chatting amongst each other about just about anything, though mostly the rain.

Rain. Avaral again--already--needed precipitation. They desperately didn't want the growth that had begun to peter out. They'd have to stop their own home repairs to build some new dams and irrigation tunnels if a drought looked eminent. So she didn't blame the topic. She'd spoken on it, too. She just wished they didn't have such a need.

Though definitely not an agriculturist like most in attendance, the host seemed a natural at picking up what they were talking about and its importance, at least to them. More, he was able to talk without affect while keeping his distance, comfortable without giving much away. Young and handsome, she could also tell he'd been working very hard. He looked worn before his years, even in that sociable light.

His wife, a bit younger still, was not quite as tired. She made up for it in jitters. Either protectively close to her husband or escaping somewhere with an intense stare and the quickest grin she'd ever seen, her mind who-knew-where, Mrs. Paris was friendly but definitely virgin to the ways and forms of being the hostess.

This made Mrs. Osol smile. She remembered her own first lunch buffet after getting married to a man as young and land bound as herself. Though she'd watched a hundred gatherings growing up, her own first one would have been a nightmare had she not her mother there to subtly steer her.

Mrs. Paris doesn't have a mother here, she realized.

Placing a brief touch to her husband's arm, to which he nodded without ceasing his conversation, she moved casually, her glass in her hands, through the pool of people who'd been curious enough about

the young Maquis couple to come and eat their food and see for themselves everything Schiller had been talking about.

She paused at the entrance of the A-frame. Mrs. Paris had dismissed the inside as "still needing a lot of work," a phrase well enough known by the others there, and respected. Her house, too, wasn't at its best.

She slipped inside anyway, sure that nobody was paying her any attention. What she found, however, wasn't very bad. Actually, the open space was quite handsome already, aside from the cracked and crumbled floor and the stained inner walls. At the front of the main room sat a couple plush red chairs with a huge stone serving as a table between them, its top shaved flat and polished to a high shine. Just beyond that on south wall sat a generous fireplace and two more chairs. Several neat piles of equipment sat in the back, along with a makeshift desk. It was probably there for lack of anywhere else to put it. But the house was neat, the addition on the side of the house--though only in bare framework and sealed off with poly-latex--looked to be coming together. It was looking very good for a couple just who'd just arrived to the mess that was Avarar.

She heard some shuffling in the other room and moved toward it, careful not to be too quiet. She didn't want to surprise the young woman. Though it hadn't been mentioned, she knew what Klingon brow lines looked like. She wasn't about to get a fork in her chest for being curious.

Her caution was unwarranted, though, as she found B'Elanna Paris kneeling on the ground, pouring more of their strange cider into a larger carafe. By the look of her hand, small yet deft, she could tell the young woman worked hard with them, though not quite as often in the sun. Without a move, nor a sound, she watched the younger lady do her work and put the carafe aside. Then Mrs. Paris paused.

B'Elanna's eyes were closed. She'd heard whatever person had come into the kitchen--and it definitely wasn't Tom. *Damnit, I knew I shouldn't have hoped so hard it'd be him,* she thought, feeling her face get hot, and for the second time that day she wondered why she cared so much. Everybody's house was a mess, so they said. *It's just the principle, maybe.*

With some effort, B'Elanna swallowed her humiliation and turned. In the door stood one of her closer neighbors--*What was her name again?*--a pretty, black haired, green eyed woman about thirty or so, with a matronly figure and a placid smile. She'd noticed the lady as soon as she'd come into the yard with her husband.

"I'm sorry to sneak in on you, Mrs. Paris," she suddenly said, taking a tentative step inside the kitchen. "But I wondered if you'd like any help?" She smiled. "It's only polite of me to ask, mind you, after enjoying your wonderful food and hospitality."

B'Elanna stared up at the woman, who was a little uneasy in her intrusion but standing there all the same. Managing a small grin, she shook her head. "Thank you, but I think I have this. And you can call me B'Elanna."

"B'Elanna, I'm Isabel." She walked further into the oddly large kitchen and peered around. "It has potential," she commented. "It'll be nice when it's done."

B'Elanna snorted. "If it ever gets done."

Isabel nodded. "I understand. I was frantic about mine even when the planet was still smoldering... Of course, I didn't lose any family in the attack. I could afford to think like that. I lost my parents some years ago. I can't imagine what I'd be like if I'd lost them in the fires."

This sobered the younger woman immediately, and she cursed herself for it. "I'm sorry," she said. "I don't remind myself often enough--"

"Oh no, I wasn't angry." Isabel knelt down beside B'Elanna and got a cloth to wipe the lip of the carafe. "Believe it or not, I have to remind myself quite often, too. It's just so unreal, I guess, that you have to. No, it's been harder on Azro--my husband. He lost his father and sister. Thankfully, he's Bokoran. His spirituality's been a help." She touched B'Elanna's hand. "I do understand what you're going through, even if you weren't here when it happened. It's almost like..." She paused to put the words together, "It's like you need to have at least one thing straight and organized in your life in order to see the rest as possible. The kitchen seems a logical place to start."

B'Elanna's eyes widened before she drove them away from her neighbor's kindly smile. "I guess you're right."

Isabel took another look around then added, "You'll have your house in good order, if your embarrassment about it serves you at all. But honestly, I think you and your husband have done wonderfully on this place, considering you've been away more than here."

Before B'Elanna could comment on that, the pretty woman beside her had already stood with the carafe, which she handed to her when she too stood. "Thank you."

She waved her hand. "Not at all. But let me do one thing for you: Let me introduce you around to the other women. We're not the bigger population here, so you'd might as well know a few of your kind."

B'Elanna laughed, nodded, and let her neighbor lead the way out.

Once outside again, the carafe set back on the table, she joined Isabel within a group of from the west plain. Watching Isabel drop into the conversation without missing a beat, B'Elanna couldn't help but envy the woman's easiness, as she did Tom's. It was a skill she had always coveted but never mastered, to say the least. In spite of her instinct to excuse herself and find something to do, though, she let Isabel take her through the motions of getting to know that group, unobtrusively studying her grace and trying to relax and get into it a little, the casual introductions and the shifting of topics.

Soon enough, they gave her a reason to want to stay. The people that had come were genuinely glad to see her there, some extremely curious about her and Tom and what was happening outside of Avalor. Others were simply thankful for the supplies she and Tom brought when they first came, and when they returned, no matter how small.

Mrs. Losael--Privsa, she corrected--had arrived late and warmly thanked her again for the food and medical treatment. Amik was much better, much stronger, and they would likely be able to keep their home after all. B'Elanna had repaired the anodyne relays in their generator, Privsa told them, giving them enough power to start repairs and run their damaged but still functional replicator.

Claire Varney perked at that, very interested in the sudden power topic, since "Jack couldn't trim a power conversion node to save his life--much less mine!"

"I could teach you," B'Elanna said with a shrug. "It's easy if you have the tools."

"Oh, please do," she said sincerely, then snorted. "And don't let those tools near Jack when you bring them! He nearly took down the greenhouse with a shunt stabilizer!"

B'Elanna laughed as the others did, and as she shook her head to hear the rest of the story, she

noticed Tom, leaning on the table to listen to Schiller and some others talk about the reservoir and how several more rains would begin to fill it again. He looked like he was getting tired, and she noticed he'd switched to coffee. But he did seem interested in the conversation going on by him even as his eyes turned, then found her. When their glances met, her lips turned up. In turn, his tired face grew with his smile, and he gave her a wink, then glanced back to Schiller. B'Elanna drew a deep breath, her own grin finding her eyes...

Isabel touched her arm. "B'Elanna, you've met L'Vos, haven't you. Jisin's husband."

Pulling herself back to the conversation, B'Elanna looked up to the older gentleman. "Yes--briefly. You're the family on the southwest side of the old city, right?"

"And a fellow engineer," Isabel added, hinting.

L'Vos shrugged, bowed to her. "In the old school, but well enough."

"Any school is still an engineer," B'Elanna told him bluntly.

"Ahh, a purist," he grinned. "Actually, B'Elanna, I did want to talk to you and your husband about some ideas I've had about conserving some of our resources. --I know, I know you're a starship engineer, but after hearing Tom speak of some of the work you've done before, I think this might spark some ideas in you."

B'Elanna's brow rose. "Really? And what would that be?"

"You seemed to get into the mood just fine," Tom commented, holding B'Elanna warm under the stars that night. They'd given up the kitchen for the while, the black ceiling and buzzing replicator, dragging out a blanket to the yard to try to wind down from the long day.

B'Elanna sighed happily, warming Tom's collar before she kissed it. Breathing his scent, she did so again. "Thanks to Isabel," she said lightly, squeezed him. "You were right about them, and it did turn out nicely, didn't it?"

"Better than even I expected. And I really like Isabel and Azro. They're a great couple. Hope you don't mind our visiting tomorrow."

"Actually, I'm anxious to see their place." She snuggled further into his shoulder, lightly caressing the trim of his shirt, continuing to drink his smell as her stare drifted towards the plain far beyond their yard. "Commune farms and new dams on the lake," B'Elanna breathed. "They've really got plans for the place, don't they? We'll definitely be of use, like L'Vos said."

"They're all good ideas," Tom agreed, "and there's plenty of polyduranide on the Seti-moon to build something lasting. If it works for Klingon cruiser hulls, it'll be strong enough for our needs. I know we still need the equipment to mine and refine it."

"Not to mention deradiate it," B'Elanna pointed out. "We'll need a radiospectromic processor to break down its emissions, make it safe."

"You're right," Tom said, ticking off parts in his head, old Cardassian mining facilities in his memory, but finally shrugged. "Once the house is done, I'm sure we could start some preliminary specs, an equipment list. I'm no engineer, but I do have design experience."

B'Elanna giggled. "For what? A warp-capable aqueduct?" His chest rumbled with laughter, then he pinched her waist, making her squeak and hug him hard. She grabbed his ribs and he shook harder with chuckles before placing her hand back on his chest. Toying with his collar again, she said, "Seriously, I think you'll work up some great designs. You have the mind for it."

"Glad we agree," he said with a jaunty wink, grinning more when her eyes rolled. "At least we could set the atmospheric regulator in orbit. That should help the rains at least; stabilize the weather until we get something better. Have any ideas for the polyduranide, though?"

"I'm sure I could come up with a few extraction methods--or maybe ask K'Karn about it. His mate is a metallurgist, remember?"

"Good idea. Now if only we could get the house fixed."

"Mmm." B'Elanna paused. Her eyes drifted down to his hand. His thumb had begun to rub her arm in little circles, which somehow was eliciting a twinge of arousal in her. Her lips curled. "I think I'm starting to like it here a little *too* much."

"I know." He drew a deep breath and released it, rested his cheek on the top of her head. "I guess we just need to adjust to having both lives, Maquis and civilian. Doesn't mean our loyalties are any different, just that there's more."

"I know I asked Chakotay for the time away, but... You don't think we're leaving him a lurch, do you?"

"They're on layover," he said, more an excuse than an answer. "We're just having ours somewhere else. If the Liberty wasn't in such constant need of repair, it'd be easier." He sighed. "I guess I've thought about it, too. If we keep coming here, that we'll...rather stay here. I don't want to let Chakotay down, either, but I also want to be here."

"Me too," she said.

"So, we'll just have to make up for that when we are there," Tom said.

"I think you're right," she whispered, closing her eyes, relaxed as a sleepy kitten from Tom's gentle touches, his warmth. Lately, she couldn't get enough of those contacts. Thankfully, he was happy to oblige her. He had always been a "toucher," but there had simply been more to it of late.

Hard work, fresh air and a strong sun to feed the skin makes a body live, her mother would have told her. On that occasion, B'Elanna would have had to admit that was right. Since they'd gotten back to Avalar, her body was feeling very alive, indeed.

Damn right I don't want to leave nights like this, she silently admitted. His fingers bore well into her, opening her senses, plus some. She stretched herself against him, bending back her fingers in the air to loosen every nerve, and rubbed her nose into his throat.

He grinned to himself when he heard her purr, and felt her response to his motions. He moved his hand to rub her neck and felt her exhale warmly against him. Her fingers reached into his collar to caress his warming skin. "Well, Miss Torres," he drawled in a low whisper, "I think I might have found your Achilles heel here."

"You knew it long ago and you know it," she breathed, "so don't stop."

"Just the words I like to hear," he returned softly and met her wise stare when it came to him.

Brushing a kiss across her lips, he added, not stopping his hand, "But to give a very good massage..."

Her stare grew deeper, but instead of reaching up to him, she rolled a bit to give him access to her blouse, which he parted effortlessly. Running his hand around and up her back, he pulled her to him again, kissing her more fully. Soon he felt her leg grazing over his, rocking them slightly together.

B'Elanna mewed into their contacts, heating up with unusual speed considering her tiredness. Her lips, still contacting his, flickered upwards as Tom's hands steadily moved downward. To that, she obliged, taking her own turn in undressing him. The process was not quick but it was steady. Neither seemed inclined to move but the necessary amount, neither wanting to break the intermittent kisses and tastes between them.

Like succumbing to a luxury, the touches and explorations, and languid kisses, marked with small smiles and comfortable purrs growing into growls. When his foot finally did push away the remainder of her clothing then bent back to rid his own, when he pulled her leg up around his waist and she arched herself towards him, the gazes exchanged between them held more than the cursory expectation.

Kissing again, a shiver coursed through B'Elanna's body. Though, feeling his skin pressed to her, his hands strong and holding her, his warm breath and ready erection, a sudden and unusually strong need for him welled up in her. Arching to give him access sooner, rather than with more foreplay, she reached up and caught hold of him by the neck, pressing her nails slightly in.

"Now," she whispered.

"Yes," he replied softly.

When he thrust into her, B'Elanna's eyes opened upon the moon.

A few hours later, they shot open to screams. Again...

"God, B'Elanna, you're trying to kill me, aren't you?!"

"And you wouldn't mind going out like that one bit," she returned and ran her nails firmly up the curve of his back, "would you?"

Tom's low purr in response was all she needed to hear. But before she could do anything about it, he pulled away from her to sit up on his heels. She stared up at him in angry dismay.

"Tom, Chakotay needs us back on the bridge in two hours--if someone doesn't come knocking on the hull beforehand, and I still have to align--"

"B'Elanna..." he sighed, then relented, "roll over." Even then, he was only slightly surprised by her eagerness, dropping her protest as soon as she heard him. With a smile and in one move, she was on her belly and about to pull herself to her knees. But Tom pressed her gently down before covering her, kissing and nibbling her skin as he eased aside her soft brown locks so to hold her shoulder.

Caressing her body with his own, preparing to make love to her yet again, he felt a deep shudder within her. She was ready already. He felt like he could drop dead.

Tired as he was, however, when he ground himself inside her, her growls of satisfaction could not

have been more pleasing to him. He did love that sound, the feel and scent of her, the way she rocked back into his motions with perfect timing, making them truly one in their lovemaking. Whether that was good or bad for him, they were things he knew he couldn't tire of.

But since they left Avalor, she had been nearly insatiable. Even she admitted to it, always with an evil grin. Not that either minded too much quenching her recent needs, but throughout their relationship, they sometimes took things called 'breaks,' for either work or preference. Of late, neither excuse was enough.

"Harder," she gasped, rocking up to him as he continued. "Please, Tom."

He growled and lifted her up to her knees, grabbing her hips before pulling her hard against him.

"Yes, Tom!" she groaned, feeling her body light up, trembling for... "More... Ahhh, oh yes... Like that..."

He gladly complied, feeling her ecstatic responses as much as he heard them. After a few minutes, feeling himself growing close, he released a hip to slide his fingers down, then--

"Rodrigo to Paris."

"Damn!" Tom grunted, but didn't dare stop--not at where he had her, not where he was at.

"Don't answer!" B'Elanna rasped.

"If I don't..." Tom caught a breath. "...he'll come down."

"Damn!"

"Rodrigo to Paris--Got a minute Tom?"

"No... Later, Rodrigo," he managed as normally as he could, even as he clearly felt a sudden shot of tension in B'Elanna.

"Sorry to bother you, but the port manifolds are giving me some trouble. Could you--"

"Later!" B'Elanna snapped. "Cut the COMM and go away for ten...fifteen--oh, God!--minutes. --No, tw...twenty."

"Am I disturbing you two?" Andre asked, a little bewildered.

"Yes!" both cried out.

"Whoops," was the reply, and then Andre laughed. "Tom, I thought you said you'd hit the sack, but I didn't think you meant--"

B'Elanna growled. "Conjugal duty, you idiot! Go away! Torres--out!... Oh God, Tom!"

One deck above, Andre doubled over in laughter, leaning over the conn chair to keep himself from collapsing onto the deck. Chakotay still had a writhing Jenna in a shoulder lock, his free hand firmly pressed to her open mouth to prevent her from turning Andre's little goof into downright humiliation for their friends.

Wiping tears from his eyes, Andre finally managed to get his toolkit. "I'll get started on those manifolds before Tom is...released from active duty, Captain."

"Bwa!" Jenna cried, finally released, and threw herself into Chakotay's arms laughing until he finally snorted, too.

The Liberty was headed full speed--a relative term, in B'Elanna's opinion--to their next rendezvous when B'Elanna arrived again in an engineering room she'd rather have avoided. More often than not, it had become a bane to her--and she didn't even bother feeling guilty anymore for her utter disgust.

Why can't Chakotay simply go out and get himself another ship? she found herself wondering more often than not, sighing to get back to work.

"Little tired, Torres?" asked Benders as he passed her by, grinning. Everybody on the deck knew where she'd been.

"Where are those ISO rods I asked you for?" she demanded, not looking up from yet another joke of a diagnostic.

"I passed it on to Nelson. I didn't have time with the other--"

"Well, I don't care which one of you does it, but it'd better be in my hand soon or I'll have the both of you scrubbing the access hatches with your teeth. Got it? --And what the hell are you staring at?"

"Okay, okay I'll check on it," he said and backed off, stifling his grin until he was out of her sight.

B'Elanna drew another breath and she scrolled down the results, shaking her head as she read. *This is lunacy. I can't be expected to deal with this inadequacy week after week. Nothing gets fixed. Nothing changes--except for the worse every time we scramble with the Cardassians. We're just going in circles--if not down the drain.* She pushed herself away from the console. "Jonas, I'm going to the bridge. You've got things here."

Minutes later, she was there, and blinked a moment of disappointment when she saw Rodrigo in the seat her husband usually occupied. *Where is he this time?* she wondered in a flash, but then aimed her stare at the captain, forcing herself back to business at hand.

"Chakotay, we can't keep doing this," she told him.

He turned from his own troubled readouts to look at her, raising a hand to the low ceiling to lean on a panel. "How did I know you'd be up here soon?" he replied, not a question.

She ignored that. "We need to get to Juvosic, or scrape up some latinum for the black market, or you'd might as well go into the junk business. Those shields aren't worth the energy we use to raise them."

Chakotay shook his head. "B'Elanna, we need to make this checkpoint."

Rodrigo turned around at that. "Why don't you send her and Tom off in the Marseilles?" he suggested, stuffing his grin down with much effort when B'Elanna's glower met the corner of his eye. "Juvosic's only a day off. It'd save time and get more done."

Chakotay lowered his eyes. Though he really did want Tom to finish those backups, Rodrigo was making obvious sense, and he knew it'd be nice not to have his engineer clawing at his throat for a while. Since she and Tom had gotten back, she'd been jumpier than ever about those engines. From the diagnostics he'd been reading lately, it was for good reason.

In fact, since they had begun staying at Avarar, she'd grown increasingly restless on the Liberty--not to mention distracted. In either case, it seemed restoring things on Avarar had helped her see exactly how bad things were there. Little wonder she was getting impatient.

Giving her the ability to solve one problem here might calm her down--and help the ship out, too...

At the same time, they were expecting to go into a new defensive to help carve out some hideouts on the other side of Bajoran space--the reason for the rendezvous and subsequent planning sessions. If he was going to be responsible for holding a front or creating a diversion, he'd need those shields...

"Guess the secondaries will have to wait." He clicked on the COMM. "Chakotay to Paris. --You too busy down there to take a ride?"

Four decks below, Tom looked up from the relay juncture he'd just put back together. "Where to?" he asked.

"Forget it!" Andre suddenly announced. "I have a Cardassian cruiser coming at warp eight, straight at us!."

"Shit!" B'Elanna spat and glared at her captain. "Tom and I have to get the Marseilles--it's the only way we'll get any advantage."

Chakotay nodded once and quickly. "Go! --Tom, get to the scout, pronto!"

But the pilot had already vacated the access tunnel and was running to his ship. "Andre, secondary navigation's still shaky," he said as he sped around a corner, pushing past a few people on his way, "don't use it unless you have to."

"Got it. Fly straight, Tom."

"Will do. B'Elanna--?"

"Right behind you!"

"Paris to Harlowe. --Jenna, we've got a cruiser en route fast. Charge up what you can now before we lose power systems."

"We've got nothing in meds in here! Where am I--"

"Make do. B'Elanna and I will see you later. Keep safe."

"I will--and good luck. I'll make do...damnit."

Tom cut the COMM as he rushed into the hold, already active with others preparing for the eminent fight. Sailing across the deck, he caught B'Elanna in the corner of his eye, running in from the other direction. He simply left the side hatch open when he jumped in and threw himself onto the bridge and his controls. His wife joined him a moment later. The engines were already whizzing to life.

"Chakotay, we're just about set." Tom announced.

"Get out of here! Activate the cloak and come in from behind. Try to knock out their generators, and we'll do what we can."

B'Elanna was shaking her head, knowing damn well that wouldn't be much. "Watch your starboard, Chakotay, and tell Jonas to keep the power output levels at eighty percent--it'll save some punch for later."

"Good idea. Now get out of here. Good luck."

"You, too, Chakotay. Stay on kappa-seven-three." Yet even as he cut that frequency, as soon as they left the Liberty's hold and activated the cloak, he opened another. "B'Elanna, I'm sending out an encrypted distress signal to Kivo and the others. Can you give it a little boost?"

She nodded. "I'll take care of it... That Cardassian vessel's slowing to match the Liberty's speed."

"And Chakotay's already leading them on," Tom nodded. "We'll stay on their wing a while to blind our subspace signatures. You got our message out?"

"Yes."

Yet as quickly as all their preparation had been, their efforts seemed to be in vain.

After they'd gotten themselves in place, a long wait followed, with both pilot and engineer holding position on their captain's wing, mapping in their relative safety the chess game that'd suddenly started between the Liberty and the Cardassian ship, who was following only a few parsecs behind them. The Liberty wisely showed no sign that they'd noticed.

Tom and B'Elanna both knew without saying that Chakotay was meanwhile scrambling to get the ship as ready as he could, and that without workable parts or power supplies. They were tempted to comm over and assist, but they couldn't risk giving away their presence outside the ship. It was common knowledge that the Marseilles was affiliated with the Liberty. Tom thought about that as the seconds ticked by.

"B'Elanna," he said quietly, breaking their long silence, "Do you think the Cardassians are waiting for us to show up?"

She shook her head. "No, they'd know we'd pick them up."

"Something doesn't feel right. They usually don't prowl so closely..." Tom raised his head and swore to himself. "But they'd know that we'd call for reinforcements--from the Marseilles."

B'Elanna paled, set herself to work immediately. "I'm sending another subspace message to Kivo and contacting the Liberty."

"They'll detect us."

She looked at him. "Better us than five more Maquis ships. We've got to fight them ourselves."

Nodding once, Tom inhaled deeply, flexed his fingers, let his breath go slowly. "Just tell me when, then."

"You'll know when. When they pick up our encryption signature and give up the game." She encrypted and diverted systems at the same time as she felt her adrenaline begin to race. She breathed into it, unconsciously steadied her feet on the deck.

"Then tell me when you're about to send it."

"I'm sending it...now."

Tom's hands landed on his console and he broke from the Liberty's wing. At the same time, B'Elanna announced on an open channel to Chakotay that the Cardassian vessel was going to pounce.

Seconds later, it did, and Tom whirled the scout around the Cardassian cruiser as it dropped out of a low warp, right on the Liberty's tail.

The Maquis ship veered suddenly, fired immediately, and its pursuer, undamaged, followed suit. Tom watched, and behind him heard B'Elanna preparing to drop the cloak.

Over the COMM, he heard Chakotay's orders, but Tom barely heard them as he threw the scout onto the cruiser's tail. His eyes were locked on a Cardassian nacelle as they veered and turned and inverted, matching the ship's pursuit of the evading Liberty. His stare might have melted into that had he not thought to blink.

His fingers flew easily without looking though, tailing the cruiser more closely than it was keeping up with the Liberty. He grinned for a moment to know Andre was doing a hell of a job keeping the cruiser off guard, using their size against them. But even that wasn't going to be enough soon.

As he predicted, the Liberty took three hard hits from the Cardassian ship, which blasted holes in places Tom knew they'd just repaired and dotting out the power momentarily. The Liberty sent a couple torpedoes back, but it wasn't enough to do much damage. He tapped down the COMM volume. "B'Elanna, divert what you can to the phaser output and knock a hole in their port nacelle shield."

"That won't last."

"I'll only need a second," he replied and opened his line to Chakotay, "Captain, we're decloaking now!"

"I'm losing navigation!" came Andre's voice. "It's not responding!"

Another loud blast--and a deathly scream. Over the COMM, it sounded like the whole bridge had taken it. But the captain cursed loudly before yelling, "Not yet, Tom! We need your--"

"Chakotay, there's no time! I have a chance to get in there, and we'll only have one shot! You're losing systems. Two more hits and you won't make it."

A second was all the other man needed to decide. "Do it!"

"B'Elanna--now!"

Without delay, she powered up the phaser banks as she dropped their guise. "Eat this," she snarled and fired, then again.

"More, B'Elanna!"

"I am! But-- No wait! It's shearing along their deflector axis!"

Tom dropped the scout down and smacked them through the shield bubble, phasers still going full blast even as the Cardassian ship still fired on its prey. "Nail the nacelle!"

She diverted their shields and lined it up again, but suddenly her engineer's mind told her where it'd hurt the cruiser more--their containment coils. Activating a torpedo, she realigned and fired. Three eternal seconds passed, and they both watched...

"Yes! --Tom, if you want to play bandit, do it *now*! --Chakotay! Get the hell out of here!"

"What about--"

"We're coming! *Go!*"

As soon as the Cardassian ship began to lose attitude control, the Liberty lurched and shot hastily off. After one desperate transport, the Marseilles did too, slipping out of the ship's perimeter and jumping away at full impulse just as the other ship began to tear apart, nacelle to bridge, in an enormous, white ripple effect of destruction.

Tom set his feet firmly on the deck. "Brace yourself!"

Realigning their shields, she didn't hear him in time: As soon as he popped the scout to warp, the shockwave hit their field. B'Elanna flew out of her chair and smacked the deck back first.

Tom embraced the conn, transferring every system he could to their engines, cursing as he reestablished their attitude. Shooting a look back, he screamed his wife's name, and with no reply, he jerked his eyes back to the conn to catch the Liberty.

Within a minute--they hadn't gone far--Tom stopped his ship and jumped out of the seat. He passed B'Elanna in a sprint and ripped open the supply cabinet for a med kit, then returned to fall down at her side on his knees, too scared to cry.

A few moments later, he was too relieved to.

"We're en route to Juvosic," Chakotay said, stomping through the remains of deck two as Tom carried a groggy B'Elanna beside him. "The Powys is meeting us there to help us out until we can get to Palod. We've got eighteen wounded--no dead, yet. How's B'Elanna?"

"Concussion. She needs to stay awake." He shook her in his arms until her eyes fluttered. "Still with us, Miss Torres?"

"Yeah, still here," she mumbled, rubbing the corner of her eye against the soft fleece of her husband's coat collar to scratch an itch of soot. "And just to refresh your memory, I'm B'Elanna, and that's Chakotay...and you're Chancellor Gowron with a new hairdo--can I have a painkiller now?"

He grinned at her quip, but hugged her with regret as they turned into an inner corridor. "I'm sorry, but you know I don't have any. --Chakotay, she can't be left alone right now."

"Someone else can sit with her. I need you on the others."

"I understand. But I want her near me."

"Fine." They made another turn, toward the triage, not slowing their swift pace even as Tom turned with B'Elanna to allow others to pass. The captain took a solid breath. "Tom, I'd better prepare you. Rodrigo is in pretty bad shape."

He shot a stare to the man by him. "Andre? What...?"

"Just before you dropped your cloaks, the main propulsion grid blew out. I had to fly the ship from tactical.... You don't want to see the bridge--"

"What's his condition?" Tom asked.

"Jenna's done what she could for now. You'd better let her explain. For now, everyone's hands are full."

Holding his wife protectively in his arms as he steered around opposing traffic, Tom nearly sped to a run to get to the next section. Entering the Liberty's makeshift triage, he found Jenna doing as promised--making do.

Jenna would have killed for a stiff drink by a hot fire by the time she managed to scoot another knitted bone with the body attached out the door so she could start all over again. Her hair was ratted up on top of her head, her face was smeared with soot, and her thin print tunic was stained with blood down to her knees, where her leggings had a tear in them. But she buzzed around from one injured to the next, popping off orders to whoever was there who could help.

When she turned and pinned her eyes on Tom--he was placing B'Elanna into a cot while telling Atara to keep her awake--she let out a breath and hurried to him.

"I'll check back, okay?" Tom told B'Elanna, giving her a quick kiss on her brow.

"I'm fine," she whispered, rather wishing she were able to help him. Her eyes had been open enough to see what passed over his features when he heard about Rodrigo. "You go ahead. Take care of what you can."

With only a look, Jenna knew B'Elanna was all right, and so she passed the younger woman a quick smile before addressing Tom. "Andre's hard put," she told him.

"Chakotay told me--now it's your turn," Tom said shortly, feeling his nerves crawl yet again to see his friend on the table. "What's going on?"

"The short version?" she said and gestured to the young man. "He needs a lot--mainly surgery. His spleen is distended among other bleeders and we barely have the meds for it. He's got third degree across sixty percent of his body. He's in shock, lost a lot of blood, and I'm still trying to get the platelet regenerator online. I'll keep trying. I did what I could, and he's barely stable for now, but I don't have any experience at all with opening people up. You're the only one who has."

Tom glared back at his friend with the thought. "Are you *nuts*? He needs a doctor, not a part-time medic!"

"Oh! I'll go out and replicate a doc right off! --Ah, but no, too damn bad, Thomas. The *replicators are down!*" She huffed down her breath, not wanting to argue with him of all people just then. "Look, you're all we've got--for Andre and all the others I can't handle with but two arms. There are no

doctors for two days from here *if* we can manage warp speed any time soon--and they're all busy, too."

"I know that!" Tom snapped then breathed into his frustration, sighing it out in a growl. "Set up a table and bring me everything you've got, then go get T'Nar to help me. You keep going on the others."

Then he looked at his patient.

Me, operate, on him, like this. If he wasn't looking at what he was, Tom could have laughed at the thought. He'd operated before, sure, but not on anything that serious. Seeing B'Elanna hurt was bad enough, but that was a thing he had been able to treat aggressively and confidently. But internal surgery--with antiquated, non-Federation surgical equipment and very few medicines? His cache from the Cardassian vessel had produced some good engineering supplies, but he didn't have time to raid their sickbay stores. He was confident about most procedures by then, but...

Andre was unconscious, but his entire torso, naturally lean and healthy, was twisted, grotesquely swollen and discolored from the impacts--the conn exploding against his belly. Tom opened up a tricorder, tapped a few controls. Just as Jenna had reported, there were several internal injuries. *As usual, she didn't mince that.* The burns across his face and chest, though severe and only slightly healed, would have to be considered secondary. *And he was a good-looking kid... He'll have to wait for restorative surgery...* No, the bleeding was the worst of it. He was drowning in his own fluids.

"I just wish we could get a cup of coffee," he muttered.

Jenna smiled bravely at him. "That's my boy." With one more solid look into his eyes, she immediately went to work, piping out for someone to bring Tom's chosen assistant. And she grinned at the choice despite her business. *No doubt he'll need some Vulcan nerves to guide his own for the while.*

Tom slid his coat from his arms and turned another look to his wife. She was gazing weakly at him. He returned to her bedside, lowering himself enough to lay his coat over her. Tucking the coat up around her pale neck, he said, "I'm going to be busy for a while."

"I was listening," B'Elanna breathed and pulled her hand up, placed it on his arm. As best she could, she held his gaze, tried to sound assured. "You'll do your best, Tom. That's all you can do."

He laughed mirthlessly. "You and I both know I'd rather do better than that."

"But it's all you *can* do. Remember that."

He took her hand into his own, kissed her fingers. His mouth opened, poised on something witty, something to lighten them both. But it died and drifted away before his breath could power it. Instead, he found her understanding smile, felt a slight squeeze of her hand. With a nod, he kissed her hand again and stood away.

"Take care of her, Atara."

"B'Elanna's doing fine," Atara replied, hopeful yet firm in her nod, her dark gray eyes as solid as her posture--with an effort. "Neither of us are going anywhere. So go see to Andre."

Tom blinked his acknowledgment, turned back again.

My patient, he sighed to himself and drew another breath, finally determining himself to do it, even

if his head hurt just thinking about what he knew he needed to do. He tried to stop reminding himself that he wasn't a doctor, while knowing Andre would die if he did nothing. There was no doubt about that. Just like piloting, it'd be a series of maneuvers and risks, what knowledge he had and a hell of a lot of instinct...and luck.

T'Nar had arrived, walked steadily through the other wounded and to the table. One of B'Elanna's better warp technicians, she was young but unflappable enough, knew a little medicine and was good with tools. He barely spoke to her but to say what they were doing. The Vulcan, of course, did not mind his brusqueness.

Taking up a still charging laser scalpel and checking its frequency, he wished himself a little more luck on top of the unknown amount he had, and wished he could believe it.

"No! Just get her out of here and leave me alone!"

B'Elanna groaned as she awoke, turning her head and hand aside to stop the screaming, far more groggily than she usually did. "Tom, shhh..."

"Damnit Andre! You goddamned hick! You're nothing but trouble sometimes, good as you are. I don't need this crap! --T'Nar, get me a cortical stimulator! Charge it at--"

"The power unit is no longer functioning," she stated.

"Then get another one or figure something else out!" he ordered. "Go! --Go ask Meyer if we've got anything that can back it up. --Shit, Andre, this is not how I wanted to end the day! Come on kid, don't go out on me again."

B'Elanna's eyes opened. The first thing she saw was Jenna taking Atara out of the room, whispering and pleading sentiments as she did. Neither woman had either bathed or rested. Atara was visibly upset, angry for having to leave. She wanted to be there when it was over, and made Tom swear to call her if it came to that. Painfully, B'Elanna turned her eyes down and saw Tom.

"He's not dying yet," Tom snapped, not looking up from a tricorder he gripped, white-knuckled. Despite his words, he shook his head. "You're not dying yet, Rodrigo."

Bloody, pale, exhausted, unshaven, he was grabbing one instrument after another, desperately trying to access something--she didn't know what. He mumbled to himself, bitterly one moment, on the verge of tears the next. His hands were shaking.

Finally, he adjusted and administered a hypospray, took another tricorder reading. A short bitter laugh escaped him, then, before he let out his breath. "Good," he muttered thickly. "Just keep on like that, okay?"

We've lost people before, B'Elanna thought, a little confused. *We've had to let people go before... Well, Andre is just a kid...*

After another minute, Tom slumped, hands on the table that held Andre, who was still severely burnt...charred it looked like in some places. He was all but unrecognizable for that and the enormous bruises and blisters covering him...His mouth was slightly open...

Like that girl, B'Elanna slowly realized, pulling in a deep breath of awareness and waking. Steadying

her pounding head, she slowly sat up, then looked down. Someone had put Tom's coat on her--for warmth. She had no other blanket... Then she remembered that Tom had put it there.

She moaned a little when she got up, and motioned for her husband not to stop her when he noticed. Instead, she walked across to him and, setting aside the hypospray in his hand, put her arms around him. He returned the embrace with a cough, holding her tight.

"Tom, if it's his time..."

"I don't want it to be yet."

"Sometimes we can't help those things," she said softly.

"But you'd rather stick to it, too, wouldn't you?" he countered. Pulling back, he examined her eyes. They seemed all right, dilating naturally when the light hit them. They were also filled with concern. Two days of rest and the last of their hydrocortazine had indeed done the trick--for her.

His two days with Rodrigo, however, of three separate open procedures, four cardiac inductions and several new ruptures...and looking at his face, looking at the burns... Tom had almost been tempted to get into the Marseilles and drop Andre off at the nearest Starbase, where he could the treatment he desperately needed.

But in reality, he knew that would be a stupid idea for all involved. Andre wouldn't survive that long without the Liberty's already sparse equipment, anyway.

The young pilot had even woken at one point, delirious but lucid enough to know what was going on around him. Atara flew to him, cursed him for not ducking and made him laugh and apologize, trying not to flinch at her lover's face. Tom stood back, tricorder in hand, relieved and happy to see their friend coming out of it, already planning to get B'Elanna back home after helping with what repairs they could on the Liberty.

Then Andre's heart stopped.

"How long are we from the cell?" B'Elanna asked him as she rubbed Tom's back.

"Nineteen hours," Tom answered, his eyes still pinned on Andre, still twitching, growing weaker. "B'Elanna, you need to be resting, still, and...I have to keep working on him. If I can just keep him going, at least until we get to Palod or Xorlen... I have to keep trying."

B'Elanna sighed, leaning her head against Tom's warm chest. "You're afraid he'll try to take you with him," she whispered.

He froze. The simple, quiet statement hit him like a displacement wave as he closed his eyes against the view of his friend's burnt skin. He hadn't realized...

The little girl... I didn't want to go with her when she asked... The deaths, I don't want to follow them, to see it, my friends, my mother, that child...

Tom said nothing, shook his head slightly and caught his breath.

I'm scared to go with them...that I'll ever be as powerless as they are, that my own life would get ripped away so...simply... Well, damn right I don't. I have too much to live for. But, not matter what I do...one way or another...

Finally, slowly, he nodded against her hair, his chest trembling for restraint. "Andre's not dead yet," he said. "You're right, though. If it's his time, then we'll let him go. I just need to wait and see if there's *any* way to keep that from happening."

B'Elanna pulled her head up, blinked a few times. The light still hurt. "Get me a chair? I'll sit with you."

For the first time in two days, Tom grinned--almost. It flicked away almost as soon as it appeared. He bent his head. "I hate this place sometimes, B'Elanna," he muttered. "I hate this war."

She swallowed. His body had stilled; his caressing hand had stopped. "So do I."

The moment Tom's gaze recaptured hers, the neural monitor on Andre's nape beeped, and the young patient lurched with a deathly groan. B'Elanna released her husband and he flew back around to whip open the tricorder. "Damn!" He shot a glare back to the entrance of the triage. "T'Nar!"

Her husband and her Vulcan engineer started working again, leaving B'Elanna only to watch and wait, though she couldn't take that for very long. Moving to get her own chair, ignoring her headache, she found another medkit. Groggily pulling one apart, she started thinking about what she heard when she woke up before, alternative hypo-cell power sources. Laying out the instruments she found on another bed, she mustered up enough of a voice to call engineering her for relay kit.

Well, maybe I don't let things go so easily, either.

"God, that bad?" Andre whispered, holding his girlfriend's hand and looking up to his captain through his undamaged eye. "Where's Tom, anyway?"

"Finally getting a break," Chakotay answered with a grin. "He's back under the navigation array."

Their cheer, though, was forced. Rodrigo had been whisked into the crowded Palod field hospital, Tom right by his side, carrying the rigged exterior power cells attached to the patches on his friend's forehead. As a last resort, B'Elanna had ripped out three isolar circuits and a power juncture from an emergency lighting cell, and worked them into the worn-out cortical stimulator to keep Andre going. It had not sped his healing process, and Tom was forced to operate a fourth time, not too long before they finally arrived at the hideout. But it had kept him alive.

The doctor at Palod, being a doctor, pushed Tom aside with a curse at his work to come. But the pilot was more than willing to give up the ghost by then, too tired to be indignant, practically crawling away to his bunkroom. He didn't even bother to shower. B'Elanna joined him soon after.

They didn't come out until late morning.

Andre swallowed and nodded as he was filled in on what had happened. "I want to talk to him," he finally said, looking at Atara. "Can you go get him?"

"I'll bring him by later," she said, forcing herself to keep her eyes to his, feeling more a need than ever to be strong for her lover, or perhaps protective.

The young man's answer was a blink and a frown. "No, Maiel. I want to talk to him now. --Please, Captain."

With a glance to Atara's suddenly expressionless face, Chakotay nodded.

An hour later, Atara led the tired pilot into the room. When Andre saw him, hands buried in his coat pockets, eyes darkly shadowed, his mouth set into a weak grin, he told the others to leave them. He waited until they had gone back to the entrance to speak.

"How are you?"

"I'm okay." Tom sat down by his friend's side and breathed a half laugh. "But you're a pain in my ass, you know," he said.

Andre was not then capable of grinning. He didn't try, but only stared at his exhausted friend. "I owe you my life, Tom."

"You would've done the same."

"No, I couldn't have done that. Not all that you did. --Please, don't argue with me. I...I just wanted to tell you, thank you."

With a sigh, Tom assented. "You're welcome."

Behind them, in the main walkway just outside the ward, Jenna peeked in as she updated Chakotay, then gave a relieved Atara a little grin and a few words of encouragement, which Chakotay echoed. Caught up in their own talk, they didn't notice B'Elanna, whom Jenna had brought mainly to relieve the engine room of the half-Klingon's uninjured nerve. She slowly passed them by, took a few steps into the ward.

Yet when Jenna glanced over and noticed B'Elanna's movements, she didn't stop her. Rather, she took a step aside to draw attention away from the engineer.

"I'm glad you were there for me," Andre continued, and nodded slightly when their eyes met again. "I know I'm pretty beat up. Doctor Aboine told me I'll need a visit to a good facility to get me back to myself. But...I'm glad I'm alive. My mama, she needs me, with Papa gone. She needs to know I'm alive."

Tom nodded slowly. "Maybe you should be with her, then. Maybe it'd be better for you to be home."

"No, she and I both knew I was better off here. Carolina's there to help her. I need to stay here, to help protect them. I can do nothing there, and I can't go back to feeling helpless."

"Yeah. I guess so."

"Do you?" Andre asked, eyeing him. "Do you really believe that what we're doing actually matters, is doing any good? I think we do, but...I think sometimes we try too hard, and nothing comes out of it, except people...like me--getting hurt."

Drawing a good breath, Tom considered that. "When B'Elanna and I got married, Chakotay said we wouldn't win this anytime soon, but just make a mark, save what lives we could, protect what we could, but otherwise just leave an impression. Put together, Andre, those impressions do matter. Maybe not now or soon, but in the future, I believe it'll matter. Besides, I've got a homeworld to protect now, too."

The younger man nodded slowly. "It changes things, doesn't it?"

"You bet it does. I mean, B'Elanna and I were dedicated before--"

"Too much I think."

Tom blinked. "What do you mean?"

Andre had not averted his ghostly stare, holding Tom there for several seconds before he answered.

"You put too much time into fighting for something that even you say's not going to pay off for a long time," Andre said. "It's noble, but you should have more. You and your wife need something that would give something back to you for a change, something to build and nourish. You need a place to call home--which you have now."

"I guess I can't argue that," Tom said, grinning with an effort. "But we still have our friends here, and the Marseilles."

"It's not enough, Tom," Andre told him. "You and B'Elanna deserve what you're giving yourself. You need to keep doing it."

Listening to them, B'Elanna stood, her arms crossed and her expression blank. Watching her husband nod to their friend's words, she agreed, silently, to herself. Then she cursed it, shifted from one foot to the other.

As if sensing the move, Tom glanced over. With a little grin, he held a hand out to her. She approached to take it, and quietly sat by him to say hello to Andre, then thank him.

"For what?" he asked softly, honestly not knowing what she would have to thank him for.

"More than you know," she said cryptically, then shrugged. "But mainly, I guess, for sticking around a while longer."

Andre's wrecked features relaxed into a good effort at a smile. "I'm glad to have earned it"..

"I don't deserve this," B'Elanna snipped, eyes locked on the panel she'd just opened. "I don't need to replace this junction every damn week."

Behind her, one of her technicians turned a look back to his captain.

"I have replaced this same relay five times in twice as many days," she said, feeling her pulse start to rise. "We can't take a shower without it feeling the urge to blow out."

Chakotay sighed, shook his head.

"This piece of shit isn't worth the sweat we put into it!"

"Cut it out, Torres," Chakotay said. "We've all got problems to deal with here."

"Screw you," she snarled and shot her glare back to him, "*Captain.*"

Chakotay let out his breath. "Okay. That's it. Out. Benders, replace Princess Torres' relay. B'Elanna--out. Now." He pointed.

She threw her compressor at Benders's feet and stormed into the nearest corridor. "I know what you're going to ask," she told him, "and here's your answer: Same damned shit, different damned day. And I'm *tired* of it!"

"What would you have me do?" the captain demanded. "Buy another ship?"

B'Elanna stopped abruptly, shaking her head at the floor. Finally, she threw up her hands. "I give up. I've been back in there for three days, and every time I get one thing fixed, something else and worse goes down. We've never been this bad off--and it won't get any better without a major refit."

"You think it's any better for me?" Chakotay returned. "If the Marseilles were in as bad condition--"

"The Marseilles is in good condition because it's *worth* the repairs Tom and I make on them!"

Chakotay clenched his jaw. He'd had enough of arguing with her. Not one word in the past six days had solved anything. Arguing with her was only making them all worse for the wear. Yet for some crazy reason, he still tried to settle his friend. "B'Elanna, once we get the parts, we can start making the repairs we really need. I know we need them as much as you do. But in the mean--"

"Forget it! Just forget it, Chakotay! We're off to Xorlen. Let the hacks there have a shot at it, because I'm not doing anything that's making a difference. I can't think rationally about it anymore, so I'm not going to try." She grabbed her communicator and flicked it on. "Torres to Paris!"

"Yeah, B'Elanna." Tom's voice also reflected both impatience and exhaustion--and it was echoing. He was likely still stuck in the navigation conduits. "Taking a break?"

"We both are. I want to leave. Now." Her eyes were locked on Chakotay's as she said it.

Tom sighed. "What blew up this time?"

"Everything has--including me. We're going."

Chakotay's jaw was starting to hurt. "Tom, we're almost to the hideout. Get her out of here. Get some rest. You both need it."

The pilot paused, then said blankly, "Gladly, Captain."

Finally hearing the captain's distress as her own desire had been met, B'Elanna let out her breath. Her eyes dropped. "Chakotay," she said. But she didn't finish her sentence. There was nothing she could say, not after what she already had, no way to make up for it, even if she meant every word. She just shook her head as her shoulders dropped.

He relaxed a little too. "We'll handle it. I'll contact you from Xorlen."

A small, unhappy grin crossed her mouth. "I don't even know why we're alive anymore," she muttered. "But I don't want this ship to be the cause of us all getting killed. At least getting knocked off by the Cardassians would have some honor attached to it."

The captain sighed, blinked a nod. "Go home, B'Elanna."

An hour later, she and Tom were gone.

It was Jenna's idea to go visiting, since Xorlen was only a few light years away, and as they had little to do for at least a week before the new parts for the ever-battered Liberty were to come in. Borrowing a small, souped-up shuttle, they made good speed to Avarar. On the way, Jenna confessed her own concerns, noting how tired they were.

"Well, you and I wouldn't be bad off to have a bit away either," she grinned in conclusion.

Chakotay still attributed B'Elanna's impatience to Avarar, the differences of living there and on the Liberty. Jenna shrugged it aside as a hell of a lot more and that just being supporting friends was all they should attempt. B'Elanna's bad mood would pass, and Tom would get some decent rest soon enough.

Though he wanted to believe Jenna, Chakotay was beginning to think his friends would not remain much longer in the Maquis. They were as dedicated as ever, but their lives were expanding. Their priorities were being challenged by their rightful desires.

Or maybe it's just my perception, he thought as he watched Jenna hop down the rocks to the house like a little goat. *I shouldn't think they can't have a home and the Maquis. They're still sworn to the cause. One doesn't necessarily exclude the other, only that it's all still new to them--and B'Elanna never was one for distractions...*

Jenna stopped at the bottom of the hill as he caught up, her elfin frame reed straight in the warm breeze that blew her skirt and her hastily pinned hair. Her small boots were firmly planted in the hard ground as if they belonged on dirt, and he reminded himself with a little grin that in many ways they did. Pert and stronger than she looked, 'salt of the earth' seemed like an understatement.

Maybe it is just me. Maybe I've been fighting too long, been away from a home like this for too long. Maybe I'm jealous in a way...

But when they came around the last bend, to the hill leading down to the house, Chakotay found himself having to rethink all his previous questions.

"For Christ's sake, B'Elanna! We said we'd take care of it, right?"

"But you're not taking care of it at all! After we're through with everything you *want* to do, we'll be dead! I want my kitchen!"

"*Your* kitchen?! You don't even cook!"

Tom and B'Elanna were circling each other in the yard, ripping building parts off the ground only to drop them in frustration and yell back at each other. The house looked good, aside from the addition, which still required slate sections on one side. The yard was a little better, nicely dotted with moss and decorated with their homespun eating table, a lantern. The tree Tom planted had begun to revive, and the garden B'Elanna spoke so highly of was starting to look like something edible.

Meanwhile, they were about to rip each other's throats out.

"Well, I keep the house up and help feed all these people who keep coming by!" B'Elanna snapped. "I'd like to have a kitchen to do that in! You knew the day we came here I wanted one--"

"Sorry I haven't kept up with your schedule, Miss Torres! God knows, I haven't had anything *else* to do!"

"A kitchen!" B'Elanna moved up on Tom, glaring up into his white-hot stare, "WITH an indoor table so we don't have to eat in the living room when it's raining! WITH the fireplace you promised me! WITH a counter I can work on! WITH a goddamned window so I don't have to activate the lights every time I go in there!" She blew her breath up in his face. "You *PROMISED* me, Tom!"

Jenna smirked and looked up at Chakotay. "Ahh, hormones," she chirped. "Those were some of my fondest fights with Lloyd."

Chakotay couldn't help but laugh.

B'Elanna heard that. Focusing on the new arrivals, her eyes narrowed into slits. "Oh, you think this is *FUNNY?!*" she railed. "Why don't YOU come into my lousy kitchen and have a look around?!" She threw her glare back to its original recipient. "If you can *see* anything in there!"

Tom wasn't fazed. If there was one thing he wasn't afraid of, it was his wife. More, knowing that beyond their debate, he adored that occasionally insane half-Klingon woman, and so he decided to go ahead and shut her up the best way he knew how: To give her exactly what she wanted.

"You want a window?" he asked quietly. Silence followed.

B'Elanna blinked. Suddenly, the breeze seemed loud and she felt thud in her heart at the turn of intensity in his eyes, his straightened mouth. He crossed his arms, tapped his fingers on them. She resisted the urge to back off, though. She wasn't scared of him.

But Chakotay caught his breath when he heard the tone, and heard Jenna breathe, "Oh damn."

Tom didn't break his stare. "Would you like a window in the kitchen, B'Elanna?"

B'Elanna took a breath. *Why in the hell am I fighting him over this?!* she screamed inside herself, yet replied tersely, "Yes. I would."

His stare narrowed further, and he gave her a single nod. "Fine. You want a window? You got a fucking window." He spun and strode over to a supply case. Sweeping his hand down into it, he extracted a disruptor and stomped into the house.

After the second it took for her to realize what he'd just grabbed, B'Elanna ran after him. "What the hell are you doing?!"

"Giving you your goddamned window!" Tom shouted and punched open the door to the kitchen, slamming it against the entering wall.

"Tom, you'll take the house down with that!"

"I'm a better shot than you think."

"We just put that wall back together!"

He grinned evilly and aimed. "Right here looks fine."

"NO!" B'Elanna jumped back as the disruptor beam hissed out of the weapon, and she shut her eyes tight as she heard the rock wall disintegrate and crumble.

My house, our beautiful house, and he's going to...

The blasting stopped. The sounds of rubble died into a whoosh of dust, then the breeze...

She uncovered her face, slowly opened her eyes, too angry to do anything but catch her breath--and crush her urge to throttle him. Tom was staring down at her as he lowered the disruptor. He moved aside, gesturing to the gaping, smoking hole in the wall.

"Does this please my lady?" he asked, ironically without rancor. Somehow, blowing a hole in the wall had been enough for him.

B'Elanna turned her glare to the wall. A two-by-two and a half meter hole sat in the adobe, and the sun was shining brightly into it. The rolling plain past the valley Isabel lived in was in perfect view. Tom had somehow missed the support beams and slate sections completely.

She blinked. She looked up at him again. "...I like it," she sputtered, still trying to believe he'd actually done it.

"Good. Now get out."

She almost choked. "What?!"

He grinned and touched her jaw with a finger. Before she said a word, he stole a kiss from her gaping mouth. "Get out--please. Go visit Isabel for lunch. She owes you lunch. And send Chakotay and Jenna in here--or take Jenna with you. I don't care. I'm going to build your kitchen."

B'Elanna stared hard at him. "Tom, I'm--"

--Going to Isabel's." She almost spoke again, but he ran his fingers into her nape hair, holding her gently still so he could drive his point. "I don't want to *ever* have to argue about this kitchen again, B'Elanna. I refuse to. We fight all the time--outside this house. I'm not about to make this place into a war zone, too, over a goddamned kitchen. The bedroom will wait until the kitchen is done, unless you mind sleeping in here a bit longer--and if that's the case, I'd suggest you stay at the Osol's for the week. But this kitchen's getting done--today." He released her, running his hand down her neck and shoulder, giving the latter a tender squeeze before moving away.

B'Elanna let out of her breath in a half laugh. *He really is nuts*, she thought, shaking her head at the view out the window.

"Fine," she finally said, backing out of the room. At the door, she stared back again. "Put the table by the window...please."

"Fine," Tom replied, tossing the disruptor onto his duffel. "See you later."

It took her another look and shake of her head to go.

Azro had his repair kit in his hand before Isabel stopped laughing. "Well! My! He does have a bit of spark," she chuckled. "Azro... Yes, go help them."

He gave his wife a peck on the head and a wink to B'Elanna. "Be back later."

"We'll come up," Isabel told him.

"Okay. --And B'Elanna?" When the young woman looked up to him, his smile was kind. "Don't worry. It'll be okay...though I do have to give your husband some points for originality."

B'Elanna had been slumped back, arms crossed, at the table, sour-faced as she told them why she'd come visiting at such an odd time of day. But she couldn't help but grin at Azro, and remember him telling her about the inevitable short-tempered days on that world. He had reminded her that time, too. "Thanks Azro--for everything."

"Not a problem. Glad to help." He gave her a wink. "But just don't be too upset of you come home to a meter-high house. It's been a while since I've fussed with adobe."

B'Elanna laughed as he left, finally sighing away the tension. "It's just been a bad day, I guess--a bad couple weeks, really, all the running back and forth, that ship...Andre." She looked to her neighbor. "We almost lost one of our friends, just a kid, really... He was mutilated, and there's not enough to go around for corrective surgery. Tom was with him for four days straight, forcing him to stay alive."

"But he pulled through?" Isabel asked and saw B'Elanna's assured nod. "Well, at least you have that much."

"Yes. I think it's just the stress of it, that damned ship that seems not to *want* to be fixed, our friends...then coming home to another bunch of problems... I don't know. Maybe it's been me. I can't seem to stuff anything anymore--and now that we're away from everyone else, I start aiming at Tom. Stress, probably."

Isabel eyed the younger woman for another minute or two over their tea before moving to stand. "Would you like to see what's been popping up out back? I'm sure you need some seeds for that garden Tom's dug, right?"

B'Elanna had little choice but to follow, grudgingly pulling herself up to stand and walk behind her friend, through the atrium behind the kitchen and into the warm air outside.

But once they exited, B'Elanna felt her jaw drop and her eyes go wide. Isabel's garden was thriving. "My God, how did you do that?" she breathed.

"The ashes are good for something, it seems," replied the farmwoman as she took a knife from a storage box. "You have to taste these radishes I've been crossbreeding. Thankfully, I've been keeping seeds and suspended gene samples in the cellar. That's why I wanted those power nodes so quickly. When our generator started failing, I was scared to death we would lose them."

"I'm glad you didn't," B'Elanna said, meaning it. Isabel certainly had made good use of her workable land. Even so, she held a hand up to what the woman was digging for. "Uh, I'm not really a fan of radishes. You really don't have to pull any for me."

"These aren't like any you've tasted," Isabel insisted. "At least give it a try--they're good for you. I'll get you some cuttings, and show you how to plant them when we go up and see how Tom's destroyed your house."

B'Elanna sighed, her steps sticking in the soil. "You think I was wrong, then?"

"I've told you all about the fights between Azro and I after the attack, haven't I? Everybody on this planet's been there, B'Elanna. Don't be so afraid to be normal."

"Are you kidding? That's *all* I've ever wanted." There, B'Elanna stopped, suddenly realizing her

admission. She'd never said it so openly before...though she couldn't deny its truth.

Isabel didn't seem to mind it, though. Tucking her bobbing black hair behind her ear with a finger, she busily dug into the soil with her knife. A few moments later, she was cutting apart and peeling a large, orange tuber with well-practiced fingers. "Perhaps it is the war." Handing B'Elanna the radish, she smiled expectantly, nodding as B'Elanna did. "You see, isn't it delicious?"

B'Elanna chewed and swallowed, genuinely impressed. "It's wonderful. Needs salt, though."

She laughed. "Another thing I need to show you how to make. The Palto Range springs produce tons of it--even now."

"How did you make it so...? It's not just spicy, but it's sweet, too. You know?"

"We crossbreed some of them with halkot, a Bajoran pepper. I'll get some cuttings and a few seeds for you to produce."

"I'd like that. Thanks."

The other woman bent down to get some more samples. "And since you like them, I'll pull a couple more--they do have to be eaten, after all. We'll make a nice salad for dinner, maybe see about some caltola to chop up. I have a wonderful vinaigrette we can program into your replicator."

"Salad dressing?" Laughing numbly, B'Elanna couldn't help but stare as she shook her head. "How do you stay so normal, Isabel? I mean, we're standing around talking about salt springs and radishes when..." She motioned to the land around them.

The other woman didn't lose her pleasant smile. "Because it is life, B'Elanna," she said. "We talk about these things and go on with our lives because it's the only way we really have to fight the Cardassians. We keep living and we move on. We plant crops and eat the harvests, because if we didn't, then they would be victorious. Shooting at them isn't the only means of resistance."

"True," B'Elanna grinned. "I can't say Tom and I haven't thought the same way at times. But I guess it's strange to see someone getting by as well as you are. I can't believe you were here when it happened. I don't think I would've...recovered as quickly if I'd been here. I couldn't have accepted it as well."

"Maybe because I have little other choice but to accept it. Oh, I'll admit I cried for days after the attack--all my friends gone, coming out the cellar after two days to see this." She motioned to the same view as B'Elanna had. "There's nothing left in my tear ducts for all I cried. But then I got up and realized that none of that was helping. What's done is done, what's lost is lost, and Azro needed me to help him through the mourning ceremony properly. After that, we started rebuilding."

Isabel paused, and seeing her neighbor's thoughtful face, she put aside the knife and the collection of cuttings on a stump. "Let's walk, B'Elanna. I want to show you the lake I told you about."

"Well," Jenna said, staring at the hole in the wall as she folded up the bed linens to take out of the kitchen, "at least you got it out of your systems. A little venting never hurts."

"We don't fight each other," Tom told Jenna, grabbing his duffel and throwing it out into the living room. "We almost never argue--not like that, anyway."

"Maybe you should," she said, forming a grin. "It's--"

"Maybe *you* should!" he snapped. "Maybe it worked for you, but that's not how I want to live. I have enough to deal with."

"Oh, sorry to trample on your daisies, Thomas," she replied. "You're not the only person around here with troubles to deal with."

"I *know* that. I'm just tired of all this crap."

Chakotay had been quiet while Jenna folded the bed and pulled it into the main room, while Tom cleared out everything but what he needed, too. As they went back and forth with their comments and accusations, the captain had gladly relegated himself to preparing the shelf brackets and listening. But on Tom's last note, he finally turned away from his work. "What crap would that be, Tom?"

Unfortunately, Tom was frustrated enough to tell him, "Too much sex, too little sleep and that goddamned war we happen to be fighting. That just about says it."

Ignoring Chakotay's responding stare for the moment, he hefted the replicator off the floor with a grunt to get it out of his way. Dropping it a little harder than he probably should have, he remained bent over, taking a few deep breaths.

"I just want to be happy, Chakotay--to make B'Elanna happy, too. Is that so wrong?"

The captain sighed. "No. But you put too much on yourself. Maybe you're trying too hard?"

"Sometimes I feel like I'll never do *enough*. I know B'Elanna wants so much, but she never complains, almost never asks--except today." He straightened with a sour laugh. "No, today she made up for it. God knows what put her in that mood."

"Ladies have a way about them," Jenna commented with a look.

"It's never been that bad," Tom said, knowing what his friend meant. "But that's not even the point."

"Then what is?" Chakotay asked. "Because you and B'Elanna both don't seem satisfied with anything anymore. What *is* going to be enough, Tom? This kitchen? I don't think that's going to answer all your problems."

Tom paused, grinning mirthlessly as he looked around at the work he needed to do, promised to do. "I want it as much as she does, but...sometimes it feels like it's endless. The fight, the house, the pain, our friends getting blown to hell, those goddamned nightmares just about driving me and her nuts..."

Tom shook his head, looking up at the blackened ceiling. "We fix things and move people around. I train people and they get their faces burned up and their guts imploded. B'Elanna spends her life doing repairs that don't last a day. We're supposed to be satisfied with that? We fight and fight but nothing ever comes of it, nothing changes except for all those people who die trying to make a dent in Starfleet's idiotic policies. It might be worth in the long run, but I'm tired. Just...tired."

"Avalar's not been a bad deal on you, though," Jenna pointed out.

"This?" he said and gestured around him. "This place is the only real victory I'll ever see--the only

one I'm really able to do anything about." His stare drifted to the window, to the sky beyond the distant range. "That war out there is only delaying the inevitable. The Maquis will never win, Chakotay. All we're doing is exposing the Cardassians' betrayal of the treaty and waiting for Starfleet to get off its ass and do something about the shit decisions they've made. Knowing them, that won't be for a long time. They'll fight *us* first, just like you said. So, it's only going to get worse."

He turned back to his friends. They were staring back at him, set with concern, and even understanding. But he couldn't feel for them just then. "I need this place to be right as much as B'Elanna does. I need to feel like I'm doing *something* that's going to last, that I can see *now*, for B'Elanna and for me. I'm trying my best, but we're both getting pretty frustrated because nothing *but* this place is working. And when things aren't working here, either... I'm going to finish this kitchen, *make* it work--today, if possible."

Chakotay was quiet. He couldn't deny anything that Tom had said, not when he thought realistically about their situation, reminded himself of his own predictions. He had always tried to keep faith, believe that they'd get a chance to take an advantage somewhere in the DMZ, and make a break in the wall they'd been shooting at.

But that opportunity wasn't there yet, hadn't appeared in the year they'd been fighting, and probably wouldn't be there any time soon. They had been successful in their defenses, protected what remaining colonists they could get to in time, organized their resistance to the Cardassian incursions with better accuracy, and held what they felt was their territory.

Another offensive was eminent. Starfleet had officially named them their enemy, and had begun their hunt for the so-called traitors to the Federation... *How much worse does it have to get, are we going to let it get, before it gets better?* he had to wonder. *We had avoided Starfleet before. Now we'll have to fight them, too...*

As Chakotay turned away in his thoughts, Jenna stared wisely at the man before her. She did not smile, though inside, she was glad he finally said what was on his mind. What was going on in his mind was nothing she hadn't struggled with in her own right--nothing most Maquis hadn't thought on.

She'd stayed with him and Chakotay on the Liberty, sent her beloved children ahead of her, so that she too could do something, and work out the rage the rape of her planet and murder of her husband had driven into her. Indeed, it was endless. But she knew she couldn't go to her children then, either. They'd imprison her--and being a convict was worse than their knowing she was treasonous as far as she was concerned. *Hell, at least rebel fits our lot.*

But one thing she'd known all along was that little things did indeed matter. Tom needed that one little thing.

So, she shrugged. "Then let's get the bloody kitchen fixed. The day's not getting any younger."

Slowly, Chakotay smiled, then he gave his friend a nod. "You heard her, Paris. What's first?"

Tom didn't share their cheer, but he did feel some relief when he nodded back. Opening his case, he pointed with his chin to the window.

Isabel perched herself up on the dock, which sat fifteen meters from the edge of the glorious lake it once sat in.

It would take time, she knew, for the silt to slip back again, the water to rise. The younger woman joined her there to share the view. Her dark stare pinned on the water almost immediately, and her gently curling hair caught the warm, wet breeze. She breathed it deeply. A tiny smile found her.

Looking at her, Isabel decided once again that B'Elanna Paris was a beautiful woman. She was strong, but she could tell there was trouble behind that intelligent stare--or, better, pain. Her small body was folded up so she could hold her knees to her chest, causing the skirt of her dark gold outfit to pull in the breeze as well. Young, but old, worldly but sheltered, complex but knowable: She could tell why an equally complex man like Tom would love her as he did.

As that thought settled, a nagging question she'd had about the both of them resurfaced. She would not have asked either of them on their first meeting, nor even their second. But seeing B'Elanna so relaxed just then...

"Why are you in the Maquis?"

B'Elanna blinked at the sudden question, but didn't look troubled to admit it. "Because I'm needed."

That sounded right to the older woman. "You like being needed. You've lots to carry, though."

B'Elanna grinned slightly. "It's no paradise and I resent wasting my time that piece of crap our captain insists on throwing at every warship he can find--as if we could spare it. --Don't get me wrong, our captain is a very good friend of Tom's and mine. You'll meet him later. But that ship is starting to get to me." She shrugged. "What we do matters. I know that. For all the death and pain and the problems we face, we know we're saving more lives than would be if we did nothing."

Isabel nodded. "It's a hard life."

"I hate it, really," B'Elanna confessed. "I hate the firefights, and watching friends and innocent people die. I hate waking up to a torpedo blast, and having to reroute every system just to get us to impulse. Not being able to see my husband for days while we're on the same ship, and wondering every time I'm not on the bridge and we get hit if he's still alive... I see what it does to Tom--how it hurts him, more than it does me. But it has to be, Isabel. We have to fight. We have to give up our peace of mind, so we can protect it... Am I making sense?"

"Yes," Isabel said, her eyes drifting to the bright blue sky above them. "Well, from what I've seen--from what you've done here already--you're a good engineer. Little wonder you're needed."

B'Elanna took in again the dank air of the lake. She could see how beautiful it must have been before, majestic below the bright green hills and chalk and sandstone rocks that surrounded it, and the flocks of birds that must have crowded there.

Now they're gone, she thought, gone to those who wouldn't see what was beyond the stash of weapons under the city. The Cardassians didn't have to destroy everything and sweep the entire land with fire. The bastards wouldn't know honor from a hole in the ground.

But they did strike down that land--as they had on Tinalat and Negheris, and would have done to Ronara if they hadn't been stopped. Yet even those efforts were looking less and less successful. She wondered if Tinalat, under Cardassian occupation then, was growing back, as Avalar looked to be doing.

"Usually Avalar looks better at night, when you can't see," B'Elanna finally said. "I imagine it'll be stunning when it recovers."

Isabel smiled as she nodded. "Yes. I've always loved this place. I've been coming here since I was a little girl." She nodded back to the way they'd come in. "My parents dug the trail out here just so I wouldn't get lost; whenever they couldn't find me after that, they'd come down here. Sure enough, I'd be sitting on that tree, right over there." She pointed over to the heavy branch across the inlet, barely touching the water. It too had been blackened, but she didn't seem to see it, her memory being so near. "This place was always very special to me."

"I used to wander away to the water, too, when I was little," B'Elanna confessed. "When I was a little girl, I used to think it was...magical somehow."

"There must be something about it that stirs the young, I think, and the warmth of a clear sun. As hard as it is being a dreamy little kid, I always thought it was necessary. I never could understand how children could be raised as well on a starship. You must miss the sun when you're on a ship for a long time."

"Now more than ever." The grin on B'Elanna's lips pulled a bit. "Tom and I have been getting pretty used to being outdoors again. We both liked being outside when we were growing up."

The wind stilled, and in that pause, Isabel could almost see the shift of thought in her new friend's eyes. The smile slowly faded and her gaze turned inward. Then the young woman's eyes brightened a bit. Her lips parted, poised on the thought. When she spoke again, her voice was almost childlike in its softness.

"I used to think," B'Elanna said softly, "that the light from the warp core could keep me warm. That it was...protecting me somehow. I liked being holed away with my engines, away from everything and everyone, away from things that could hurt me, or leave me. I'm not good with changes, or instability. I can handle it, but not as well as I like to think. So many things were out of control in me, in my life, that I used to hold onto things that I thought could control. I ended up pretty alone, until I got to the Maquis, met Tom."

She hugged her legs. "I have so much more now--my husband, good friends, the Marseilles. Now I have a home--another thing I wanted but never thought I could have. Now...I want to keep what Tom and I have built."

Isabel smiled. "I'm glad you and Tom have come here, B'Elanna."

"I am too." Unfolding herself to lean back on her hands, she looked over at the lady sitting beside her, so relaxed on her lake, on her land, assured in her place. "Do you ever think it will get better, Isabel?"

"What do you mean?"

B'Elanna gestured around with a hand. "This: Avalar, the war... All of it."

"Of course I do," Isabel replied with a strange, knowing smile. "All things have a beginning and an end, B'Elanna. I grew up knowing that, seeing the seasons come and go. I'm surprised you're even asking me that, considering where you've been. But yes, I think we'll see an end to this someday."

"We'll lose a lot more before it's done," B'Elanna told her.

"But I have faith that somehow, someday, we'll have won, in one way or another." She grinned. "That might not be as exact an answer as you might have wanted."

"No," B'Elanna said, shaking her head shortly, "I liked how you said that. I want to believe it."

"Then believe it," Isabel said simply. "Have some faith in all those efforts you make despite the annoyance. If you stop thinking you'll be successful, then you'll be fighting for the rest of your life--and not just the war."

"What do you mean by that?"

"You've got to come to terms with what you want, B'Elanna. What you *really* want--and trust that you'll have it. You have to be faithful to your desires, and let go of what you have no control over, like what's already done, and what's truly out of your hands. Otherwise, you'll only end up going in circles, and you'll never be satisfied."

B'Elanna remembered that all the way home, silent by her friend's side as they treaded the rocky soil up to her home.

Tom set the last of the dishes in the particle reclamator he'd seized a few weeks before, then looked around to make sure everything was put away. Everything was. Satisfied, he grinned at the new kitchen.

They'd only gotten the last touches done the night before--and that very day had hosted another afternoon get-together for their neighbors. Even Schiller was impressed when B'Elanna finally let him roam through the house.

By then, though, B'Elanna couldn't have cared less. She'd had enough compliments to last her a long time--and she accepted each one while casting a little smile to her husband, who knew exactly what her smile meant, and let her take the glory. For the gleam in her eyes with every word bestowed upon her, he loved every minute of it.

She stood so proudly in her heeled shoes and a creamy orange tunic dress as she smiled and talked about the house and their garden, about the planet and their plans for the irrigation ducts and power relays, finally comfortable in the company of their neighbors, even cheerful... No, Tom wouldn't have disturbed that for his life.

Even so, both were glad when the day was done, and B'Elanna was left needing some time to herself. Tom nodded her off, and sent Jenna and Chakotay out as well, telling them goodnight some time later when they announced they'd be turning in. He breathed a bit of relief when they did. The quiet was good for him, too.

Rewarding as some of it had already been, it had been a long couple months. She'd done everything for him, stuck by him during those inevitable bad times, and still did. It was only natural that they'd start reacting to the stress, much as he didn't like it. But B'Elanna insisted it was just that--stress--and they had nothing to be sorry for. That was true, he knew. But he still didn't like that he'd gotten so angry over something so small, whether or not she had, too.

For that reason, aside from the obvious, it had been good to have Chakotay and Jenna there for the time. Friends and houseguests--skilled laborers, too: Tom knew well he wouldn't have finished that kitchen without their help--though, in the mood he'd been in, he would have believed he could have. Isabel and Azro had also been coming by often after that day, to help with the rest of the room and share some meals and recipes and plant seeds in the garden, simple things.

Over the next few days, Tom started feeling better; getting something completed there seemed to help B'Elanna, too. She started laughing more, relaxing without working herself to death. The intensity in her, at day and when they were together at night, had finally begun to dissipate. Not only for himself, but for her peace of mind, Tom was glad to see it.

The dishes done, their bed set up and everything clean, Tom went silently out of the kitchen and through his living room to go meet his wife. He barely made noise as he ascended the curved path up to the lake, careful not to slip in the deceptive moons' light. Coming to the apex of the trail and turning through a slight puff of fog, he grinned a little at how easily he'd gotten used to all of it. It was a good feeling.

Not too far up the lakeside, he found her.

She was sitting on a large, flat rock near the middle of the way, staring out at the moonlit water, utterly still. Her knees were pulled up to her chest, but she was relaxed, almost hypnotized. She'd asked him to meet her there once Chakotay and Jenna didn't need him anymore, but suddenly, seeing her as she was, he was hesitant to disturb her.

Nevertheless, he approached, still quiet. "Hey."

She moved only to raise her head. "Hey... Come here, Tom. Come sit with me."

He did, sliding up onto the rock beside her, letting his bare feet slip into the water, then leaning back on his hands to enjoy the view. But for the trickle of water on the shore, lapping gently at the sand, not a sound could be heard. The surreal light left everything around them shadowed in a haze, pleasantly eerie.

She whispered very softly, slowly, "It's so...quiet."

His tone was as inaudible. "Yeah."

The trickle died down, the wafts of fog stilled, as if sealed in immortality, then the slightest tug of air started both again.

She drew a silent breath. "I never liked silence before. It always made me restless."

"Me too...except on the slopes."

"Skiing?"

"Yeah." He drew a breath, looking towards the whitened trees, trees he knew were still black in daylight. "I remember, when I'd be at the top of a hill, about to go down, I'd stay very still, not move at all. It was almost...holy, the silence, the kind of thing you feel in your gut. It was magical."

B'Elanna turned to find his stare slowly drifting to hers. His expression was so full of thought, of unspoken emotion, of gentleness. How well she knew his face by then; she had to constantly remind herself it--all of it--was still relatively new. They had only known each other a year, and yet...

She breathed again, looked back to the water. A tiny breeze shimmied the moonlit ripples like a shiver. "What's happened to me, Tom?"

"What do you mean?"

She almost looked as if she didn't believe her own thoughts as she smiled slightly, shook her head. "I've never felt so at peace with myself, with life, than when we're here. I used to fight everything, feel it spinning around in my head, all that restlessness and need to get away or back to work. Now, I can take this silence, this...normality."

He accepted that with a sigh. "When you know what you want and start getting it, it's a pretty good feeling."

She paused. "I guess that's why I keep pushing you, pushing myself to get this done--"

"You haven't been pushing me," Tom replied then grinned. "Well, except that kitchen of yours. But I'd wanted it, too. Figures we'd fight over something we agree on."

She smiled. "I am sorry about that, you know."

"So am I. But it's done. I think we can put that one away."

"I think so, too." Her eyes wandered back to the lake, colored softly in grays and bluish whites, willowing in a transparent fog from the warm springs far below the surface. "When Isabel and I were talking the other day, I realized how much has happened to me..., to us. I know we've talked about this before, but..."

She shook her head again, let her eyes roam over the colors, drink them in. Someday there would be fish in that lake again, Schiller had said. Someday, there would be birds, migrated from the south, nestling in the trees, once there was thrush again to house them. Someday, Avalar truly would be alive...again.

"I don't want to go back, Tom. I don't want to fight anymore."

His eyes also remained on the water, tracing in his vision the path of the reflections. His lips turned upwards. "Me either."

"But somehow I think that as soon as I get used to it," she continued quietly, "a normal life, I'll get restless again, start looking for fights, start getting dissatisfied with everything. It's happened before, and I don't want that to happen again."

"Or maybe you'll just find yourself new challenges. You're older now, B'Elanna. You're not a teenager running into things with her eyes closed before running away from it. You have to trust yourself enough that you won't go back. I guess that goes for me, too."

She unwillingly remembered that person he mentioned, that teenager, nearly a stranger to her now, emotionally frozen, totally alone, much because of her own efforts, so hostile and hurt...by things she really didn't have any control over. It seemed so long ago, except for maybe that temper. She knew she still had that. *So does everybody unfortunate enough to have been in my engine room lately,* she grimaced to herself.

"I guess our biggest problem at this point," Tom added, breaking his gaze from the water to look at her again, "is the instability--not what's going on here, but out there--not knowing how things are going to play out. I think we get restless because it makes us think we'll be staying a step ahead...which isn't so bad, as long as we stick together. It's worked for us so far, anyway." He shrugged. "Guess we'll just have to keep keeping ourselves busy until the rest plays out and we don't get the urge."

Her returning stare was slightly unconvinced. "You make it sound so easy."

"A little wishful thinking never hurt anybody--at least a little." Reaching over to her, he gently took her hand. "Let's just take things as they come, okay? We'll only make ourselves nuts if we keep trying to solve everything."

B'Elanna laughed quietly. "Yes, we do tend to think too much, don't we?"

"Better than not at all, but I think we can manage a compromise."

"I think so, too," she replied and squeezed his fingers. Regarding him a few moments more, she saw the slowness of his blink, the quietness of his smile. She returned the same. "You want to go in?"

"Sure," he said, and guided her down from the rock after slipping off himself. "It's been a long day. And we've got an early start, too, with Chakotay and Jenna leaving and the Basners' replicator."

"God, I almost forgot about that." She slowed herself as they came to the ledge trail, letting Tom lead the way. "Isn't the meeting at their place?"

"Yes, but next week. We'll be well gone by then."

B'Elanna frowned at that. "Well, remind me to jot down some notes. I want everybody to be thinking about those new energy conduits we designed. I think it'll be a lot easier on everybody's resources in the end."

Tom grinned. When they got to the wider part of the trail, he took her around the waist. "You don't have to sell it to me, B'Elanna," he reminded her. "But I'll remind you--or maybe we can get them to push back the meeting date to when we get back."

"You think that'll fit with everyone's schedule?"

"What schedule? Nothing's going to live or die any faster by shifting the meeting date 'till when we get back. Besides, we're the ones bringing the supplies--and arranging to blast out that polyduramide."

B'Elanna considered that. "Okay. We'll mention it, then. But let's stop by L'Vos and Jisin's tomorrow before we leave. I'll need to talk to him about refining those alloys. He's got more experience in that than I do."

"We still need to encrypt a message to send to K'Karn."

"That's right. We'll do that next time we leave."

Coming down the rest of the way, Tom glanced back up the trail, wondering about getting a better stepping surface cut into the hill when he got the time. Tucking the thought away for the moment, he snuck back through the house with his wife, careful not to awaken Chakotay and Jenna, both unmoving by the fire. It was very late--or rather, very early--and they needed their rest before returning. For their part, Tom and B'Elanna were not accustomed to sleep anymore, had learned to simply sleep when they got tired, expecting to wake up prematurely.

Nevertheless, they undressed and settled down into their still temporary bed without complain or expectation of anything but the view their repositioned palette afforded them. As they had for three days then, they spooned up on their sides so to stare out of their kitchen window, bask in the bluish moonlight pouring in.

Tom stroked her hair, softly as he always did, caressing it over her shoulder. When she released his other hand, he placed it on her breast, tracing it distractedly until her eyes closed. As if sensing that change, he turned his head a little and kissed the back of her head, whispering, "Goodnight."

She mumbled the same before sleep claimed her.

He followed soon after....

With a tiny grin, Chakotay looked over the counter and regarded what lay beyond it: Two strong arms and a rumpled blond head all but blanketed the tiny sable-haired form just before him; two small hands held those arms, and beneath the covers, legs, too, were wrapped together. The entwined couple was unmoving but in shallow breaths, even in the light.

"Think we should wake them?" he asked quietly.

Jenna turned a look of flabbergasted disgust up to the man beside her before she drug him back out of the kitchen. "You fool," she snorted and went to grab her satchel. "We'll leave a note and you can call them later."

Chakotay looked around for a PADD as Jenna collected the remainder of their gear, and he tapped a short letter to set on the desk. "I almost regret needing them anymore. This place has been good for them."

Jenna shrugged. "They needed a home and finally found one. But they know you need them."

Watching him nod quietly, eyes down, seeing again the troubled look that'd been growing on his face for weeks, she softened immediately. For such a strong and practical man, he could be so tentative on the inside. She knew he would relent to whatever he thought would be the better good for all involved, no matter how it might affect him. Jenna couldn't help but be attracted to that, even while widowed for as short a time as she had been. It was also, she knew well, one of the things that made him as good a captain as he was, what had helped them survive and stay with him as long as they had.

"Not to mention, dear, they do care about you," she continued, giving him an understanding smile. "They'll not give *you* up easily, either."

Chakotay did not respond.

She watched him plant the PADD and collect the parts B'Elanna had repaired and set aside for him. She took another look around the house before following him out, deciding not to say any more on the matter to Chakotay for the time being. But she could see what was happening there, with their friends. Chakotay's instincts weren't far off course. Every inch of the house showed it.

"Hello! B'Elanna? Tom?"

B'Elanna drug her head up from the pillow and pulled her hair from her eyes to squint at the chronometer. "God, Isabel," she muttered and fell back down, barely noticing that Tom was gone.

A minute later, she felt a shake on her shoulder. "Up, B'Elanna."

"What do you want?" she moaned.

"Where's Tom?"

"Probably having a bath in the lake."

"You're leaving today?"

"Yeah."

Isabel grinned and gave B'Elanna a peck on the head. "Okay. Go back to sleep. I'll leave a note in the Marseilles--the supply list and a surprise for you and Tom."

"Fine. See you when we get back."

The older woman smiled gently down at the younger, who was quickly back to sleep in the portable bed, hair sprawled upwards and over the pillow, arm bent next to her face to block the light.

"Keep yourself safe, my friend," Isabel said and left the kitchen.

B'Elanna, buried again in the pillow, frowned to herself. *Didn't Tom wake up last night?...*

She pulled herself up and saw his empty pillow. A moment later, her dark eyes lit with the realization as she sunk back down to her side. Reaching out to touch the place he'd been, undisturbed, all night, she could feel her smile deep within her.

"How's that intermix coming along, Hogan?" Chakotay asked as he tapped on a few overhead controls.

"Pretty good. Better than before."

"Good. Try it again, see if it's better." The captain took the co-pilot's seat and started his own diagnostic. Glancing beside him, he saw Andre still going through his own checks with surprisingly good speed. *Tom's just too good a teacher*, he grinned. "How's it coming?"

"Pretty good, captain," Andre replied quietly, concentrating on his readouts. "Reaction time's up to seventy-five percent."

"Good work. Let me know if you beat your record."

"I'll see what I can't do."

Rodrigo said nothing more, returning to his calculations and simulations. Chakotay sighed a little at it. It was only natural that the grievousness of his injuries would take a notch out of Andre's boyishness as the remaining scars had torn away his good looks. But even before then, Chakotay had always missed Tom's devilish cheer when he was flying--or the banter between him and B'Elanna. They could go back and forth for hours if left in the right mood, leaving everyone else in stitches, and that aside from their talent.

He missed them both. But he knew, somehow, the more time his friends spent on Avalar, the more he would spend missing them. They had found a home, when both had, in all but word, been exiled from the ones they knew. In becoming Maquis, they had forsaken those places for good and learned real camaraderie; in becoming land bound, they were building a life outside of the Maquis. Growing up, growing away, now that they had what they needed.

Damn you Jenna, you knew from the start this would happen, he thought with a sigh and went back to another systems check.

"What's our ETA to the Minar sector?"

"Five and a half hours," Andre answered, seeming to perk up a bit. "The Parises planning to meet us there?"

"No. Later, outside the Ronaran grid."

"How's their house coming along?"

"Pretty good. I think they'll get the bedroom done in their next trip."

Andre's eyes went down at that, then back to his readouts. "They'll like that."

The silence returned to the bridge, even after Krammic checked in, took his seat, and the captain silently sighed to himself before going back to the lift.

He wanted his pilot and engineer back. He wanted things back to the way they were before. But as their captain and, more, their friend, he knew it was both unfair and unrealistic to expect that to ever happen. As a man who'd burned quite a few bridges in the last couple years, he knew he'd just have to wait it out, and go on from there.

"Tom, come look at this."

He did, tapping a few commands on the conn before joining his wife at the door of their cabin. A wide smile broke out on his face, and he put his arm around her. "Nice. I guess that's not Schiller's work."

B'Elanna shook her head and went to their bed to touch the obviously handmade bedspread and pillowcases that graced their bunk. They were like thick woven silk to the touch, trimmed with tassels at the corners and edgings whip-stitched with thick thread.

"Isabel...," she breathed in awe of it. "She couldn't have replicated this--their unit isn't that powerful. We have to bring her back something nice."

"Maybe that soil neutralizer she was talking about? Maybe scrape one up at Ronara?"

"Definitely. Oh, yes, definitely."

Tom watched his wife admire the bed fabrics, utterly amazed. He too was impressed. "We've got a few spare bars of latinum."

He drew a deep, happy breath, not caring how their neighbor had gotten into their ship. *Probably*

heard my access codes--or she's a lot more technically inclined than she let on. The result of Isabel's work had simply thrilled B'Elanna. That was all that mattered then, and he made a mental note to thank her personally for it, too.

"Shields up! ETA?"

"Four minutes."

Chakotay hit the COMM. "Chakotay to Harlowe. You braced down there?"

"For the most part. Be careful."

The captain grinned. Being careful was one thing the Maquis didn't particularly specialize in. "We will. Have you--"

His words stopped abruptly as a blast to the stern knocked him across the bridge. Chakotay stumbled into a seat and started hitting buttons.

"Where the hell did they come from?!" Andre shouted.

"Doesn't matter!" Chakotay returned. "Get us out of here!"

Andre popped the Liberty into warp, beginning the chase, and began lining up evasions as the other ship jumped into pursuit. "Do we have any fields or places to hide? We won't be able to do this long."

Chakotay thought quickly. "Set a course for the Kieno range. Maybe we can shake them in the asteroid field."

"Going!"

"Krammic, what's our weapons output?"

"Eighty percent with those new banks. But our shields won't hold up for more than a few misses in the field."

Chakotay grinned and patted Andre's shoulder. "Guess Rodrigo's got to fly around the phaser fire, then."

Andre only grinned in reply, tapping his console quickly.

"Where the hell are they?" B'Elanna muttered. "These are the coordinates they left us?"

Tom grinned. "You know how plans change in the Maquis," he said, winking back at her, chuckling at her returned smirk. "Run an ion trace. I'm sure they're around somewhere."

"They sure wouldn't have gone far, knowing those engines.... Here it is. It's the Liberty's ion signature all right. I'll run a long-range sensor sweep." Clicking on a few buttons and setting their computer to work, B'Elanna leaned back in her chair. "Maybe we can try Aeparna for that neutralizer."

"It might be a bit tricky. Last time we were there, the Marseilles wasn't as well known. We might run into trouble landing there."

She nodded, ran her eyes over her console. "Well, I know they won't mind having a new airionics generator, either. That other one was already old before it was battered up."

"And it didn't cost as much, either." Tom looked down and nodded to himself. "There they..." His squinted at the monitor readouts. "They're under attack in the Kieno Asteroid Belt. They've got a Cardassian border guard on their tails."

B'Elanna growled and started making the necessary preparations.

"The main sensor grid is down!"

"Krammic? --Krammic!... Andre, come about on that next rock!"

"Bringing us around. --They're still following!"

"Damn it!"

Chakotay jumped on tactical, pushing Krammic's corpse aside. "Firing!"

"Make it good, because we won't outrun them! Their ship is twice as maneuverable as ours, and they didn't fall for the deflection." Andre banked the ship through another gorge of rocks before bucketing around and back through several more smaller asteroids.

A blast sent sparks raining down in the back of the bridge. Chakotay grit his teeth. "Repair crews to the bridge!" he yelled and fired again. The torpedoes bumped them, but didn't do what he wanted. He lined up another array.

Another hit on their vulnerable port and Rodrigues ground the Liberty to full impulse in the field. Jerking a bead of sweat from his eye, he pulled them around another group of asteroids, not about to give them the upper hand again. He set another pattern and swerved through another array, banking hard and pulling the ship around, then through the next opening, then....

"Andre," Chakotay said. The ship banked again.

...through another gorge, then around the next...

"Rodrigo!"

"What?!"

"They're gone."

The young pilot blinked. "What?"

"I don't know, but they're gone. They're not behind us." Chakotay went back to his controls. "They could be hiding, but our main sensors are still down. Stop the ship."

Rodrigo did so, then looked straight down to his readings. "Sensors, warp, power on four decks, the

shields--"

"Shut up and let me check this out," the captain snapped, urging up the secondaries. "I have a ship approaching... Damn you! --Rodrigo, open a channel!"

He did, and in the forward viewscreen he saw a familiar shape make its way around one large asteroid. Rodrigo smiled. "Good to see you, Marseilles."

"Sorry about that," Tom drawled. "But you know, this Cardie swatting business is getting a little one-sided. You need your own bug spray."

Chakotay blew a breath through his nostrils. "Where the hell have you been, Paris?" he demanded.

On the Marseilles, Tom and B'Elanna shared a look, a raised brow. "Looking for you," B'Elanna told him. "You okay, Captain?"

"No, we're not okay," Chakotay answered. "Most of our systems are down, our deflector's offline, we've got twice as many more holes in the hull than you left us with--plus Krammic's lying dead at my feet. While you two have been out building sandcastles, we've been fighting a war. We're about as far from 'okay' as we get, thank you!"

Between the sinking feeling in her heart and the furious indignation that shot up within her, a sense of rationale somehow surfaced before B'Elanna could say something she knew they'd all regret. Looking at her husband's pursed frown, she drew a cooling breath.

"Open the hold, Chakotay," she said, calm but clipped. "We're on our way in."

*Krammic's death was *not* our fault,* B'Elanna told herself over and over during the literally endless repairs on the Liberty.

We're not the only ship in the war, and Tom and I are not the only engineer and pilot at his convenient disposal, she added each time she crawled through access hatches or ripped apart burned out grids or continued to try and stitch together the fried relays in the shield generator.

Over the next several days, the Liberty remained all but derelict, powered down and in orbit of a large asteroid in the Kieno Range. Meanwhile, the crew worked nonstop to put their ailing ship back together. The remaining bridge crew efficiently and emotionlessly organized their lists and proceeded to command their separate teams, systematically preparing to overhaul everything they could before having to take off again.

Twice during that time, Tom took the Marseilles to the nearest trade post and with lists ten times longer than the one he had from home, making deals using his own latinum if he had to, trading off what they could salvage from the Cardassian ship and their own stores, and even blackmailing one of the traders he was lucky enough to run into. On his way back, he decided to take a few diversions, knocking off a couple freighters and supply garrisons, grabbing whatever he could before returning to the Liberty.

Back on the ship, B'Elanna fought and kicked and ripped apart from a list of repairs that seemed unconquerable. She took naps in the access conduits instead of sleeping, determined to get *something* done there, determined to not give Chakotay another reason to blame her or Tom for his own stupid bad luck, the Cardassians' lucky timing, or poor Krammic's misfortune.

She cursed every moment of it in her mind.

At the same time, she knew, then more than ever, that Chakotay needed them. He needed their skills, their dedication, their time. He needed them on the bridge to break the tension and down in the guts of his ship to keep it alive. He needed them to talk to, to argue with, to troubleshoot around, to beg, borrow and steal for him.

In spite of all the repairs that were completed before their return, nothing had changed. They were back to square one again.

This ship will never survive the war... But he needs us.

From time to time, she and Tom, all but completely separated by their duties and repair jobs during the time, would share the same look--a knowing, troubled but hidden stare, which between them had come to share everything wordlessly. B'Elanna knew, instinctively, that Tom was probably feeling even guiltier than she was. He had a knack at that.

And he'd only just started sleeping well again... We'd said in the beginning that we needed to balance both worlds, the war and our home...

But she knew they hadn't. She knew, in truth, they never really would.

Chakotay needs us, she thought yet again as she laid her head down on the hard portal surface and closed her eyes. Then she opened them again.

But I want more. Tom and I both need more...

She got back on her hands and knees and started moving. She knew where to go.

"We need to talk," she said quietly, meeting her husband's weary stare when he turned from the open panel in the forward access junction.

She crawled into the tube with him. Her face was probably as dirty as his, her eyes likely as dim with the tiredness of too much work even more thinking--days worth of both, and no time in between it to let it go.

Tom also knew he was reflecting it, judging by how she examined him as she neared.

He drew a heavy breath, scooting himself against the wall and setting aside his tools to make room for her.

"Yeah. We do."

The Maquis captain was dreading what would meet him when he entered his repaired, cleaned and reorganized cargo bay. Looking around the pristine, uninjured scout, he found the people who had called him there--the captain of the Marseilles, his lead pilot, and his head engineer, sitting on two bound cargo cases. They were waiting for him.

The three of them had barely spoken since the Marseilles' return, Chakotay knew. He could attribute that just to business, their need to get the ship back on its feet, their mutual need to concentrate. But that was all it had been--business. There was no banter, no familiar camaraderie in their few

meetings, only orders, updates and acknowledgements before their paths diverged. *And now they're off for home again... Home.*

B'Elanna took a breath, kicked the case at her boot heel lightly. "We're taking these with us," she told him. "While we're home, I can get to work on the new shield array."

Chakotay grinned, actually relieved to hear it. "Sounds good."

"Have a seat?" Tom offered. "B'Elanna and I have a few things we need to discuss with you."

He, but offered his palms to speak first: "Look, I wanted to apologize for coming down on you two when you saved our necks out there."

Tom's eyes didn't waver, but softened; B'Elanna sighed and said, "We know you've been short-handed--and don't think we haven't felt bad about that."

"Putting Krammic's life on our plates was wrong," Tom told him, "but we know you didn't mean to blame us."

Chakotay nodded. "No, I didn't."

"So, we forgive you for that." B'Elanna watched the captain nod again, a little more comfortable, but not entirely so. She waited for his eyes to return to hers, though, before continuing. "Tom and I don't think we've given you any less dedication than we did before."

"Only less of our time," Tom joined, "which you approved." He studied Chakotay's gestured agreement. "Do you regret that? Letting us go more often?"

"Honestly?" he asked. "Yes. I'd be a fool not to want you two here full time. You're my best people. I could survive without you if push came to shove. But I don't want to have to shove anything else."

Tom drew a slow breath, glanced at B'Elanna. She was tense, and trying hard not to show it.

"We *are* Maquis," Tom told him more firmly then, if anything then to drive that knowledge into their captain, in case it wasn't assured before. "The cause you're fighting for is the same one we are--protecting what we have here in the DMZ. The difference is now B'Elanna and I really do have a *reason* to fight besides for revenge. Not that we didn't fight for all the right reasons before, but now we have the same reason as everyone else who's lived here--to protect a world we call our own."

B'Elanna squeezed her husband's hand to jump in. "You and Jenna, and everyone here--you're family to us, and we'll never forget that, however happy we are on Avalor."

She paused there, watched the captain take that in, and then added, "I'll continue to work on replacing some of those systems that keep making me nuts. I'll have the new shield array done in a couple weeks if things go as planned. I'll need another month for the plasma inverters. If we get some coils, I can rebuild the warp drive again."

"The ship might not even survive that long," the captain pointed out.

B'Elanna laughed lightly. "I don't know if that'd be a problem or a relief. Probably a relief. --No insult."

He breathed a half laugh. "None taken. I know what you mean."

"In any case," B'Elanna continued, "from here on, Tom and I are not going to feel guilty for taking that time again. You've been generous in letting us go, but we need to get this straight: When you go off from the bases without us--which was not a part of our original arrangement, by the way--that's your responsibility."

"We agreed on this," Tom said. "We won't leave you when you're in the field, and we'll return as soon as you call us. What you do between then is not our problem." Again, Chakotay grudgingly assented, and Tom nodded slowly back. "There's more."

He wasn't surprised. "Which is?"

"Honestly?" B'Elanna queried. "We need to break off. We'll fight because we know we have to, because it means something and saves lives in the end, and because you need us to."

Chakotay acknowledged her confession with a single nod. "But?"

With a reassuring squeeze from Tom's hand, B'Elanna drew her next breath to finish it. "But...we also need you to let us go. We need you to put us on an on-call basis, indefinitely."

Chakotay's fingers wove together as he slumped a little. They meant it.

"You want your own commissions? To work as agents?"

"Yes," Tom said, adding nothing more.

The captain paused again, seeing all too well why they'd gotten to that point. He'd seen their frustration, heard enough of their dissatisfaction to know that they needed to gain a little more distance. They all knew their rebellion would only become worse. So they were doing what they had every right to: They were trying to assure some control over a situation where little was certain or improving, and would become less cohesive still...

And I might lose them completely if they get any more frustrated.

"You know," he said quietly, "as much as we're family to you, you're the same to me--what I have *left* of family. I do need you. I won't lie about that. But I don't only need you to fight or to fix this ship. You're my closest friends, my counsel. If making something for yourself away from all this is going to help you be the people I care about, then I want you to have that, too. I won't like it, but I'll accept it and help you to it, because I know you've given me everything you could, and still want to."

B'Elanna was visibly relieved, and Tom let out his breath. "Thank you, Chakotay," she said.

"You'll come back as soon as I contact you?"

Tom smiled and nodded. "Deal."

"Good." Chakotay then tapped his COMM band. "Andre, what's our ETA to Vissius?"

"Half hour," Andre returned.

"Thanks." The captain cut the channel and looked at them again. *So, they're agents, now. *My* agents. Might as well get used to that right off.* "Get a list of stores from Jenna before you leave. We'll come and pick it up."

"We'll see what we can grab at the market," Tom nodded.

"Don't take any unnecessary risks this time," Chakotay told him. "B'Elanna, I'll see about those parts. I won't guarantee anything."

"You don't have to--guarantee, I mean. Plans change all the time in the Maquis." She smiled. "That was the *first* thing I learned here."

As their captain stood, B'Elanna felt a odd sort of lightness she hadn't had for a while. They still had the responsibilities of Avalar and their cause with Maquis in tact. But somehow, she felt freed; she felt they both had been. Within that relief, she wondered why she had feared that Chakotay would let her down. He was, when all was said and done, their friend. He was big-hearted enough to let them do as they felt was good for them.

Imagine that, she grinned to herself.

Chakotay looked back to the two, still sitting on the cargo cases they'd be taking home with them, still holding hands but looking to him with a combination of respect and contentment. He could admit to the same feelings himself--or if not contentment, then relief. They were still with him.

A moment later, he imagined several ways their new status might even come in better use. Not being tied to Liberty would leave them open to several options within the sect--and the sect would be more than happy to know they were able to expand their services. In the mean time, he asked, "Do me one more favor?"

"Sure, Chakotay," Tom said.

"Name it," B'Elanna joined.

A grin crossed his lips. "When we drop by, make some of that broccoli. I liked it." He held his hand up to their reply, turning to leave. "See you in a few days."

The very week B'Elanna Torres arrived in the Maquis, she met Thomas Paris. In that first meeting, he told her matter-of-factly that no plan was ever certain in the Maquis.

She saw a lot of proof to that motto not long after--and not only with their constant diversions on the Liberty. The man that had captured her attention and her fancy also succeeded in earning her trust and her love. She certainly hadn't planned on that, becoming his lover, much less still becoming his wife, or settling down with him on a DMZ former colony, or taking control over her life and her living, coming to at least some terms with herself.

To her, the changes in her life had been all but unbelievable. Only that she was living it made it real to her, made her thankful every time she caught her mate's eyes and knew, truly knew, they belonged to each other. Equally gratifying was knowing he felt the same. At the same time, things were finally starting to stabilize. Their lives were becoming normal, and they were growing stronger and more hopeful every day. It was amazing, for certain, but she loved it.

She looked with great pride upon her house the day Chakotay and Jenna arrived. The yard wasn't fully green, but it was well on its way. She and Tom had finished the bedroom--finally, in a last-ditch effort--adding two large picture windows in the front and in the back.

It was Tom's little idea of a joke, even if she liked it.

They'd gone so far as to whitewash the house, erasing what remained of its fire scars, and laser-stain the trim and exposed outer beams to a deep chestnut. Tom replaced the front door to complete the look, using a huge dead tree he'd found and a phaser knife to shear it flat and drill the knob holes.

The whole place was decidedly old-fashioned, an ancient chalet plunked down on a mountainside far away from its original home. They were thrilled with how it turned out.

Even the garden was coming along nicely. Thanks to Schiller's care during their absences and Tom's fussing, not to mention several rains the week before and the temperate weather, the vegetables there were growing quickly. Down the hill on the other side of the house, Isabel and Tom had also started some hybridized vines. They would produce an interesting sort of red grape, Isabel promised, not to mention prevent erosion. As for the rest of the land around them, though the sun quickly dried it out, a flush of short grasses, burgeoning beneath the surface, would be ready to burst when the 'winter' ended. Or so Schiller said.

"Well, what a job you've done!" Jenna cried out as she ran ahead of Chakotay down the trail to her friend, hugging her on arrival. "Oh, it looks wonderful!"

"Thank you," B'Elanna said, hugging Jenna back. "We're definitely pleased."

"You should be," Chakotay said. "I think I'm getting jealous."

B'Elanna laughed. "Well, would you be less jealous if I got you something to drink?"

The captain grinned, a little surprised to see her so relaxed, but relieved all the same. "That might help a little."

Patting his arm, B'Elanna led them into the yard, hopping down the slight incline she'd met them on and flipping her hair out of her face when the breeze came up off the valley. She was getting used to that wind.

She liked that--getting used to things, as it was.

As if designed to spite it, ten hours later, she and Tom walked down that same path in a state of shock after coming home from a short run to pick up a case of isolinear rods dropped off at a barren planet for them. They entered their new bedroom without a word. B'Elanna sat on the edge of the bed, Tom kept moving, toeing off his boots and sliding off his coat. Finally, he looked back to her.

"We're crazy," she said.

"Maybe. Does that bother you?"

It was a good thing, she knew. But it was another change in their lives--a big change they hadn't planned for at all. She wondered if it would be fair, since she and Tom would likely always live on the run, hiding from Starfleet, buried away. How could they bring a child into the middle of all that? At the same time, she knew she and Tom would find a way to manage, as they had since they met. She trusted him. She had come to trust herself, too.

They did want it. They would find a way. They always had.

She held out her hand and beckoned him to their bed. He gladly went with her there.

Twenty-eight hours after that, as she and Tom waved off their friends, whom they would follow in a couple days, B'Elanna knew she shouldn't have expected so much as to be used to anything. After all their hassle and arranging with Chakotay, they'd have to leave the Maquis after all. Worse, they would have to leave the home they'd built together, the world and friends they loved and had become so involved with.

They'd come to that painful conclusion before Chakotay and Jenna left, after having a wonderful lunch and some good laughs. Even their captain, pained anew to know they'd go, had managed to cheer up a little--or at least had his sense of humor knocked back into him by his irascible girlfriend.

He was still sorry to lose them, for the obvious reasons plus some. "With this break period they've been taking," Chakotay said, "we're going to have to be ready once they set their plans into action--which should be soon." He looked at his suddenly sobered friends. "I don't mean to lay any guilt on you, but the rumors are starting to confirm what we've been thinking. The Cardassians are just toying with us right now. Starfleet's in communication with them.

She and Tom did know that. They'd been fighting those skirmishes for the past few months, carefully placed nearer to the Cardassian border, and mostly away from Bajor, where there was a Starfleet presence. Those battle patterns could very easily swing back their way with something as simple as a new offensive on Starfleet's part.

"Avalar's close to the Federation border," the captain continued, "but obviously that hasn't kept the action away, so you're going to need to be careful. If Starfleet doesn't come looking for you, the Cardassians might find another reason to poke their noses into the area again."

Chakotay's reminder of that possibility made B'Elanna's skin crawl, terrified her in a way she'd never felt before.

But as Tom said, she knew, I've never been pregnant before.

Later, when they dared Jenna to tell them, she looked B'Elanna up and down, her cider held in her small fingers as her lips curled upwards. "I'd say a girl. Fifty-fifty chance, I know, but I'm getting a female vibe, here."

A daughter.

A life made from hers and Tom's together, and by his calculation made there on Avalar, was a good thing, a wonderful thing.

The thought of that growing thing inside of her body lit like wildfire in her quick mind. So had a natural protectiveness--a maternal instinct whose suddenness and intensity surprised her as much as it had piqued her common sense. It made her know she would kill and die for that life she'd not yet even met, could not even see or feel, only knew existed. It made her know that their child had to be safe, no matter what.

Leaving any source of possible danger was her first reaction to learning about it. But the idea of it just as quickly broke her heart, and played bitterly across Tom's face.

How in the hell did this all happen to me? she wondered. What's happened to me? And when the hell did I grow up? Get this life? These choices?

In spite of her agreement with Tom that leaving was the safest thing they could do, though, when B'Elanna pictured her unborn child, she imagined a little girl running in their yard, there on Avalar,

getting lost in the grasses yet to grow. She could see a little jumper and small, dirty feet tucked up under her as she got into whatever mischief, playing in the garden, hair all mussed in the breeze coming up from the gorge. B'Elanna could hear a little girl's chirping laughter echo around the yard...

"How about Grinara?" Tom suggested noncommittally.

"Too expensive," she dismissed as blankly, "too close to both borders--not to mention the Ferengi."

"Yeah. Misolos?"

"Too cold."

"Forgot about that. Bokora?"

"Too expensive."

Tom sighed, shook his head. "We still have time to decide."

"True."

They leaned back on the slope below the garden, side by side, taking in the view of the gorge and its river, which flattened out into the south plain. It was almost hard to look at it, yet they remained for some time, both caught in their similar thoughts.

They longed for Avalar before they even were gone from it. But again, they couldn't take the risk, not with a price on both their heads and a child to protect. They would have to disappear to secure their freedom, and do it before any worse could happen to them. They knew they had to. At the same time, they had to convince each other of it, hoping to convince themselves.

"What are we going to do?" B'Elanna asked quietly, looking at him.

He blinked, turned to catch her gaze. "B'Elanna, are you sure you want the baby?"

Slowly, she nodded. "You?"

His lips turned up. "Yeah. I said so last night. I've wanted your children since the day I met you."

"You never mentioned it before."

"I didn't know if we were ready, with everything else going on."

She grinned. "Jenna says you never know if you're ready for a thing until it happens."

"That sounds like her. Doesn't give us any less to think about."

"We still haven't decided on anything."

His fingers touched, then wrapped around hers. "We'll figure it out," he said. "We always do. We'll find a place that's safe and right for us. We still have time to keep looking."

"Sounds good enough, for now."

It was his turn to nod as he watched her eyes drift away again. Her mouth was slightly open, as if wanting to say more. But she remained silent, trying to look away from everything, seemingly for fear

of missing it even more.

Sighing deeply, he rolled onto his side and took her into his warm embrace.

Immediately, she clutched herself to him, buried her head in his collar.

"We'll be okay," he whispered.

She had no choice but to believe that. She wanted to enough. So did he.

They would find a way.

"Hey, hot mama, goin' after daddy?"

B'Elanna laughed, shaking her head as she strode past him with her bag of tools. "Keep it up, Bendera, and you'll have a nice cushy doghouse in the waste extraction room. --Hey, Hogan, finish those ISO bundles yet?"

"On my way to, actually," he called back, then pulled himself up from the hole he was working in. "Hold on, I'll walk you part way. I needed another juncture." The part in his hand, he caught up as she started down the corridor again. "Off already, then?"

"Yes. I don't know how long, though. Keep things in one piece while I'm gone?"

"Are you kidding? With the list you left me to read?"

"You'll need them," she replied with a slightly evil smirk to her lead protégée. Since learning about the baby, knowing they'd be leaving Chakotay for good, she and Tom had actively begun to retrain their people, and even bring in new recruits to fill the void. Of her own staff, Hogan was her best man...for the most part.

Great a guy as Hogan was, B'Elanna seriously knew that nobody could keep that junkpile their captain called a ship in one piece better than she could.

"I won't be around much longer, Frank. Better use me while you've got me."

"Don't tempt me," Hogan said, laughing when she rolled her eyes. "Speaking of which, what's Tom's return time?"

"Tomorrow," she replied, her smile drifting down at the reminder. They'd never gone home separately--even if it'd been necessary for her to prepare those work details for her technicians and for Tom to make that supply run. But she didn't like being away from him, nor him flying the Marseilles without her. Without her, she could only imagine the glorious trouble he was getting into.

"He'll just be by here to drop off his treasure trove before getting back to Avalor." She stopped at a turn in the corridor. "Which is where I'm off to. See you around."

"You too."

"Read all of it, Frank," she ordered as she started away. "I expect you to have that memorized by the time I get back."

"Don't eat too many banana pickle sandwiches while you're gone."

She felt her stomach turn as his laughter echoed behind her. "Bad idea, Frank--taunting a half-Klingon pregnant woman."

"Oh? Should I be scared?" Even as he said it, he knew he might be.

But B'Elanna only smiled and said, "Keep well. I want you alive when I get back."

"Thanks," he chuckled then gave her a nod. "Have a safe trip."

By the time she'd settled herself next to Rodrigo in the tiny squad shuttle they'd recently picked up, her own smile had faded into a small grin. That trip had gone pretty well for a change, with some effective repairs helped along by a break in the action. She could go home without thinking too much about what she was leaving behind.

Even so, it still felt odd, leaving for home without her husband... *God, I am so married*, she remarked to herself, laughing under her breath. The day or so alone would give her some undisturbed time to start on the new shield array they'd been collecting parts for. But she was equally glad he would not be long behind her.

B'Elanna glanced to her side. Andre was quiet but pleasant as usual since the trauma he'd been through. Without more than a few words to Chakotay over the COMM, he took them away from the Liberty and set them into warp. For a good part of their journey, she enjoyed the quietness, watching the stars as they streaked around the viewscreen, then slipped into the rear of the shuttle for a drink. As she popped open the bottle straw, she looked to the younger man again. He still hadn't uttered a word.

"Want something to drink?" she asked.

"No, thank you. Later, maybe."

"Chakotay told me you're taking a break for a while," she said, stretching a little before moving back to her seat, "taking Maïel to your homeworld, I heard?"

Andre's mouth flicked a little. It was hard to tell, if he was smiling or not for the scars still smeared across his face. The doctors had done the best they could with their limited equipment, and Jenna's old-fashioned herb balm had cleared up the red patches a little, but he was still heavily scarred. In truth, he looked like an old man too long in the sun.

"My mother asked me to come," he told her. "She's been ill."

"I hope it's nothing serious."

"No, just a virus. I'm bringing her some medicine, though, just in case. Mariah's going to keep up navigation for the time. I'll tell Tom when he gets back."

"Okay," she acknowledged, turning her eyes back to the viewscreen. "Well, at least it won't be a busy month. After the refit, we're just off to the Macar base in the Badlands. Nothing too much."

"You going to install the new shield array there?"

"Seems like the best place," B'Elanna replied. "Nobody there to distract us there. After that, Tom

and I are probably going to leave."

"For good?"

"Well, for the most part. We'll have to lay low."

"I don't blame you. I'd be doing the same if Maiel was in your shoes. But she can't have children."

B'Elanna nodded at that, then paused on a question, wondering if she should ask. But she was curious, and he was--she believed--enough of a friend that he wouldn't take offense. "Does your family know about what happened to you?"

"I told her," Andre answered. "But I don't think anything's going to prepare her for when I get there. That's why Maiel's coming, too."

B'Elanna gazed steadily at him until he turned to her, and she waited several more seconds for him to look her in the eyes. He rarely looked people in the eyes anymore.

"You always said your mother loved you very much, Andre," she told him, "and I can tell you love her, too. Once she gets over the shock, she'll accept you." Reaching over, she placed a hand on his arm. "It'll be okay. Just give it time--get past the hard part, and you'll be just fine. I know you will."

The young man's eyes fogged a little, and the smile that managed to form on his mouth was a grateful one. "You're a good woman, B'Elanna."

"Not to mention spicy," she quipped, and immediately enjoyed hearing Rodrigo laugh. It'd been a while since she'd heard that. "What, do you think Tom could resist telling me that?"

Andre was still laughing, as if he needed to. "No, I don't think he would." Breathing through the last of his chuckles, he held her eyes for a moment before he spoke again. "You and Tom, I owe you two my life. I'd never been able to figure out how to repay you."

"You don't have to," B'Elanna told him. "You're our friend, Andre."

"You and Tom both," he grinned, shaking his head back to his panel. "Both of you don't make it easy for a man to be thankful. Even looking like this, I'm glad I'm alive, if only for such friendship."

"You won't always have to have the scars," she insisted. "Tom's always on the lookout for medical supplies. I know he's still got dermal regeneration plates on his list. You know he won't stop 'till he finds them."

His nod was cursory, though he said sincerely, "You two are too good to me. Whether or not you like it, I'm going to do something for you."

B'Elanna wanted to tell him no again, yet she withheld it, swallowing one mode of manners for another. "If it'll make you happy, Andre, then we'd be honored. --Just don't put yourself out."

"It'll be my gift to you, not an inconvenience."

She smiled, settled back into her chair. "You're a good man, too, Rodrigo. Your mother loves you for good reason."

"She raised me well, then," he replied, his grin settling as his eyes turned back out to the viewscreen.

From there, they merely shared the silence. Neither seemed to mind it that time.

Several hours later, after warmly bidding farewell to her friend, B'Elanna materialized on the edge of her land, seeing her house first, and the sun setting over the back of it. Then she felt the lingering warmth of the day that was just about to pass.

She did not walk inside immediately, but simply took in the beauty of the brightly hued sky and the willowy fronds of the tree beside it blowing in the breeze. The air, as usual, smelled of the sandstone, sweet, cool and wet, and of a scented variety of moss that had been growing higher up, near the lake.

B'Elanna felt her heart flutter as she took it all in. *We can't leave this place*, she told herself. She and Tom had known it all along, but then, feeling her world around her, she couldn't try to fool herself into anything else. *Not yet. Maybe we can wait a while longer...as long as it's safe...*

The wind picked up again, dry and cool with the fading sunlight. Shivering a bit, she moved herself into her house. She set her gear down near the back of the room where the rest of her equipment sat waiting for assembly, called for the lights and activated the fireplace--another compromise of sorts with the house. Tom had wanted to make a real wood hearth, but after several discussions on the matter, they agreed to save that for the kitchen mantle.

She went into the kitchen and powered up the replicator. She wasn't too hungry, but she knew she should eat. Jenna told her she had to keep something down to keep her from getting queasy, and so far, the advice had usually been helpful. Staring at the machine for a minute, she finally decided on plain tea and wheat crackers. As it generated and materialized--slowly--B'Elanna thought the next good investment for the house would be a new replicator.

A minute later, she justified it by thinking they could take it with them when they had to leave, but then growled at the idea. She didn't want to think about leaving. *Work should keep my mind off it*, she thought, glancing back to the small piles of junk outside the kitchen door.

She nibbled on a cracker, just enough to coat her stomach, then took a sip of tea. Thinking she could handle a bit more, she leaned on her counter, stared out the window at the dark orange sun, setting in Vaslas Rise well beyond the plain.

She'd been there with L'Vos, checking out the old planetary power assembly. They'd be making another trip out there soon, once the house was done and they could move on to greater things. She wondered if the silver clover the L'Vos mentioned had come up yet. She was curious to see it.

The sunset poured in through the picture window, warm on her face. Entranced by the sight, her stare growing heavy, she finished all her crackers and half her cup, leaving her rather proud of herself. It'd been a couple weeks since she'd eaten very much at all, and all of that had been with encouragement. A little rejuvenated, she became anxious the start the isolinear grids, and so left the kitchen to change her clothes and wash her face before starting. She knew herself well enough that she would stay up well past midnight working on it.

Entering the bedroom, she slowed then stopped. Her work for the moment vanished from her mind.

"Andre," she whispered, her face growing into a wide grin.

In the center of the bedroom sat an intricately carved bassinet, hung on a trellis of wrought metal and made up with pretty blankets and thick lace pillows.

B'Elanna let out her breath, too surprised to laugh. Approaching it, she saw a note on the pillow. She picked it up and read:

Hanek Season
2371

Tom and B'Elanna,

My gift to you for your friendship and courage, your perseverance and generosity. One day, your child and any others that follow, will learn this of you, which makes me glad for the future.

For my life, and many things that are good in it because of you, I pray to those who bore us that the life you bring is joyous, and brings you joy.

You will be missed when you are gone, but I will smile, always, knowing that you are happy, creating and living with that which you love, and, most of all, living in peace.

Your friend,

Andre

Smiling at the letter, B'Elanna reached out and caressed the soft cloth inside the bassinet. A light rose with white flowers in a fluffy knit, she could feel its warmth only in touching it, imagined a baby snuggled within it, the blanket tucked up around her little girl as she slept, rocking gently...

From the bed her child would someday sleep within, her eyes fell across the room, to the bureau they found in somebody's underground storage in the city. It was where they'd gotten their few pieces of furniture, and helped others replace theirs. She went to it and pulled out some leggings and a shirt from the drawers, changed her clothes in silence. After folding her work clothes, she moved to get a sweater from another drawer. Then she stopped.

Barely thinking, she instead chose a folded palette of cloth, wrapped around an akoonah and a few personal items. Cradling the bundle in her arms, she took herself back into the living room.

Before the hearth, she sat, set out what she needed. It had been a while, at least a few months since she'd "visited." Neither she nor Tom had ever made it a routine, though she knew Tom had been the one to frequent the meditations lately. Thinking briefly on it, she knew it was before they'd come to Avarar, the last time.

That evening, alone in her house, it was her turn.

Thankfully, she had no problem with it, had no need for preparation or relaxation techniques, only that need to do it in the first place. That was unusual, though she didn't give that much thought, either. Instead, she placed her fingers on the device and released her breath with the words that she had been taught, and had finally become comfortable to her...as did her request of knowledge, within

herself.

Some time later, B'Elanna opened her eyes upon the fire, removing her fingers from the device. For some time, she didn't move.

When she did, it was slowly, easily. She returned to the bedroom, stood at the door for nearly a minute before going in. That time, she allowed the fear, the uncertainty and the nervousness. She also, finally, let herself feel the happiness that she knew was there, too, the anticipation, the desire, the hope. She allowed it all, and stepped within her bedroom again.

Again, she looked inside the infant bed and decided it should stand out from the east corner. It was too much of Andre, she thought, far too extravagant a thing for a Maquis to procure. And yet she had to admit, especially to herself, that she was anxious to fill it, even if for only a short time on that beautiful world she truly had claimed, she loved without doubting. She wanted to be able to, and hoped Tom would agree.

Yet even as she retired later that night, curled up on Tom's pillow, staring at Andre's generous gift, she fell to sleep knowing they would find a way to work it all out, and that she was truly thankful for Andre's gift. It was that simple.

Tom shared that gratitude, too, when he arrived the next afternoon, after they sat down to share an early dinner and catch up a little. She waited until he had eaten to speak with him, though, let him come down from his trip and tell her about his missions--which were as mischievous as she'd predicted they would be.

When she did finally tell him about what their friend had been up to, he immediately got up to see it. His face lit with his smile as he looked at the fine workmanship, felt the soft blanket and pushed the swing a little. At the base to the trellis stand, he saw Andre's signature. "I thought so," he said.

"What?"

"Andre made this himself," Tom explained. "His father taught him how to wield iron when he was a boy. Remember? He's from Jaros-three."

"You mean he *made* this for us?" B'Elanna asked, shocked. She looked the bassinet over again. "This must have taken so much time! And where did he manage to stow it? I can't even imagine..."

"It took a lot more time than anyone knew you were pregnant," Tom pointed out, "considering how much time he had off with us gone."

B'Elanna still couldn't believe it, circling the beautiful creation once again. Finally, she just shook her head, returning to Tom to wrap her hand in his. "Amazing."

"We'll have to do something special for him when we all get back together."

"Before we retire."

"Yeah," Tom said quietly. He tugged on her hand. "Want to have that walk now? See the wildflowers?"

She nodded. "I'd like that."

"Tom! B'Elanna!"

"You two up yet?"

They looked up from their work and to each other at the sound of their friends' voices. B'Elanna immediately smiled, pushing herself up from her knees, anxious to show Isabel the bassinet. Tom followed along, wondering if he should replicate more coffee. Hesitating a moment, he finally decided to ask. It was pretty late in the morning, after all. Maybe cider would be better.

By the time he got out of the door, though, B'Elanna had let out a yell and was already hugging Isabel. "How great for you!"

"You are nothing if not contagious," Isabel giggled, "and so we can be totally clueless together, now."

Tom furrowed his brow and looked at them all askance. "What's going on?"

Azro, not a tall man, may well have been a meter higher for his posture when he smiled at his neighbor. "Isabel and I are expecting our firstborn."

Tom laughed aloud and went to shake the man's hand. "Congrats, Azro! --Isabel, that's great." He leaned over and gave her a peck on the cheek. "How many weeks?"

"Only four--we'll be a bit behind you," Isabel told them. Still holding B'Elanna's hands, she gave them a squeeze. "They'll almost be born toge--" She stopped, apologizing with a look. "Well, you might be gone by then."

Tom and B'Elanna glanced at each other then grinned at them again. "Actually," Tom said, "B'Elanna and I decided last night we'll wait around a little longer, unless something comes up. We really don't want to leave, not if we don't have to."

Isabel might have cried when she yanked B'Elanna back into her arms. "Oh, my friends! I'm so happy you said that!"

B'Elanna coughed a little upon her friend's enthusiastic hug. "We're happy we decided." She backed up, though, to stare her neighbor solidly in the eyes. "If or when the fight turns back to us, we will leave--don't mistake that. But for the mean time, we do want to stay."

"Then we'll be having our babies together," Isabel decided. "And whatever my mother didn't tell me, we'll have to complain about on our own terms."

"Actually, Tom...picked up some literature to study."

Isabel's brows rose. "Baby books?"

"Baby books," Tom confirmed with a grin, "obstetrics made easy and postnatal insomnia--basically everything I could get my hands on."

B'Elanna rolled her eyes. "Obstetrics made easy? That's one I'd like to see. --Come on in and have something to drink. Jenna gave me a list of selections that keep the nausea down."

"Oh, I'd like to know about that!" Isabel said emphatically.

"Already?"

Isabel gave her a look. "How do you think we found out?"

"Why does that sound familiar?" B'Elanna rejoined. "Well, come on, and I'll make a copy of the recipe while we're there."

With a gesture from the latter, Tom and Azro stayed behind in the yard as the women went in. Gesturing to the table, Tom led the other man to sit. Azro settled himself with a breath of relief through his impenetrable smile, though his eyes followed his wife until she went indoors.

"How you handling it?" Tom asked, likewise blessed with a grin and a greedy stare, though far more knowingly. B'Elanna had pointed the silly expression out to him several times.

Azro drew a full breath. "I'm in shock--and I'm worried." He looked at Tom. "You're a lot more a doctor than anyone here, Tom. Captain Chakotay said you're a great medic."

Tom just shrugged. "I've picked more up than I learned, really." He eyed the other man. "You want me to help with Isabel's care?"

"I'd really appreciate it if you could."

"Not a problem," Tom replied easily. "In the meantime, I do have some studying to do. There aren't many babies born on Maquis ships. I've seen two deliveries--in bunkers. But that's about it. Mainly the women are doing the work and we're just there to play catch, or handle anything that might come up. --That's all aside from raising it..."

Both men silenced, caught on that thought--fatherhood. Tom, a little more used to the idea by then, grinned first, Azro following not long after.

"It should be..." Azro started; then he laughed. "It *will* be scary as hell, as you put it."

Tom chuckled. "Yeah, that just about says it. But I can't wait, you know? I won't know what I'm doing, but it's exciting to think about.."

"Well, I just hope I'm somewhere as good a father as my own father was. He was a rock of strength for us all, a fine example."

"Sounds like how my mother was," Tom said.

"Your mother, my father. We lost our mother when I was young. I only remembered my father taking care of the four of us. He gave up so much to give us a good life." Azro looked over towards the gorge. "That's why we came here from Bokora, became Federation citizens, so he could take the time to be with us."

Tom nodded solemnly. He already knew that Azro's father and older sister were both killed in the attack. The other brother lived at a Federation base and the last belonged to a science team that traveled extensively, thus both had remained out of contact with their brother. Tom had managed to sneak a letter through--coded, of course, but he was pretty certain the notes had gotten to them. Essentially, though, Azro had been cut off.

"What about your family, Tom? You never speak of them."

His hands dropped into his coat pockets. "Well, after Mom died a couple years ago, my family and I...split ways. We weren't really communicating before then, so it wasn't much of a change. That was

partially my fault, I admit. Anyway, I haven't been in contact with them since I left Earth, and there's no way I could now, considering."

Azro considered what he had been told for several seconds. "Have you brothers or sisters?"

"Two sisters. My father's still alive, too. That's my immediate family."

A little taken by Tom's sudden offhandedness, even coolness, Azro blinked at his first curiosity. "Don't you love them?"

Tom honestly had to think before he answered. "Well, my sisters, sure. My father... Well, Dad's a little tricky. He and I had disagreed on a lot of things. Well, I wouldn't even call it that. Basically, I let him railroad me a lot into what he wanted, and I wound up hating him and myself for it. That's pretty much in the past, though. I've come to terms with a lot while I've been gone..." He breathed a small laugh, knowing he'd said more than he wanted to, but glad he hadn't made a total mess of it. "Yeah, I guess I love him. Why?"

"It's just too bad that you can't talk to him. I can't imagine not having had my father there for me when I was younger. I wish he were here to guide me now. I may have his soul within me, as the souls of all my ancestors. Still, it's not the same as having him *by* me as he was." Willfully breaking that thought, though, Azro looked at Tom again and smiled. "But that's what friends are for, now, isn't it?"

Tom nodded assuredly. "You bet. --And we'll start with the texts."

"I know nothing about medicine, Tom!"

The younger man grinned. "But you will. Speaking of studying, has L'Vos sent you any of the data on the polyduranide composites from the Seti-moon?"

"He said they'd come tonight. He had a power failure at his house. --I know. We need to get that grid stabilized."

"The sooner the better." He sighed. "When B'Elanna and I have to leave, I'll make a point of stopping by one of the junk depots for a conversion grid. Maybe we can soup it up one of the Marseilles' distributors and use that in the interim. I mean, we're only supporting fifty-one people right now. We shouldn't be having these..."

Azro began to laugh, more to himself than anything as he shook his head. "What?" Tom asked.

He just shook his head. "You and B'Elanna and your causes. You two are the most tenacious people I have known, on or off the farms."

Tom shrugged. "Once we get our mind on something, we like to follow through with it."

The other man nodded. "True enough. True enough. I think that's a very good idea. Then all we'll need are those extraction tools for the mining."

"I'll see what I can find," Tom said. "They won't be tools, Azro. It'll be mining equipment. I might be able to scrape up something else later on."

"I'm sure you will," Azro chuckled. "You probably won't rest 'till you've gotten it, I'm sure. And I'm thankful. We all are."

The pilot merely shook his head and replied, "This is our world too, you know. You don't have to be grateful for anything."

"Tom, Azro? Want some coffee?" They looked over to B'Elanna, standing in the door of the house, one hand perched on the heavy wood door, the breeze blowing into the house, onto her. "We've got some issues to discuss with the paternal side of this delegation," she teased.

Looking at her, Tom knew his dumb grin had returned. Since they'd come to Avalor, her dark curls had been touched reddish with the sun, and her skin had grown warm and rosy. Both features were complimented by the teal green tunic suit she'd chosen that day, which cut held her small body so perfectly, Tom had to draw a breath against his first and natural reaction.

Wonder if telling to Osols to get their coffee and scam would be rude, he thought wryly.

"Coffee sounds great."

B'Elanna blinked at the gaze her husband was giving her. She knew *that* look as well as the others, even across the yard. More than ever, too, it warmed her immediately, made her shiver with the promise that stare afforded.

She drew a deep breath, steadying her tone with it. "Well, come inside, then," she said, a bit more softly. "Isabel wants a dual shower--at *your* house, Azro."

Azro shook his head, peered up to Tom. "How did I know it would happen?" he chuckled and got to his feet. "Coming, then."

B'Elanna nodded, gave Tom one more look before heading back in ahead of them. That gaze of his still played in her mind, however, and not regretfully. *It's a nice enough day for a swim,* she smiled to herself and strode back through to her kitchen.

"Hey," B'Elanna said softly, turning onto her side to look at Tom, whose eyes were pinned on the clouds above, as they had been for some time since they came out of the water.

They'd been going swimming a lot since they'd gotten back, but usually, Tom liked to take a nap after, bask in the sun a while and just go to sleep. But that day, he just stared at the sky. Fortunately, it didn't look like something bad had put his thoughtfulness there, from what she could see.

"Hmm?"

"What's going on in there?"

He was quiet for another moment, taking in the rich, moist air, and then letting it out again. "I was thinking about my father."

"What about him?"

"He hasn't seen me in two years," Tom said, laughed shortly. "I wonder if he'd even recognize me now--or if he'd let go of what I was before."

B'Elanna thought about that, then shrugged. "I don't know. You never can tell how or if someone's

going to change."

"I've pretty much forgiven him. I think the harder part of that was forgiving myself. Even so, whether or not he forgives me in return, I can't help but wonder what he'd think if he could see me now."

"I've wondered what my mother would think of me," B'Elanna admitted. "I mean, when we saw K'Karn, and he said he'd tell Mother about me, I couldn't help but wonder if what he said would make a difference."

"I don't know, either. You remember Tommy Harlowe? Jenna's oldest?"

"I remember seeing him once."

"He said all the way back then that I should write my family," Tom mused, "that since I'd changed so much, they should know I was doing better. I wasn't ready then."

"And now?"

He drew another deep breath. "I still don't know. I'm not scared of how he'll react, really. It's not like I'm there to hear about it. But I don't know if I'm ready to tell him all that happened since I left. All I'd really want to tell him about is you, and the baby. He ought to know about that... But that wouldn't be enough, B'Elanna. If I went that far, I'd have to tell him everything, and I don't know how I'd even begin. Writing it out...finalizes it somehow. I...I wouldn't know how to start. Guess I'll just have to think about that a little more."

She sighed softly, turning onto her stomach. Propping herself up on her elbows, she looked out towards the rocks piled high around the perimeter of the lake's wide, sandy shore, much covered with moss by then. Some strange looking grassy flowers were beginning to pop up from between those rocks. She barely focused on them, however, as her thoughts began to take over. The colors merged, the patterns between rock and grass blended, as her gaze revealed more of what was behind her eyes, not before them.

"The night before you got home," she whispered, "I took a vision quest."

Tom looked over at her. "You haven't in a while."

"I felt a weird need to, I guess," she said. "I saw..." She paused. "...I saw us here, Tom. I saw us and everyone else here--the Osols, Andre, our parents, our baby, Chakotay and Jenna... Everyone was here, and Avalor was recovered. The plain was green and the city horizon was gone. There were trees--roses in the side patch, just like you've wanted. Even the backwaters to Lake Koellin had filled in..."

Tom grinned slightly. "I can picture that even without going there. It'll be nice to see someday."

She smiled. "It was beautiful, and we were so happy, laughing... But then it all disappeared. When I'd felt so happy and full before, I suddenly felt very alone...scared. I asked where it'd all gone, and my guide told me I only needed to keep walking. I said I couldn't see it, and she told me to open my eyes."

B'Elanna turned her head to look at Tom. His returning stare melted into her. "Then, you were there with our baby. You took my hand, and we started walking, around and around in nothing. We passed people by, but there wasn't anything else around us."

"I asked you where our home was, and you said we'd find it, that we just had to keep going. That's how it ended, with us just walking. I was scared, Tom, I felt like... I felt like I wanted to run, but I couldn't, and the ground was disappearing under my feet. I wanted to go back. But the whole time, I could feel your hand, and my guide said before I pulled out of it that I would always return home if I only remained."

Tom kept her gaze steadily, though he squinted a little with the last statement. "What do you suppose that means?"

She shrugged. "Maybe that I'm afraid of going back to how things were, or that I'm too scared of losing this place, or you, or the others, to see that it'll be taken away."

"Could be any of those," he admitted.

"Given my state of mind though," B'Elanna told him, "I think I'm just scared of having to start all over again. Things have changed so much for me, Tom--for you, too, I know. But I'd never been good about changes in my life, never handled newness well. You're about the only thing I think I've ever not minded rushing into my life, even then I was scared of it. With you, I always felt like I could let go and get on with things--you made me believe that I had at least one thing in my life that was going to last. I still believe that. But after a while, I started to think that that could apply to other things, too."

"So I claimed one thing, set my heart on this one thing--our home. It was a fight and a struggle, and it all paid off. We've done so much here, and will..." She breathed in awe of that. "I never thought I could have things like what we've made for ourselves. But now I'll have to give it up, start over again."

Tom nodded with his eyes alone. "It won't necessarily be for forever if we have any luck."

"I don't know if I can afford that kind of hope," B'Elanna said, grinned slightly, "though we both know I will, anyway. I'll want it to be true no matter how pessimistic I get. I...I just don't want to be disappointed."

Sighing at that, her eyes turned back to the rocks, tracing the lines of green against the sandstone with her sharp, dark stare. "There's so much pain around us," she said quietly. "Look at Andre, having to go home to his mother like he is. Jenna, Chakotay--almost everyone in the Maquis has lost so much. Everyone here has, too. I wonder if they think about it as much as I do."

"Probably," Tom said. "I know I do."

"I wonder if they have the same hopes, or gave them up."

"I'd like to think people hope for better. But the way things have been going, I wouldn't be surprised if there's a lot of disillusioned people out there, too. God knows I've been there."

She nodded and, without thinking much, moved herself halfway on top of Tom, putting her arms on either side, her hands casually on his shoulders. She felt his hand sink into her hair and smiled. He was warm and dry and comfortable, unlike the hard ground had been on her elbows.

"You know how much I love you, right?" she asked.

"Yes."

B'Elanna gave him a squeeze, relaxed again. "Then you can imagine how empty things would be if

something took you away from me?"

"I don't like to think about that, but yes. I can imagine it... I'll never leave you B'Elanna, you know that."

She touched his face, smiled sadly. "But you can still be taken away. Nothing is certain...and I hate it. I'm afraid of it."

"I know..." He shook his head. "I still don't like to think about it."

"We can't really control anything, except for what we do," she continued. "Avalar can be taken away whether or not we leave it, anything we have can."

He drew a breath. "So you want to hold on to whatever you can. I can understand that."

She nodded. "I know we could live anywhere, Tom. I *would* live anywhere with you. But this is our home, our *real* home. We made it together, and I think it'll always be ours, even if we're away."

Again, a small grin found his lips as he stared tenderly at his wife. "Yeah."

B'Elanna quieted, lowered her head again. The sun grew pleasantly hot on her back and her hair. The latter slightly was slightly cooled as Tom ran his fingers slowly through it, slowly drawing out the locks, only partially dry, into the air and letting them fall upon her shoulders again, waiting patiently for knots, it seemed.

"Are you going to write your father?"

"Maybe. I still don't know what to say."

She paused. "I should write my parents, too. Just in case something ever happens to me, I want them to know, about you, the baby, what'd become of me. I don't like to think they would *never* find out, for whatever reason. They deserve to know."

It was true. Tom knew that he'd tensed with her statement even without his imagination laying in the gruesome details of why their families would remain ignorant. But he couldn't deny it was a good idea. "Then we'll leave letters behind us, just in case."

"And maybe someday we'll send them?"

Tom nodded. "Sounds like the best way to start. Honestly, I'd hate to die in a vacuum with them."

"I've only just learned how to trust what I'm doing with my life--our lives. But you know, you and I have been doing some pretty...brave things." She pulled herself up to look at him. "I want my mother to know I'd finally gotten enough guts to do something with myself that mattered. I think she'd like that."

Tom gave her a hug. "I think so, too," he told her sincerely. "But I thought you meant both your parents."

"I'll send a note to my father, too. But I really don't know him--even if that's partially my fault, too. Still, he'll be easier to write than my mother, even if I know what I want to tell her. She and I fought when I left...I said a lot of things that were pretty bitter."

"Well, we've got time to figure it all out."

B'Elanna drew a breath. "But I already have. I just need to write it."

Slowly, Tom nodded. "So do I."

"Got it?"

"I'm fine, you go ahead." With a kiss to her brow, Tom left for the trail, tools in a hand in the morning sun. B'Elanna turned back to her main room and crossed her arms to see what she'd completed during their layover. Pursing her lips, she decided that the mainframe should be transported in first, and then the completed assemblies. They'd be easier to unpack on the Liberty that way.

Moving to her corner 'office,' she began to set the coordinates on a mobile panel she and Tom had set into the wall. When they got the parts and the time, they planned to build a small addition off that of the house and put the whole system in that space. They had yet to decide on where to put the baby's room.

Their COMM beeped just as she'd begin the transports, and she leaned aside to tap it on. "I'm a little busy," she said outright.

It was L'Vos. "Sorry about that."

"That's okay," B'Elanna replied, still concentrating on her work. "What can I do for you?"

"I was wondering if you might add some opti-cables to your list."

"Don't tell me you've lost another cluster," B'Elanna said and shook her head. "What I'll do is just replace your ODN frame. It'll save time."

"That's a lot more--"

"We'll be passing by some wastrels when we leave. It's no problem."

L'Vos' smile was audible. "Thanks, B'Elanna. Regards to Tom, yes?"

She grinned. "I'll tell him, L'Vos."

He clicked out and she sent the last two stacks to the Marseilles' lower cargo room. Done with that, she turned and smiled at the little that remained. Working together, she and Tom had gotten a lot done during their evenings and on one rainy day. A couple more days and they might finish all the inverters. At the same time, she wondered if Chakotay could do without a couple at first. She wanted, after all, to have a couple evenings where she and Tom could simply relax. They could make the last modifications and install the inverters once they got to the Badlands with little else to do.

What a luxury... When am I going to start feeling bad about that? They'll be out there fighting, struggling--will I ever... No. I'll always feel like I could be doing more... Maybe we'll find a way to do more from here or wherever we may be without attracting attention.

Despite the tug that put in her, B'Elanna didn't hesitate to fold away the panel, grab their sample

bags and head outside to catch up with Tom. They'd wanted to plan some trails and collect seeds while they were there, and the day was perfect for it. There was no sense in wasting a moment on things she couldn't do anything about.

After several minutes of climbing, she found Tom near the cavern, raking a small pile of rocks off to the side. He'd already cleared about fifteen meters. "How about a break?" she said.

As if on cue, he dropped his rake. "Love one."

She reached out, snagging his hand to lead him back to the flower patch. En route, she told him about L'Vos, and her solution to his problem, which Tom agreed with emphatically. "If he had to replace his rods two more times, he'll have a whole new unit as it is!"

Enjoying the respite, he collected the blooms into the stasis dishes B'Elanna brought, then decided they should search for more over the next rise. They'd found some succulents there that Schiller said made great juice, and had asked if they could collect.

B'Elanna knelt on the ground next to Tom while he dug out the cuttings and tubers, as Schiller had directed him to. But instead of watching his progress, B'Elanna took to watching Tom. His face had earned a golden tan with all the sun, his fine features and lean body were nicely defined with hard work and regular meals--not to mention good sleep. He hadn't woken up overnight in a couple weeks. Already, the shadows were gone from his eyes, and he was so relaxed and easy, even at work on the Liberty of late.

Even there, digging up the thick yellow succulents, he grinned casually, not feeling any need to rush the work, knowing it wasn't his specialty but he had taken an interest to as a practical hobby. His strong, slender fingers pushed away the sandy dirt with an odd grace that usually blessed control panels. Occasionally, he'd look back to her, and she'd smiled at the spark that met her. In that glance, B'Elanna knew he was happy.

She was thankful she'd been right in the beginning.

She could even say for herself that Avarar had done her a world of good, too--in spite of the initial stress they dealt with in coming there. Even as she was beginning to feel some of the daily effects of her pregnancy, starting the day with the hypospray and forcing herself to keep food on the stomach, she yet never felt more relaxed, and more at ease with herself and the people around her. Or maybe it was because of it somehow. Also, while she was careful to use a skin protector, she knew the sun and air had made her look better, healthier. She noticed every time she looked at herself, which was far more often and appreciatively of late than ever in her life.

Once Tom was done with his cuttings, had everything packed and ready to take back, he stood and helped B'Elanna up. "I think that's enough seed for now," he said.

"True. It'll be good to get something to drink, too."

He nodded, and they set off back over the rise and back to their path to the house. "Are you hungry yet? Maybe I can make you a sandwich?"

B'Elanna gave that a moment to sink in. "How about that stuff you gave me the other day--peanut butter?"

"P-B on sourdough? Sure. Lots of protein in that."

B'Elanna rolled her eyes. "You're not going to get obsessive about my health now, are you?"

"I've got to take care of what seed pods I can," he drawled, squeezing her hand.

She laughed and shook her head. "Fine. P-B on sourdough, then." She let him--again--help her over a tree trunk, grinning at his gentlemanly bow as she came over. She'd never really admitted it, but she loved the way he looked when he did those chivalrous things.

Her eyes caught an orange spot in a crop of green and she paused. "Tom, what's that?"

He furrowed his brow. "I don't know. Berries, it looks like. We'll ask Schiller when we take him the margrow."

Again, she watched him kneel and take some samples. "You're really turning into a farmer, you know," she commented.

He grinned. "Well, I guess the little experience I had paid off. Mom and I used to do things like this in the garden, before I got on the parises squares team. She taught me how to cut different kinds of stems to propagate them, how to keep them..." He stopped there, but snapped his attention back to finish taking the samples and closing them into the plates.

Sitting back on his foot, his eyes set straight ahead, his grin ebbed a bit. In a long pause there, the wind rushed up and around them, then died away as he bent up to feel the sun then turned his head down again. His face filled with thought, and seemed caught on one when he let his gaze drift over the stones below him.

Then he said, "I miss her."

B'Elanna lowered herself beside him. "I'm sorry I never knew her," she said softly.

"Mom would have adored you," he assured her. "She was so giving, always busy, but she always took the time out whenever you needed her to. She had about a billion hobbies; you never knew what she was up to, but you knew she was always busy with something. And her voice, it was like...very melodic, expressive. Even when she was joking... I loved listening to her. She always wore this perfume, smelled like powder and lilacs--there's no other way to describe it... I remember so many things about her like that. You'd have liked her a lot."

Her lips turned upwards; she took his hand. "I think so, the way you talk about her."

He drew a long breath, as if testing the scent of the air, and looked up at the sky. The sky of his world. "Whether or not he resented me," he whispered, "Dad lost her and me at the same time. My sisters did, too."

Their eyes met again.

"I've denied being a lot of things," he added, "but I can't say I've never been selfish."

That time, B'Elanna was the one to stand and help him up.

They found themselves at the table not long after, in the mid-afternoon sun with the breeze slowly ebbing. Having gone inside for something to drink, they noticed the writing PADDs on B'Elanna's 'desk,'

picked them up and gravitated to the table outside.

He'd decided to write his letter with the electronic stylus. B'Elanna chose to type hers out on a standard PADD, which could be translated to Klingon when it got to the Homeworld.

Tom almost started, but then he looked up. "You know the stardate?"

"48274," B'Elanna answered. "That's what it was when I last looked."

She started hers first, carefully but without much emotion. He felt no need to keep up with her in any way. He thought it over, let his eyes drift from the PADD to her, out onto the yard, past it to the gorge. His stylus rested gently in his long fingers as he simply stared.

After some time, Tom blinked slowly and, shrugging to himself, set himself to writing.

Long after B'Elanna finished, he still wrote, not stopping but to pause briefly, a wistful grin playing on his lips as his eyes drifted away. A minute later, he continued.

Looking at him, bent slightly over the PADD, resting on his other elbow, looking up from time to time, eyes lost in memory but somehow not conflicted with it, B'Elanna felt a fullness in her heart, knowing what a thing he was doing. She had, too. They were finally, irrevocably, letting go.

She also knew what a thing they'd done: Healed.

But they had plenty of time to think on that for themselves. At that moment, she was thirsty, and Tom probably was too. The sun had been a dry one that day.

"I can't believe that water's risen so high!" B'Elanna exclaimed, walking right down to the edge of the shore.

"It's incredible," Tom agreed. "Isabel, you must be thrilled."

She indeed was smiling. "By the time I'm about due, I'm hoping the trees will have recovered a little." She reached out for B'Elanna's hand. "Come see. There's some sprigs coming out over here. Did you go out to the Losael's?"

"Yesterday. Amik's growing like a weed. She nearly knocked me over when Tom and I got there."

"Good food and Aldebaraan physiology will do that to you," Isabel grinned. "Is Prisva all right? She hasn't called."

"Just busy with the new couplings," B'Elanna shrugged. "We must have spent an hour getting the old power grid out. The house needs a complete rewiring."

"That makes fifteen now."

B'Elanna snorted. "You mean fifteen primary engineering students."

Laughing, Isabel pointed them around to the patch. Finding the saplings, B'Elanna stared at the flush of life pushing through the remaining soot. Everything, everywhere, seemed to be growing lately. This continually amazed the engineer, who was still too used to having to make things work by her own

hand to realize some things managed to burgeon on their own.

"They'll grow in no time at that rate," B'Elanna breathed, and looked back towards the lake, which was somewhat cleaner even without the water treatments it would soon receive. To the side, Tom and Azro jumped up on the docks, talking about boats they could someday get, a thought that brought a wry smirk to B'Elanna's lips.

"There goes ten strips of latinum for parts and materials--and two days to fixing up that engine we found."

Isabel giggled. "Well, they might have fun. Azro loved boating before the attack."

"Actually, I wouldn't mind going out, too. I used to like sailing--but I want to buy the materials."

"Maybe when you get back? How long will you stay, then?"

B'Elanna shrugged. "This upcoming trip is probably going to be the last, actually. Chakotay asked us to come on this one since it's an important one. We have to check on some of our posts, ones that are out of the way, make sure they've got what they need. Plus, I have the new shield array to install. It'll be long but busy. Then Tom and I will probably be retiring--or maybe one trip after that, depending how I'm feeling."

"Then you'll be home for good?"

"Probably, and we'll stay until the offensives turn back this way--if they do. But that could be three months or three years from now. We only expect there'll be a new strike. We just don't know where. That's why we'll be gone so long. We need to secure those perimeter hideouts."

Isabel caught that peculiar expression again on her friend's face--a small smile of confidence and hesitance below a darting stare. She knew B'Elanna pretty well by then, or at least well enough to see behind her straight posture and plain words. And she'd met Captain Chakotay. A good man, Isabel believed, and much respected by B'Elanna and Tom.

"You're afraid they still need you too much?" she ventured.

"With the new shields, they'll be safer," B'Elanna said, but then sighed. "I guess I'll always worry about them. A lot. I hate to think about what could happen to him or Jenna. They're our best friends. But the Liberty has as good a crew as Chakotay can get right now. Frank's coming along in engineering and Andre's really become a great pilot--you remember I told you about him, our friend that was injured?"

"Yes. And he made you that bassinet. I'm still thinking about how lovely it is."

"I wake up staring at it," B'Elanna admitted. "It really was too much... Maybe I should invite him and Maiel down for one of their layovers. He'd always supported Tom and I when we were going back and forth, and I think he'd enjoy it."

"I'd like to meet them," Isabel said. "It'll be a comfort, that you'll stay in contact with your friends to some degree."

"We'll always be at least a little involved with what they're doing, if only keeping track of them."

"It's hard to leave people to go their way," Isabel agreed.

"Tell me about it," B'Elanna nodded. "But you know, sometimes you have to fight for things by walking away, do what you can for yourself, so you'll be able to help others later on. At least, that's how I like to think about it right now."

"True enough, you can't rule the universe," Isabel smiled.

"As much as I'd like to," B'Elanna quipped. "At least that way, I have some control over things."

"Better to have some control than none."

B'Elanna stared out to the blue-gray expanse before them, stepped around a bend in the shore. "I just wish this damned war would end, that everybody would just back off and leave the DMZ to itself, not give us a reason to fight."

"That would be a nice DMZ to live in, if it existed," Isabel smiled. "Best you just stay here."

B'Elanna grinned. "No, it's a nice thing to hope for. I think it could happen, someday."

"Yes. It just might," Isabel said, turning her own eyes out to her lake.

They awoke in their embrace, and nuzzled for many minutes before committing to the idea of getting up. Then they decided they might wait a bit longer. They'd planned a trip to collect salt and study minerals with the Osols. Tom also wanted to get the garden trimmed down a little before they left. But they had woken up a little early. The sun, though it had risen, was not nearly past the rise.

So they stretched, purring a little at each other. He gave her rib a quick twinge; she instantly threw her leg over him, straddling his waist then leaning down to kiss--or better tease--him before going for her shower.

But he got her around the waist before she could make her escape, flipping her over when she wasn't expecting it and capturing her wrists. Pulling them over her head, he kneed her legs further open and made himself comfortable between them.

"Where exactly are you going, Miss Torres?" he grinned.

She smiled. Sweetly. "Better that I ask you the same thing, Tom Paris."

"Do I get a minute to decide on a destination?"

"I think you know where you're going by now."

His lips turned wryly up. "It's a pretty hospitable locale." Releasing one of her wrists, his hand slid down her arm and to her breast. Cupping it, noting its heaviness, how quickly the nipple hardened under his light thumb, he shook his head, laughing a little. "You going to have a baby," he breathed.

B'Elanna's smile lit with warmth as she gazed up to him. Like he'd made some amazing discovery, Tom was transfixed with the very notion of that first change in her body. Though much better than nausea, feeling like she would fall over every time she leaned forward was no wonderful thing to her. But she loved how he'd reacted, what he'd said, how he made that obvious thing so meaningful, so beloved; then how he tenderly bent to kiss her, then her nipple, caressing the swollen flesh as if to comfort it. Despite or because of its simplicity, it was surprisingly erotic.

Purring, she reached down and touched his soft hair, turning it in her fingers, encouraging him to continue. "Yes, I am, aren't I?" she whispered.

Grinning slightly, he continued to lave her with his warm lips and a more playful tongue, moving his hand down from there...

An hour late--or perhaps just later--B'Elanna kissed Tom's sated smile and pulled herself from their bed. She crossed to the bathroom, giving the bassinette a playful push on its swing as she passed.

When she came out again, she was greeted with a big mug of green tea, which she took as Tom passed her by for his own bath. She dressed, went out to contact Isabel, who promised to meet them, with Azro, on the south basin for the trip down to the Palto Range.

That arranged, she walked to her front door and stood on the threshold with her tea between her hands to feel the morning sun. She closed her eyes and smiled into it, breathing in the misty, sweet air of those mountains and its morning.

Tom's hands slid softly around her waist as he came up from behind. He too turned his face up to the sun, sighing contentedly. "Gorgeous out today."

"Perfect," B'Elanna breathed.

Bending to give her neck a nibble, her backside a pat, Tom reached over next to the door and took a bag to bring with him to the garden. B'Elanna didn't move, only watched, still sipping her tea.

He worked without hurry, though steadily, one knee on the ground as he expertly cut out the caltola blooms and dabbed them with a bit of coal to seal it off. The air picked up for a moment, tossing the crown of his hair to the side. Not noticing or not minding, he moved to the next stalk...

She almost didn't hear at first the transponder go off behind her, she was so involved in that view.

But when she did, she felt her heart drop a little. *Damn--a day early.* She lowered her cup, slumping only slightly before calling out to her husband.

"Tom, Chakotay's calling us."

Tom's shoulders fell when he stopped his work, though he merely sighed as he stood away from his work, then nodded back to her. "We'd better get dressed, then."

She nodded back, stepped outside to dump the remainder of her tea over the side of the porch, then went back to the kitchen to put it in the cleaner. Tom was coming in when she came back out, and she looked at the full bag of greens and vegetables in his hand. "What should we do with those?" she asked.

"Think maybe Nell might like some alien crops and crossbreeds, too?" he returned.

"You know she'd get her hands on whatever we could bring."

"We'll put them with the other seeds, then."

They went back to the bedroom, removed their shirts and tunics and changed into their sturdier clothes. B'Elanna pulled on her boots as Tom swung on his three-quarter coat, ran a hand through his hair. "Damn, we forgot to cut it."

"Maybe later," B'Elanna grinned. Tom always forgot to remind her.

Dressed, they packed their two usual cases, adding some extra off-shift clothing, since they would have a couple weeks to spend on Macar. Tom took those cases to the main room and transported them to the Marseilles, along with the remaining shield array sections they'd finished.

Meanwhile, B'Elanna went to the communicator and contacted Schiller, asking him to look in on the garden, that they'd be back in a month or so. "And don't eat all our crops--we worked hard to get them going on this hill."

"Yeah, yeah, you ladies are suspicious of everything," Schiller said, waving her off. "Have a good journey, B'Elanna. Tom, too. Kick some Cardie bums around. Keep yourselves alive, eh?"

"We will. Take care." She clicked the connection off, unable to keep from grinning. Gruff as he was, Schiller was somehow endearing. But she didn't stay too long on that thought, as she had another call to make. Tom was almost finished with his work. Not a minute later, she met Isabel's face again, that time regretfully.

Isabel only glance at B'Elanna changed shirt and vest and nodded. "Guess our trip's off until you return?"

"I'm sorry. We just got the call."

Isabel shrugged. "Can't have it all right away. Well, don't worry. We'll go when you get back. We have all the time in the world."

"Yes, we do. -- Oh, and you do have the key to the back door, right?"

"Yes."

"Good. If you need anything, you know where everything is--the medicine and the equipment stores, too, right? Schiller's going to look in on the garden, so don't worry about that. But you know where I keep the--"

"I do, I do!" Isabel laughed. "And if you've moved it, I think I can find my way around. You and Tom keep safe." She looked past B'Elanna a bit. "--Bye Tom!"

He turned and moved into Isabel's view. "See you too in a few weeks or so. Tell Azro sorry about today."

"I will. Stay well."

"You too--and keep drinking that tea," B'Elanna said, giving her friend a wink before cutting the transmission. Looking back to her husband, she returned his grin. "Ready?"

"You bet. Everything put away?"

"I'm pretty sure."

They spent another five minutes making sure they had. B'Elanna took her mug from the cleaner and put it in the cabinet, Tom smoothed down the bed, gave the bassinette an affectionate push in his own right as he left the bedroom. B'Elanna powered down the house systems and grabbed a couple remaining bags that they'd be carrying. Tom took the others and put his arm around her as they

moved to leave.

Then she stopped. "Tom, the letters."

He stilled, sighed. "Okay." He put down his gear and got the PADDs out of the desk. "We still didn't write Schiller's note," he told her, grabbing another PADD.

B'Elanna thought fast, but Tom was already writing. "Tell him not to let anyone in the house," she said suddenly. "Isabel has the key to the back, so she and Azro can come in if they want. But I don't want anyone else poking around our things, even him."

Tom chuckled and kept writing. *Far be it from B'Elanna to let messy people traipse around in her house--whether or not we're not here to notice.* "Might as well let him at the caltola--if we're gone that long, it'll rot, anyway."

"That's fine. It'll probably go to the collective silo."

A minute later, Tom signed the letter and saved it. "Okay that's it."

On their way out, Tom set Schiller's letter in the door box while B'Elanna knelt to tuck their letters safely away in the bottom of the shoebox. Closing and locking the front door, they gave each other a look, a grin then started walking to the cavern. At the top of the first rise from the house, they looked back for a moment at the little adobe a-frame, then checked each other's expressions again. They hadn't forgotten anything.

"I wonder if there's anything worth cutting at Macar," Tom wondered aloud as he helped his wife around through the rocky gorge.

"We'll have to keep our eyes open. I know Isabel's always interested in things she can play with--like Nell. Too bad they can't meet."

"Maybe someday we can arrange that. Nell's not going to stay in the Badlands forever. She hates it there as it is."

B'Elanna came with him through the sandstone-walled path, then out onto the next incline. The fresh, cool, sunny air of morning found her face. She breathed it deeply, letting it wake her up a little more. She was still pleasantly groggy, and knew she shouldn't be if she was going to be on the Liberty soon. But then, she hadn't really had a full mug of tea that morning.

On that thought, she growled. "Damn. I left the anthology on the coffee table."

Tom grinned. "I knew we'd forget something. We always do. Is the power cell on?"

"No. I turned it off when I finished last night." She shrugged. "At least I won't have to replace the cell. I can do without it for a month."

They turned around the last bend, climbing up towards the shadowy cavern. Taking in the warm sun once more, Tom turned, took B'Elanna's hand and helped her into their ship. Ten minutes later, the Marseilles lifted gracefully from its cavern shelter, rose past the mountains, and paused there for a couple seconds. Then, swiftly, the scout ship banked and climbed into the upper atmosphere.

Moments later, it disappeared.

55179: Seven years later

B'Elanna's mouth had turned up into a strange, old grin, one shared by her husband as they nestled together on the ivory sofa. Her small fingers toyed softly with his shirt. He stroked her back, sometimes twirled a finger in her hair. Their eyes were still lost in the memory.

"I read the report," Alynna told them, quietly breaking the silence that had overtaken the living room. "That it was Captain Janeway's decision to destroy the array, so to protect the people that aided you."

Tom's eyes drifted down, and he touched B'Elanna's fingers, still at play on his chest. "It might have saved our lives in the end, hard as that is to think about. But at the time, we were pretty upset about it." He wrapped his fingers around the ones he'd covered. "We'd only just accepted our new home, our chosen life. We'd laid our roots there. We were happy..."

"Only to be ripped away from it," B'Elanna finished. "I can't tell you how...." She shook her head. "I don't know what else to say. It was good to have Jenna and Chakotay, and everyone else that survived, near us, and we knew that Avalar was safe for the time being, that it would continue to get better there. But the enormity of being seventy-five thousand light years from home... We thought we'd never see it again."

"Our friends would think we'd died, our families."

"Our home was lost."

Tom closed his eyes against her hair, kissed her head. "So, eventually, we decided to build another nest, bring Avalar to us, because we had no other choice, and we imagined we'd be there a very long time. But we would be there, someday."

"Now Avalar is safe again," B'Elanna said, "but Starfleet won't let anyone near it--especially two former Maquis with a ship that'd raided half their stores on the border."

"I've tried to have that decision overturned," Alynna told them, "and fought it when it was under consideration. Unfortunately, not many people agreed with me. What the Maquis did--what you both did--is over. It was over almost four years ago. But many people aren't as willing to believe it won't happen again. It was a hard war; we lost many people in it."

"We understand that," Tom said, "and I wouldn't blame you for someone else's decision. But pigheaded as it might seem, it's difficult to have Avalar so close and know we have to go somewhere else. We kind of feel like we did the day we got stuck in the Delta Quadrant, for all we can do about our situation."

"Have you considered any other colonies?" Kathleen asked.

B'Elanna nodded, not looking up. "Tom and I are planning to go to Oslon. It's nice enough, from what I've heard and seen in the records, and my cousin lives there. They always need engineers, and they need medical technicians at the clinic there, and probably pilots, since it's a colony with a Federation presence. K'Karn's looking into the openings there."

Tom glanced down to her, a tiny smile set on his lips. He caressed her shoulder. She nodded.

Moira had been quiet throughout the story, taking in her brother's life, her sister-in-law's life, their struggles, their growth. Their story had been plainly put, though sometimes emotional, or sometimes retreating into knowing glances before skipping ahead. She sat back the entire time, let them answer her question. They said far more than she had expected.

Tom and B'Elanna had showed them their hearts, their life in a brief but busy time in which they loved, and fought, and healed, and found themselves and a place to belong to. They came to be who and what they were on their world. Yet, for all their devotion, their work and love of the place, their right to continue there had been revoked, and would never be returned to them.

Perhaps it wasn't meant to be. But she understood why they were bitter.

"In any way it works out, you'll have to start over," Moira pointed out, "again."

B'Elanna nodded slowly. "Again. And again. Newness." She looked at her sister-in-law without accusation, but solidly, honestly wanting to know, "How many times are Tom and I going to have to *make* things work from scratch? Accept without question what's handed to us?"

Endings

48329: Seven years ago

B'Elanna refused to get up. Instead, she clutched the blanket Isabel had hand woven for their bed, punched the pillow as she heaved for breath. She didn't cry, not yet. Shock prevented it.

Tom sat near her. His hand lay on her thigh, resting just above the seam of her boot, only there to let her know he was there. Other than that touch, he could only stare at the opposite wall.

Less than ten minutes ago, they had seen the array that brought them there explode and dissipate into the vacuum of space. They were lost. Their home was seventy-five years away. Everything they had planned on had been ripped away from them, replaced by something even they could never have expected... He believed it all, but somehow, he just couldn't feel anything just then, save a blank acceptance of what they could not control or correct.

Tom had learned how to accept what his life had offered, learned also to take his own steps in it, take what he could work with and make something out of it. When B'Elanna was taken by that 'Caretaker,' he felt a hell of a lot, he went to help find her, fought for her, searched the Ocampan tunnels for her--got her back because he knew he could.

But that...their loss--home, friends, everything all at once...and he couldn't feel a thing. It scared the hell out of him.

B'Elanna turned over on the bed, still breathing hard as she stared at the ceiling.

Tom looked over at her, finally feeling a trace of tears in his eyes. Nothing came of it, though, except the same, circling thought: *All our work, all the love we put into our new lives... She was so happy there, we both were. Gone.*

"Damn it, Tom Paris, you'd better not go anywhere on me," B'Elanna stated.

"Only if you don't," he replied.

"If I lose anything else in my life like this, I swear I'll never put it back together again. I can't bear to think I'll just lose it again."

He believed her. "You don't have to tell me that. I figured that one out when you were taken away."

Stilling at his heavy response, she suddenly tried not to think about what he'd already gone through,

with the addition of their immediate loss. Not just then. It made her feel sicker than she already felt.

"What are we going to do?" she breathed, a slight tremor marking her tone.

"I don't know...yet." His own voice had grown thick.

It was the truth.

B'Elanna swallowed, stared down to him. He had begun to tremble, slightly, as he looked at nothing on the floor. "Lay down with me, Tom. I need you near me."

Without more words, he leaned over and pulled his feet up on their bed, wrapped his arms around her, molded himself to her. He held her tightly, closed his eyes.

She buried her face in his collar, breathing his scent in shudders, letting it fill her. She pulled the side of his coat over her before slipping her hands underneath and getting as close to him as she could.

There they remained, entwined, unmoving, saying nothing more.

When Chakotay found them hours later, they were asleep.

55325 - 55677: Seven years later

They were there again.

"Just over here, sir."

The commander peered under the barrel step at a strange apparatus protruding from the outer hull. She pulled her tricorder, scanned it. She gave a nod to the ensign, glanced to her side.

In the bay, but standing aside, stood two rather blank faced individuals. One, tall, with a tailored gray coat and his hands buried in the fleecy pockets, wore an expression that a photon torpedo couldn't blast through. The other, small in frame with her glossy dark curls draped over her shoulder, had her arms crossed. Her fingers tapped occasionally on the sleeves of her tunic suit. Her dark eyes were utterly blank, her full mouth pressed down.

Every visit, the Parises looked like that. Over nearly four months and the same number of formal inspections on the Maquis scout, they had shown up with those same faces, yet more set and solid every time. Their occasional visits to Admiral Peozet's office bore those same expressions, but with questions and remarks attached.

The commander dreaded her shift for it.

They came because they had the right to. They had requested and had been given permission to be in the bay during the scheduled removals of equipment. But they could not board their ship until Starfleet had cleared it. Certainly, it was not safe to fly at that time, anyway. That would require

some weeks still, to repair the warp drive and inertial dampers at the very least. The deuterium and dilithium matrices had been removed, even though those systems had been stabilized. It was just a precaution, their commanding officer told them. They didn't want a containment breach in the drydock.

The Parises grudgingly allowed the removal, even if it was no secret on their faces that they'd been furious about it.

Four months had only solidified their expressions of displeasure. And they didn't even know about the plans to retrieve the memory core...yet.

"Mommy? Are you there?"

Mrs. Paris' face changed at that, and she clicked on her communicator. "Alaine, Daddy and I are still busy watching the ship. Is there an emergency?"

"No." A pause, and the parents gave each other a look. Then, "But since you're *near* the ship...could you..."

Mrs. Paris couldn't help herself. Neither could her husband. They smiled, shaking their heads, as if to say, "It would've happened sooner or later." It was strange to the commander when their masks melted into doting fondness.

"Alaine," he said, "you know your mother and I aren't allowed on the Marseilles until it's okay to be."

"I know Daddy. And I'm sorry. But...maybe you can ask them?"

The mother shook her head slowly, her smile fading. "Sweetheart..."

"Mommy, I wouldn't ask, but I... I would like to have my grippel pencils, please. The replicator won't make them right and the waiting box had all the prints I didn't finish...."

Mister Paris watched his wife, examined her, in fact, as she gently repeated that they were not allowed on their ship, where the bulk of their children's items were stored, that they couldn't pull everything out, either. She apologized, but never laid blame on anything but that the ship's check-up was taking a lot of time. The daughter, audibly disappointed, tried to be good about it, and apologized for asking.

While it was true, the Marseilles was under a full inspection and for matters of security--for their own good legally--

"To hell with this," growled the man and he moved forward to face the commander. The hard, blank facade had returned to his face and his tone. "My daughter would like her grippel kit, and I happen to remember my son missing a couple of his games. Although I admit to spoiling my children, I don't see the need in replicating new when their own already exist. I would like to request a security detail to monitor my wife and I while we take a few *toys* from our ship."

The commander sighed. "No. I'll go with you."

"No," said Mrs. Paris. She had cut the line with her little girl and moved to her husband's side. "It'll only cause more problems than we already have. We know you're not in charge of this operation. Contact Admiral Peozet. We'll wait."

"But we will be getting them," he added, "if I have to take it to a JAG and jury. But that'd be pretty stupid, don't you think?"

The commander grinned, albeit uncomfortably, then nodded and moved away to try to contact the admiral

Alaine stared up at her mother as she was handed the grappel box she and her mother had decorated together on Voyager with her brother, Chakotay and Seven, while waiting for her daddy to come home from a trip that took too long. When they ran out of things to put on it, her mother walked with her around Voyager and asked other people to draw other things. She remembered how they smiled when she asked, and what nice things they drew, even Aunt Kathryn. When her father got back to Voyager, he put something on it, too. Then her mother put a sealer on it, so the pictures wouldn't wear off. For that reason, it was a special box to Alaine, and she had missed it since they'd come to Earth.

"But I thought you said the ship was locked up?"

B'Elanna smiled. "Daddy asked them to unlock it for a bit. Where are your brothers?"

"On the beach with Aunt Kathleen."

B'Elanna nodded, her grin reaching her eyes as Alaine drug away her box to play. In a way, she was glad that Alaine had finally asked for it--for *her* grappel set. It was good to see her playing with something familiar again. Both she and Kiarn had begun to ask about their things, having finally figured out that their stay there was running longer than expected. Or perhaps the newness had finally worn off, and they wanted for the familiar again.

B'Elanna knew the feeling.

Moving further into the garden, she went to the carrybed, which sat at the feet of her own mother. "How was she?"

"She was a baby," Miral told her, standing from the garden bench and moving around her daughter. "An hour after you left, she woke, ate, and explored each quadrant of the yard before tiring. She is asleep again now, preparing for her next adventure."

B'Elanna grinned at her mother's plainness, oddly diverting to her now, then crouched down to check on Isabel for herself. "Thank you for looking after the children today, Mother."

With a brusque nod, Miral eyed her daughter. Reunited for but a week, the older woman could easily see how fatigued her child was, as was Tom, a slight degree more than they'd been the other day.

For that tiredness, which disturbed the Klingon mother more than she would readily admit, she felt again how wise it had been for K'Karn to snap her out of her routine, force her to open her eyes again to her child. She felt needed by them, even if neither had said anything about it and asked nothing but her occasional time with the children. Though she could do very little to help them, in truth, she was not doing nothing, as she had been before K'Karn opened her eyes.

True, matters had been simpler before she came: Knowing that B'Elanna was doing well, had made her life, fought her battles, taken a mate, and borne four strong children, Miral felt a great force of pride, particularly as her last contact with her child had been fiercely unreasonable and accusatory. It was good to see that B'Elanna had indeed grown up--even without her help.

The child had abandoned her, her heritage and her family. She'd stormed out of their house--a house in which Miral had stayed with but her child's interests in mind--with her bags in hand, swearing never to return. Miral, disgusted with her daughter, had told her to go and never return, had even spat on the path that B'Elanna had taken. She'd meant every moment of her bitterness.

But Miral in many ways knew--but certainly did not want to admit--that she too had abandoned her child. That came after, when she realized she was alone, still seething with both failure and fury in an empty house and her own family far away. As much work as she had there, as much as she was settled in her life on Kessik, those things could not nearly fill the void that remained when her daughter left her to join Starfleet. As angry as she might have been, nothing could dull the bitter, stinging pain that found her each time she looked into B'Elanna's forsaken room.

So she left for Qo'noS, and quickly made herself a part of her father's house again. She forged a new career, spoke well and worked hard for her successes. Meanwhile, she became a respected aunt to her brothers' children and a known teacher of geology. Within a few years, she finally believed she had overcome the incredible dishonor and disrespect her daughter had subjected her to. She had also almost taken another mate, but ultimately declined, finding more satisfaction in her newly reinvented independence.

As the time passed, she wondered if the girl was dead by then--either by devices of B'Elanna's doing or Starfleet's, or so dead in Miral's own heart that she no longer lived there. Regardless of whatever might have happened to that girl, though, Miral had already decided to go on with the living things that had present influence on her life. That, she believed, was relevant and worth her time.

Not five years after she left Kessik and out of nowhere, it seemed, K'Karn presented himself in her chambers, bearing news of that long gone daughter who she had neither spoken of nor acknowledged in conversation since her return to Qo'noS. In spite of her indifference, K'Karn spoke, pressing his news into her unwilling ears, praising both his cousin's carriage and character, *making* his aunt know her child again.

At first, Miral did not know what to think. B'Elanna, her admittedly human child, was now a warrior in the rebellion against the Cardassian incursions in the Demilitarized Zone, fighting Starfleet as well? More, she was a wife to a human man who, despite his sense of humor, was noble hearted, a man who had reclaimed his own honor, and battled at his mate's side for freedom and justice. Her daughter, that bitter little girl--a proud wife, a skilled technician, a warrior.

It was too much to believe at first. Had K'Karn been known for relating anything but what his clear eyes saw, she would have branded him a liar.

B'Elanna thought about her, K'Karn told Miral. Shamefully, the woman could only admit she had tried *not* to think of her daughter. In her heart, she knew that she, like a coward in the shadows, had ignored her own memory for the pain she associated with it. At the same time, she felt some comfort knowing B'Elanna had likewise made herself look away from her past.

Instead, B'Elanna had made herself a life--her own life as a woman--just as Miral had reclaimed hers.

Her child was not as she had believed, and she believed she might not have judged B'Elanna so quickly, passed her off so easily to her father's people simply because she had insisted on running off like the child she had been. She perhaps still had some Klingon blood in her veins and had only needed to discover it.

It of course remained to be seen with her own eyes, but B'Elanna's fate was apparently not as

desolate as Miral had once believed.

In the months after K'Karn's visit, Miral began to collect the news that trickled in about the worsening conflicts in the DMZ, about the Maquis, angling to hear something of B'Elanna. She never did, much to her frustration. But she heard of the husband's exploits, throughout his career with the rebellion. Knowing B'Elanna was with him, she would take the tales she did hear with a tiny grin, imagining the young woman there, using her wit and instinct to elude their enemies or leave them crawling to the distress beacons.

There were descriptions of their Marseilles, too, which she read for every available detail, seeing in them what B'Elanna had likely done to the Barolian craft to make it as stealth as it had become. Though she spent little if any time recognizing it vocally, she knew her daughter's talents. Miral laughed aloud when rumor had it that the Marseilles had been equipped with a cloaking device. *That* was B'Elanna's doing--and likely to protect what she and her mate had built and found victory in. Miral knew B'Elanna had always been protective of that which she brought close to her heart...and why.

Then, only a few months after hearing of B'Elanna again, they were gone--disappeared without word or trace. For months, many said they had been destroyed, and there was nothing to contradict them. Miral thought hard on that: Had they gone into hiding with their captain? Become lost in those Badlands? (She studied that region all over again to come up with some explanation for herself.) They certainly had not been captured--both the Cardassians and Starfleet would have happily divulged their coup.

Despite the likelihood that they indeed had been killed, she silently waited, tried to explain it in her own mind, formulate alternatives of what might have happened to them.

A year later, she was delivered a small parcel from Bajor. It contained a letter and a portrait of the couple Miral had made herself so thoroughly curious about. Despite the Federation's lazy assumptions due to the loss of their own ship, Miral had rather convinced herself that her child and mate had merely disappeared. There had been no trace of hull fragments or warp signatures in the subsequent reports she had acquired, after all. Plasma storms could not wipe out all traces of a ship. Other ships destroyed in the Badlands had at least left behind some fragments of their demise.

Their deaths would have been honorable, but she did not believe them dead, for the lack of data and her own strong feelings. Something in her--maternal instinct, perhaps--said they were yet alive...somewhere. Or perhaps she simply did not want to believe her child was gone forever--not that she expected to see B'Elanna again. Their lives had grown apart, and she had accepted that long before.

For the mean time, there was the PADD in her hands, which was simple but reassuring:

48274

Mother,

I know that K'Karn has come to tell you about me. Our meeting again was an accident, though I have to admit I don't regret it. How you and I last saw each other wasn't exactly how I wanted it to be between us. Not really. Though I still don't think you understood me as well as you thought, I think I was also misunderstanding you, and I said things I think I regret now.

When Dad left, I didn't understand that you were only trying to do what you thought was best. I blamed myself for his leaving, and at the same time, I felt like you were pushing me into your ways, trying to make me into something I wasn't. Unfortunately, at the time I didn't even know who or what I was. I resented it--you and myself--because I thought I knew what I wanted to be, and felt trapped. So I decided I should leave and go after it on my own.

Just as you predicted, my time at Starfleet academy wasn't pleasant, and though I learned a great deal, I was neither ready nor willing to fit into that system. Maybe it was just my unreal expectations and being disappointed in seeing the truth. I don't know. I was having a lot of trouble with my classes--not with content, but with Starfleet's way of doing things. In hindsight, I know it was my fault, my fear of committing myself and relinquishing control--simply, I was too young; but at the time, I blamed them for making it difficult for me. They weren't the only things I blamed. In any case, I left after my second year and eventually found a new home.

How to describe how I got there isn't very easy. For a while, I drifted from job to job, just trying to stay busy. After a while, I ended up on a beat up trade ship, working with people I hated. Or maybe it'd be more precise to say I avoided contact with anyone I didn't have to talk to, and so I had no problem with not liking the crew I was with. It made it easier. I was the one who isolated myself and thought I could live like that. In the end, I knew I couldn't have.

Even having gotten what I wanted, I still knew I was a coward for hiding myself away and being too afraid to change, and that I was going nowhere on that piece of junk, with those people I didn't respect. I knew I was miserable, and didn't really care. I'd have been better off dead. It was an empty, groundless, bitter time that I can't even feel anything about now because it was just that bleak.

Luckily for me, when that ship was attacked by a Cardassian patrol, I was rescued by a Maquis captain called Chakotay, who took me into his cell, and gave me a place and a job I could do well. At the time, I needed that, that stability and that kind of company. Being welcomed there--even if they were essentially using me for my skills and nerves--meant a lot to me.

A few days later, I met Tom Paris. I hope K'Karn spoke well of him to you, because you're going to have to hear it from me. To say we belonged together is probably the easiest way to put it--though I admit I tried to escape at first. Not very well, though, I admit. For some reason, he attracted me in a way I'd never seen before. It scared me, made me nervous--in that same way you'd always criticized me about. He has an intensity and intelligence about him that I didn't understand but drew me to him, made me want to be near him. The way he looked at me the first time reminded me of what you used to say about *knowing* that a man has conquered your soul. I didn't pick up a scent or anything like that, but I did feel something between us somehow, almost from day one. As fast as my heart was beating when I realized that, though, I still tried to deny it, if only because it was so sudden and strong.

In spite of that, and though I didn't ask him, I found myself needing to get inside his head, wanting to be near him. Eventually, he was the one who let me know him,

trusted me enough to be honest with me, to speak his heart. Then he had the nerve to admit he was attracted to me, too. For all of that, not long after, I accepted him. Well, maybe because I wanted him, too, and to share myself with someone who understood and accepted me, and who, yes, captured a part of me, as frightening as that was to me at the time. But it wasn't all that scary once we did come together. I became his wife only about six months later.

During and after that time, we were fighting in the Maquis, against the Cardassians in the Demilitarized Zone. I'm sure you've heard all about that--and I can't help but think how you feel about my being involved. Aside from all the Klingon boasts of honor in victory, which I know we do have in our fights, I wonder if you might feel justified now, now that I am doing something as honorable as I know I have. You might--or you might still be too angry at me to see it.

No, actually, I don't think you would be blind to that, if anything. I also think you knew me better than I was willing to admit those years ago--not a lot, but more than I thought then. I definitely know how much I needed to learn when I look back on it now. Sometimes, the fight, whether or not you win or even make a mark in your own lifetime, is important--in the end. Maybe that applies to you and I, too, somehow.

Even so, the fighting does have to end sometime. Tom and I are ending that together, soon. We've claimed a home for ourselves over the last few months--a small, old colony near the Federation border. It's called Avalar. We love it here, Mother, and I think even you would approve of it. Still, we would've kept on in the Maquis if the natural thing to come out of settling down hadn't come: Tom and I are expecting a baby in about six months. (We think it's going to be a girl--at least our friend's guessing it.) For her sake, we'll be retiring in a few weeks and staying here at Avalar until or if the fighting shifts back our way. If that does happen, you may not hear from me for some time. We don't want to end up in prison, especially not with a child to think about, so we will be essentially disappearing.

Anyway, I think I've written a lot more than I meant to. But I did want to tell you that I've been well, that I've gotten on with my life, made something of myself, I think, and married a man that I love and respect. I've seen a lot of things differently since we saw each other the last time, seen not only you but myself in another way--a better way. You have a right to know that. I hope you read this with your eyes open.

And I hope someday we'll meet again. Until then, Mother, just know that I love you.

B'Elanna

P.S. The picture below was taken just above our land, on a flat not far below the Dachad Gorge, where our ship is housed. It's in the Aborot Mountains. This is the kind of place that makes your heart beat hard, as they say. Tom and I have our hands resting on our baby. We'd just found out about her that day.

Miral's eyes were indeed open, as her daughter had wished. She lowered the PADD slowly as her

back straightened.

A grandmother...or perhaps was almost a grandmother. A son through her daughter, or perhaps not...

Miral yet hoped they had not perished, sentimental as that was for her to think like that. Their lives were too new to have it wasted on death. --Death did not deserve them yet. Perhaps their disappearance was just as B'Elanna said--that they had indeed gone into hiding. It was possible.

The picture... She hardly recognized the woman there, so much softer, more human than Miral imagined when she read of the Maquis battles. She was likewise surprised to see her choice in mate, a fair man with a clever grin. Somehow, in her mind, she had pictured them as looking more...Klingon--or at least more steely. But that was her perception of things, she knew. Their eyes were bright, their faces were confident, assured, their bodies looked strong, and their hands were indeed held over the place where her daughter would bear another...her granddaughter. Her child was truly alive and vital.

Seeing that in the portrait, the mother found herself pleased, if not a little ashamed for not having seen it better before. In either case, she could at least rest with the knowledge that her child had let go of that which stifled her, enabling her to become a real person, her own person. Her daughter's blood flowed, if not like a Klingon's, then at least with some fortitude that was not the product of her anger and fear.

B'Elanna had made her own choices, bitterly at first then with more heed paid to her better instincts. They were the same instincts that had made B'Elanna leave her, Miral understood. But her child had overcome her challenges despite that. She became a woman on her own terms, claimed her own mate and her own world. She had made choices that had eventually brought her some honor--and made her unafraid to live. For not just the letter, but K'Karn's words and all she saw in the reports, her child had grown up and away, but had found a good balance in her life.

Miral accepted that. In her most honest heart, she knew she could not have expected anything more from that troubled girl she'd brought up, who'd scorned one half of her people for the one she coveted. But that was before B'Elanna grew into a woman, a mate, a mother herself. The past could be remembered as a lesson.

It would be easy to live with that: She could let B'Elanna go, assured that her child had found wisdom, honor and love. Miral could move on without lingering in her doubts, as she knew that her work with the girl was done.

A few years later, when she received another letter from her child--a short one explaining where they had been and what her life had come to--Miral nodded surely to herself. Her daughter had continued to make a good life for herself, even if it was a rather human one.

Three years after that, when she heard of the Voyager's return, Miral was involved in a project which required her attention, and so could not meet her. But she was outwardly pleased with the news. She asked for any messages from her daughter to be forwarded to her. One was. Her daughter wrote that she and her mate were well, as were their children. They awaited news on legal matters Starfleet had put upon them. They would try to stop by Qo'noS when it was possible.

Miral knew that day would never come, but was contented to hear the rest.

Four months later, K'Karn arrived.

The hot, moonless night of the homeworld had been a pleasant one before he tromped into her office and disturbed her work. Well, perhaps not work, but some reading that might help her in the geological survey, a search for minerals badly needed by the Empire since the war, actually, scheduled to begin in the next quarter. The weather, which, like cooking, she had an admitted weakness for enjoying, was just as she preferred it--dark and still, hot yet not too dank. She filled her lungs with the air, letting herself relax to those reports, which were rather interesting...to her.

Then K'Karn came in and stopped in the middle of the room, forcing her to stand and face him politely.

"What do you want?" she asked, reigning in her patience despite his interruption. He was, after all, her favorite nephew. She faced him with a raised chin for that, too.

"To take you to your child," he responded. "She needs her mother."

"You treat her like she was a child again," Miral snapped, glaring at him. "If B'Elanna desires to see me, she knows where I am."

"She cannot leave Earth at this time," K'Karn replied simply. "She is embroiled in Starfleet matters with her mate."

"Then I will wait until that is over."

"No. You will come now." K'Karn had said it as though it were an order, not averting his eyes even as they narrowed.

"You will have to drug me," she mewed, her own eyes closing into slits.

"You stubborn, foolish old woman!" K'Karn barked, lost for a moment of the temperance he'd learned in his line of work--and the clever handling that always afforded him. "Do you think I would waste my time on you if I thought it useless? I cannot be there. You have no plans until the H'rljatak survey begins. Open your eyes, woman. She needs your presence."

"For what?" Miral snarled. "I have every confidence my daughter and her human mate have done what--"

"Their ship has been taken from them," he cut in, stopping her with surprising speed.

Truly, she did need to pause at the news, needed that moment to let it register. She had read where she could of the glorious skirmishes and raids her child and her husband had succeeded in--much to Starfleet's disgust at the time. It made sense that Starfleet, even years later, would detain the craft they committed those acts in. "Detained it, I would think?"

He nodded. "And their possessions. They are fortunate not to be under trial or serving relieved sentences in their people's prisons. They have only begun their struggle to release their ship and be freed this month, and it does not go well." K'Karn moved his face very near to his aunt's. "You told me you came to respect B'Elanna, and her choices. If you truly respected her, you would relent your obstinate avoidance and be her mother again. --You never disowned her. You are responsible for her--child or woman. Her honor and her family are also yours."

"She makes her *own* life!" Miral countered. "And that I have respected, nephew! She left me at Kessik for that foolish place. She made her choice to return there. She is an adult. It is her business."

"Yes, it is," he said. "But does that mean she and Tom must fight their battles alone, for their mother's laziness and preoccupation and pride?"

Miral's hand came up to strike, but K'Karn caught it, clenched it hard in his fist. "Prepare yourself," he ordered her. "We leave in two hours. I have contacted D'ebrak to keep watch over the house. You are coming."

Miral yanked her arm away. "Very well," she said, then moved up to him again. "But you will not ever call me lazy again--*Diplomat K'Karn*."

A slow, short nod and the trace of a grin was his only reply.

"I do not like to travel anymore," she snarled and went to make a bag for herself.

Though she'd meant her statement, and particularly had no desire to see Earth again in her lifetime, four days later, K'Karn led her behind a stately--for human standards--house and into a lush garden, filled with fragrances that reminded her of Kessik the instant she detected them. There, within a patio clearing, she hardly at first recognized...

"Kiarn, you'll share the pretzels or they will be put away. These are for everyone--not just you."

A boy with dark hair and eyes sheepishly pulled the bowl up onto the table, acquiescing to his mother, a woman dressed casually but well, with neatly tended curls touched reddish in the sun. With a baby on her hip, she served three chatty, hungry, part-Klingon children their servings with an easy hand and an occasional grin at her mate.

"Can... *May* I have more juice, Mommy?" a girl at the table asked.

"Me too...please?" asked the boy.

"Mo' wich, peas?" chimed a younger boy.

"Yes you may, all of you," she said as she gave the toddler another sandwich. She looked to the man near her. "Tom, you want to get more juice?"

"Sure, B'Elanna," he answered, but froze in his steps as soon as he turned. In that moment, Miral studied him, noting his height and lean frame, his fair face and blue eyes, as he lit with recognition. He glanced to her nephew. "K'Karn...?"

"For B'Elanna," the cousin told him.

Hearing her name, the woman turned. Her smile drifted downwards as her jaw dropped slightly open. Her eyes darted up and down what she viewed, to K'Karn, and back again. She stared as if she'd just been struck with a disruptor beam. At the same time, the children craned their heads to look around their parents.

Miral, likewise, did not move another step. Her daughter indeed was much her father's daughter, she noted to herself, aside from the shape of her face, and perhaps her nose. Her stare shone out at her so much like her father's that Miral had to force herself not to frown. But her posture was straight, and her small frame appeared deceiving, judging by the muscles in her hand, which still supported the baby in her arm.

Moreover, B'Elanna suddenly seemed as nervous as she had been as a girl, hardly able to stammer

"Mother" when her cousin gestured the woman all the way into the garden.

Miral had to double check herself as well. She expected her daughter to be surprised, but her dress, her expression, her hesitancy... Despite the woman's obvious maturity, Miral had imagined her differently by the look of the portrait sent to her. She had hoped to see that same face, that same confidence again. That was definitely missing in that first glance they shared.

But B'Elanna soon recovered and moved to greet her. Facing her, she smiled a little, not knowing what to do all the sudden. Finally, she kissed her mother's cheek and embraced her with her free arm, not very hard. "It's about time," she said into Miral's ear, then parted to meet her eyes. Her jaw tightened. "I would have come to see you..."

"K'Karn has informed me you are detained."

"No, just the ship."

"Which you will not leave." Miral nodded. "I would not, either. They force you to share their dishonor. You are right to face them until your property is relinquished."

From K'Karn's side, Tom snorted. "Not that I'm worried. They wouldn't know how to fly it if they tried."

Miral grinned at the playful boast from the man she knew only from a picture, a brief conversation with his father, and K'Karn, of course. "You are my daughter's mate."

B'Elanna nodded stiffly, as if on cue, and introduced her husband, whom Miral gave a curt nod and a bidding of acceptance. From what she did know, and for his direct stare and stance there, she felt he should deserve as much. B'Elanna was the one who was proving ultimately strange to her, which the fair man seemed to pick up.

"An honor to meet you," Tom said, eyeing her, then his wife, with an odd, unreadable smirk the Klingon woman couldn't puzzle out--until he spoke again. "Does the fact I'm still standing mean I can call you Mother, too?"

Miral furrowed her brow and almost spoke, but B'Elanna suddenly snickered and shook her head. "Tom," she said as she turned a stare to him, "behave yourself."

"Yes, dear," he replied, his grin broadening to mock his obedience.

It was then the older woman saw it--the tension fade a bit, her child's smile as her guard eased off. Perhaps it was just the uncertainty, Miral surmised, that needed to be broken. The man had cut into that rift swiftly, thankfully.

For that, Miral allowed her own mouth to twist upwards as she faced the man again. "I have yet to decide on you," she stated, and rose a brow to see him brighten at her words. She jerked her chin up a little higher. "Your human charms will not corrupt me in the process."

"Don't be so sure about that," B'Elanna said wryly, though she seemed glad to move away and tell the very curious children who had come: "Your grandmother, all the way from the Klingon Homeworld," she said. "I told you you'd meet her. Have at it."

"We can now?" the girl asked.

"Yes, you may. Come say hello, then we'll finish lunch."

Only seconds later, Miral had her arms full of grandchildren, who might have knocked her over were she any weaker. Only a minute and a thousand excited words later, she and K'Karn were dragged back to the table for lunch. They accepted offer of wine from B'Elanna, who gladly made herself busy again, pulling two more chairs up for her family and making their places, all one-handed as she bounced her youngest on her hip. Meanwhile, Tom swung inside to bring their guests something a bit more substantial.

Their parents returned and their drinks and plates filled, the table suddenly came alive with a field fire of questions from the children, about where she had been and what she was doing to keep her away, how long it took to get there and if she was going to stay.

She and B'Elanna yet shared no sentiment. But it did not surprise Miral. They had been apart some time, and she had always known her daughter to be cautious in showing her heart. Still, Miral noticed also B'Elanna's sudden return to quietness. Even if she did smile on her children's curiosity, she did not speak, but tended to her youngest and avoided looking at her mother. That was disturbingly familiar. In contrast to his quickness earlier, Tom was equally circumspect, albeit a little quicker to prompt the children when they were lost for words. Then he sat back again, letting the children carry the conversations as he glanced occasionally to his mate. Though Miral never minded not wasting words, their silence did not comfort her.

After a day and perhaps becoming a little more accustomed to being near her mother again, B'Elanna began to speak of herself, of her work, her research and how they had lived on Voyager, and then she boasted about her children and mate. To this, Miral listened attentively--seeing the younger woman's spirit through those things, her unabashed pride in the family she had both claimed and created.

In the garden or on the beach while the others ran about, or over a glass of wine the next evening, she spoke quietly but assuredly, her smile a full and knowing one. She could at the same time match quips with her husband when given the opportunity. In those conversations, Miral slowly began to see the woman she had imagined again, strong, proud and not afraid of a challenge, mixed with that graceful confidence that had once been her child's most desired trait.

Miral was proud, too, to know that B'Elanna did share those things with her--respectful yet unafraid of her mother's opinion, simply stating what she felt and believed. This was a very good thing, gratifying to see.

Soon, B'Elanna and Tom trusted her and K'Karn with the other side of their present lives--their more recent challenges with Starfleet policies and practices. Then, later in the week, Miral had the misfortune of witnessing one of the processes they were enduring, one of their so-called petitions. It was a very poor joke, she thought with a snarl as Tom and B'Elanna stood in the sterile hall before a pithy council and supplicated for their belongings, all but stolen from them. They laid out their requests and reasons, even divulged their plans to relocate, with quiet reason and polite intent. For their efforts and willingness to play that game, they were patronizingly refused and told that perhaps on a later date, their requests would be considered. Worse than the rest, B'Elanna and Tom were not surprised by their insults.

Miral's reaction was swift, but K'Karn shot his aunt a stern stare and lead her out of the hearing room before she could speak.

"This is not the place," he told her. "Your fight here will be but a waste of your good senses and a confirmation of Starfleet's misjudgment of them."

"Then what is the use of these parades?" she demanded. "They accomplish nothing."

The diplomat nodded. "Now you understand why I brought you?"

She did not answer him.

A few minutes later, Tom and B'Elanna walked out, their faces fading once out of the view of the officials. His arm was around her; her eyes were pointed aimlessly. Their faces said the obvious: They had endured another failure they knew would occur but expended their time to, anyway; they had participated in the futile for the sake of trying. Like good citizens, which they had become again, they could only walk away and plan their next date to speak to that same panel yet again--who would likely say the same as they had that day.

Miral did indeed begin to see K'Karn's reasoning.

Taking the children on an excursion of another and more pleasant kind and later returning to Tom's father's house, Tom and B'Elanna tried to be more cheerful. They actually succeeded to laugh and to not speak on the issue, albeit with that conscious effort. It was clear that did that for the children. Their eyes still spoke, when they regarded each other, then went on with other matters. It was the best they could do.

Yet that wasn't nearly enough, Miral thought.

"You stand there like beggars," Miral bluntly told B'Elanna after the latter had sighed about the lack of progress. "They cannot respect you if you show them no heart."

B'Elanna shook her head, leaning against the doorframe as she watched the children run off the remainder of their energy in the yard with their father that evening.

"And we'll be nothing but rebel Maquis if we do." She turned a solid look her mother's way. "What do you think is worse here, Mother?"

She growled, squinted out at the fading sun. "To lose one's heart, one's honor, is worse than any other loss you might suffer."

"Speak for yourself," B'Elanna replied coolly, turning her stare out as well. "You have no more children to think about. Even your world is different. We can't prove our strength in battle to make a point, or call people out in the street and challenge them. There's no facing our enemy here that'll get anything done."

"Then why do you bother?" Miral countered. "If any fight at all is pointless, why do you waste your time?"

"We don't belong here."

"Then give up your ship," Miral told her, challenging her with mock sincerity. "Take a transport to Oslon."

B'Elanna did not look over again, and her tone did not change. "We're not giving the scout up. Maybe it'd be easier, less complicated, but we'd hate ourselves in the end for letting them take that away from us. Not a chance." Sighing, B'Elanna stepped down from the kitchen door to go into the yard as well. "We've lost enough already," she finished as she walked away.

The answers were right, Miral thought, but the attitude was wrong.

Tom's father, whom Miral had found generally well but annoyingly polite from the start, did not aid the situation. She'd also sensed his distrust of her immediately, hidden behind his pleasantly careful demeanor. Worse still, she found him far too content with his own son's inaction. The old man actually saw it as promising, which utterly confused her.

As he had been when they spoke over subspace, he just could not see. She was genuinely pleased to know that man had come to accept his son, that he did let the boy go, after all--as she had her girl. But he had also come to the belief that their hearts had settled and that they were simply going through the right motions to achieve justice. He barely acknowledged, in fact, that the ship was their property, their right.

"You do not see their longing?" she asked him that evening, after the others had gone to their rest and she found him in his den. "Can you not see their spirits wilt in this place, that they are becoming more lost with each day they must wait and know they can do nothing?"

To that, Owen had grinned slightly. "I understand that your culture would of course drive you to expect different things from B'Elanna. But they've been here for four months, and I haven't noticed anything out of the ordinary." He nodded, shrugged. "I know they do want the Marseilles back, which I understand. And I understand that's frustrating for them right now, having to go through legal procedures they're not used to. But they knew well ahead of time that the ship would be detained. It's their choice to stay here while the inspections are still in process. They're handling it well."

Miral shook her head. "No, Owen. That is not it. I expected nothing more of my daughter than to see her heart--which I do. And it is bloodless in this place. There is no fight, no challenge in even their attempts. Everything they must do is pointless in the end."

"Since the hearings began, I think they've given it some--"

"You do not understand," she cut in. "What I saw in them before is no longer there. They have let your system take over their lives--and you believe that is good?"

"For the present, Miral, that will have to be the case," Owen replied. "They're lucky to have even what they do."

"Lucky!" Miral spat. "You believe them fortunate to have their freedom ripped from their hands? What they have worked for be put under a rock to be suppressed and controlled? Even if they did leave for Oslon, your government would still control them, have of them what it wishes and nothing more, and only for the crime of acting from their hearts in the first place. If you believe this is good, you are more blind than I suspected."

Owen stared at her, notably disturbed by the woman's challenge--yet he was still unwilling to address it. "That would be your opinion, Miral."

"Then it is also my opinion that you will find nothing but sorrow in our children should you never open your eyes to the truth. They have no place here. They have no heart here."

"Well, it's their choice to stay--and frankly neither Tom or B'Elanna have indicated anything to me about being as miserable as you think."

"I should want that they would--as the obvious yet eludes you."

Owen shrugged, went back to his PADDs. "I wouldn't worry, Miral. They're strong and smart, and they're doing what they can through the right channels. They've come a long way in that, you know. Maybe you ought to see more of it."

Growling, she could only spin on her heel and leave. The old man was as useless as the pitiful struggle her children put up.

Miral then truly understood why K'Karn had come for her. It was little wonder her daughter and son-in-law's hearts suffered. Their lives had been disrupted, their freedom curtailed, their liberty denied, their wishes refused outright, their actions made impotent. Though they did try to make what they could of what they did have with their sons and daughters, there did not seem to be much chance their lives would returned to that state that had made them so alive those years ago. They fought it--but it was claiming them. And the admiral, albeit kindly and as well meaning as a man of his sort could be, was a stubborn, blinded bore.

Worse, not even she could think of a way to free them. Running from their challenge was simply not an option. She did know that much and was glad they did, too.

"Oh, I remember something!"

Bringing a large bowl of krjerik for the children's breakfast the next day, Miral grinned over at Alaine. The eldest of her grandchildren, the unborn child in that portrait of years ago, seemed to be in some unspoken contest with her brother Kiarn with who could think up the most questions for their Klingon grandmother. Even B'Elanna, standing near the hallway door with a fussy, squirming Isabel held to her breast, giggled a little when Alaine had spoken.

"What is that, child?" Miral asked.

"Mommy said you always used to tell stories," Alaine told her.

"Yeah!" Kiarn said. "Can you tell us some stories?"

"There are many stories from the Klingon Homeworld," Miral said, feeling her smile grow. It froze a little, though, when she saw in the corner of her eye her daughter shift on her feet. Looking over, she found her child's eyes blankly pinned on her. Miral dug the spoon into the bowl. "Perhaps later," she told the children. "Your mother does not enjoy them."

"Okay," Alaine said, unbothered, though she did furrow her little brow when she held up her bowl and was served some of her grandmother's...oatmeal.

Meanwhile, Miral could still feel B'Elanna's eyes on her, but said nothing as she continued to dole out the children's servings, letting them add some honey to it when they asked. Like most humans--as B'Elanna had--they liked sweetened food. Thinking on that, she believed she might have been bending a bit more than she was accustomed to for that family, even if they were predominantly human. Still, seeing the lively youngsters dig in to their meals and hum their acceptance...

"No, Mother," B'Elanna said quietly from behind her. "I think the children would rather have them now. I don't mind. Please."

Miral looked at her again. B'Elanna's eyes were still a little dull, but they met hers without complaint. She was grinning slightly as well, offering...welcoming.

The half-Klingon woman, once a bitter little girl cursing Kahless and his every feat as "stupid, brutal

old stories," was actually asking those same tales to be told to her children. Though she might not want to hear them herself, B'Elanna at least wanted the children to have that opportunity...perhaps learn from them? Miral felt her lips pull upwards again.

Only a moment later, she had chosen a good story to start with.

She didn't regret telling K'Karn a couple hours later to come for her in six weeks. Those children needed what company and help they could get. She found herself not minding coming to know her child again, either. For that matter, the survey was still another quarter away. She had the time. He assented, and soon after left, satisfied.

So she was glad to be there, in spite of her new son's impossible father and the ridiculous human population she'd given up when she left Kessik years before, after her daughter left her. She had to admit, despite her pride, and despite her disgust with the way her children were handling their affairs, that she had needed to come, to know her daughter again, and to support her and Tom in what ways she could, and because her presence was welcomed.

Her daughter, though still strong and facing her challenge, had faded under that instability. A known weakness of her child's, Miral quickly recognized it and could not bear to see return. Tom, her mate, was being strong for all of them, too, enigmatically thoughtful behind his lighter facade, and much to the point when he wanted to be. Yet Miral could tell he was holding back, resisting in thought while not in action, for his family's sake. They were both trying their best in a system they had forsaken years before, and had only come to accept on the Voyager. When they had no other choice to, they had found a life there. That was both understandable and wise. But that was over now, too.

They were being careful in that system for many reasons--and had been too much, Miral thought as she watched her daughter fuss with Isabel's blanket, careful not to stir her. Just like after the petition, the older woman could tell her daughter was tired, her posture less straight, her face oddly expressionless. Tom was watching her without blinking.

"Your meeting did not go well," she observed.

"It was an inspection this time," Tom frowned. "The next hearing is in a week." He shook his head, not knowing where to look, but finally decided on his mother-in-law again. "It's pretty sad that we have to ask permission to get on our own ship and pick up our children's toys."

Miral snorted. "Yes. It is." She eyed her daughter again. B'Elanna had picked up the carrybed with Isabel in it and moved it into the shade. "So what are you going to do about it?"

"There's nothing we can do, Mother," B'Elanna said. "You know that. We've been over this ten times already. Kathryn's still in hearings, the Doctor's status is still being decided on, Chakotay's still securing his rank. We can't do anything until all that's cleared up. For their sakes, we have to keep good face."

She noticed the clip return to her daughter's voice on that topic. "What do you desire, then?"

"If we could?" Tom asked; she nodded. "If we didn't have the children and our friends to worry about, we'd have raised a lot more hell by now. I don't know if that would've done any good, but I'd sure feel better."

Miral shook her head. "This world is too political. It pleases me you've chosen to live on K'Karn's world. You will be away from this."

B'Elanna laughed. "Mother, you can't tell me there aren't intrigues on the Klingon Homeworld, too. Starfleet just handles it differently."

"They are cowardly," the woman replied.

"Maybe," Tom said. "But we're here, and they have what we want. So we have to play their game."

B'Elanna nodded. "This biggest problem is that Starfleet is taking its time *inspecting* the Marseilles. Three full scans would have told them what they needed to know and we could have had the repairs done by now."

"Yes. I know." Miral allowed her smile at that. "You were noble warriors. --Do not contradict what I see, B'Elanna. You accepted the burden of a fight that was outside of yourselves. They were honorable, your actions. Or would you call K'Karn--and yourself--a liar?"

"We might still call ourselves Maquis, but we were fighting that war a long time ago."

"It's still in your hearts," the woman replied, as if stating a mere truth. "You still bring honor to your fight by persevering."

B'Elanna felt a beat of pride at Miral's insistence. Years ago, she would have slammed those Klingon sentiments back onto her mother's tongue. But that was indeed a long time ago, and her reunion with her mother had been far better than she'd expected. It had also been wonderful for the children, who had always been curious about their Klingon quarter. More, Miral accepted them, even Tom, without prejudice, without judging--or at least she was open to knowing them as they were. In fact, she rather liked Tom, which was a surprise. She had not expected her mother to appreciate Tom's quirks so much. In any case, B'Elanna was glad to make up for time she was once too young and angry not to waste.

She had even come to bear the Kahless stories she had invited the proud grandmother to tell the children over the breakfast table...for a while, anyway.

"No, Mother, I wouldn't call K'Karn a liar."

"Then, you must take up your fight again."

B'Elanna almost reacted, but Tom beat her to it. "What kind of fight would you recommend, Miral? Or would it be better to keep our eyes open until we find a better opportunity to get what we want?"

She considered that, nodding at her son-in-law's words. "It is not in a Klingon's nature to 'sit and wait.' But you are not Klingon, and this certainly is not the Homeworld."

"So...?" B'Elanna asked, leaving it open.

"The wait Tom speaks of sounds like your only defense at this time," Miral finally admitted, and grudgingly. They did appear fatigued, and that system--his father included--did seem to be daunting, requiring cleverness. "You claim your comrades and children as reasons to remain, and I understand that now. It's acceptable, your sacrifice."

She paused, took a deep breath of the salty springtime air, thinking of a good way to say what she wished. "Sometimes, a Bird of Prey remains under its cloak in order to examine its enemy's weaknesses then use the element of surprise. Klingons have been known to hide in the shadows before calling out their enemy in order to assess the worthiness of his challenge. It would not be a

dishonor, I think, for you to do the same--temporarily."

B'Elanna's stare was solid. "Even if we hate it."

"Particularly then. You endure hardship now, but in the end, you will have the better chance at victory...achieving your goals. Use your own language."

Without warning, Tom's lips twisted upwards. "Now I know where B'Elanna gets her great common sense," he said and gave the older woman a wink. "Good thing I'm not twenty years older. I might have gotten you in trouble."

"Pah!" Miral laughed and faced him directly. Somehow, his silly changes of topic were welcome things. Their other topic would have ended up going in circles, which he probably knew. "Save your compliments for your mate, Tom! I have no surprise in that you've kept her with child. Your tongue is as smooth as a Ferengi's."

His grin brightened even further. "Maybe so, Mother--though you know where I am if you change your mind."

B'Elanna's mouth pursed. "Tom, don't flatter her so much. You know how sensitive and weak-willed she is."

Miral would have laughed more loudly, if her daughter wasn't quick enough to place her fingers to her mother's lips, motioning to Isabel.

"Unless you want to hear a little warrior's battle cry *all night?*" she said, her eyes shining with her own unvoiced laughter as she gestured to the baby.

The older woman's face softened strangely at the touch, her familiar words and the brightness in her child's eyes. Impulsively, she grabbed her daughter's hand, pressed it to her cheek, meeting her daughter's warmth and affection, silently thanking her for it before releasing her.

Yes, she knew, K'Karn did not waste his time...on any of us

"For the benefit of the Monean people who had requested our help, yes, Admiral, I did act."

"At the risk of your ship, your crew, allowing two of your civilian crew to employ a device forbidden to the Federation in order to interfere in matters not your concern or dominion."

"I made a judgment based on the needs of the many. Their planet would have suffered catastrophic environmental damage had we not acted to protect them."

The admiral shook his head. The list went on and on, he knew. The deals with the Kazon, actually helping the Q not only to die, but to procreate--which though not necessarily a crime was all the more unnerving to the panel. The Sikari, the Kazon, the Borg, Species 8472, the Gelenid, the Charsians. The list was endless.

But she was only trying to survive, get her crew home, she'd said, over and over. But at what cost? --To Starfleet someday in the future, to her own consideration of protocol in those still uncertain times?

"Captain Janeway, I understand your noble intentions, but it was *not* in your best interest to put your ship at risk so carelessly, risk a war in order to fulfill the request of but one group of citizens..."

Tom leaned back in his chair and drew a deep, slow breath. He felt B'Elanna squeeze his hand--hard. He shook his head; her stare turned down.

They both knew exactly why Kathryn had helped the Moneans.

Worse, the admiral JAG of the day just went on and on, like on every other day of the hearing that was to judge Captain Janeway's competency to resume her duties in Starfleet.

"Is he ever going to shut up?" B'Elanna whispered.

Beside her, Jenna chuckled. "I could recommend a few places he could stick his head if it's not already there and a hologram's in its stead."

"Shh," said Chakotay beside them, though he knew how sick they all were at that new turn in the hearings--the investigations. "Don't make it worse than it is."

"This is going in circles--again," Tom told him.

B'Elanna nodded. "They won't stop, too, until they have her where they want her."

"What do you mean?" Harry whispered from the other side. "They only just started this round last week. They're being thorough; it's a normal procedure."

Tom snorted. "You still believe that? It's more than a dressing down session, Harry. They gave her time to get acclimated to Earth again before bringing up this mess. Now they're trying to fit her back into their protocol by yanking the leash in their own yard."

The admiral stopped and looked out into the audience. "Did you have something to add to this hearing, Mister Paris? You're free to speak."

Tom gnashed his teeth behind a neutral, directed grin. *Pompous old bastard.* "Yes, I have something to add."

Before him in the court, Kathryn slumped. "Tom, don't," she told him.

"I don't take orders from you, Kathryn, remember?" He turned his stare back to the admiral. "Captain Janeway might have acted, but I and my wife were the ones who advised her after coming to know several of the people on the planet and attempting to fix some of their more antiquated systems. When the government ignored their requests to take our advice and shut down their reactors, I pressed the captain to shut them down personally. I was the one who flew the Marseilles, under its cloak, to pinpoint the target."

B'Elanna stood as well. "And I recalibrated the torpedo that was fired," she added, "--before the captain made her decision."

Near to them and silent throughout the proceedings, Tuvok straightened. "And it was I, admiral, who fired the torpedo."

"Under my order," Kathryn reminded him.

"Nevertheless," the Vulcan replied, "I did agree with the assessment of the Monean government."

"And yet," the admiral said, "it was Captain Janeway's decision which brought about the conclusion in question." He sighed, checked his chronometer. "We will adjourn and continue in two days hence--in private chambers, Captain Janeway."

"Sounds about right," Tom muttered and took B'Elanna's hand. "Let's get out of here. --Chakotay: Sandrine's?"

He sighed. "I'd like to stay until Kathryn's dismissed."

"See you there," B'Elanna said. "She probably needs a drink by now."

"A drink? Hell with that," Jenna smirked. "I'll like to be dragged home tonight, by the hair or otherwise after this circus."

The commander grinned, nodded and watched his friends swiftly turn and leave. *Well, the Maquis mentality is at least good for that in the end*, he thought, knowing that even his captain would be glad for it. A little bit went a long way for them before.

Jenna eyed the couple by her in the warm wooden chairs of Sandrine's as the others ordered their drinks from the bar, slowly made their way back to the corner they'd secured.

When they met the others in the Headquarters hall, their faces were tight with anger. It'd been a useless month with the testimonies heating up and the Marseilles' inspections becoming more thorough. Nobody had to suggest going out for a drink anymore after what was by then the fourth hearing, only choose a place, which usually ended up being Sandrine's.

Even the Doctor, who like Seven had been needed that day in the first hour of testimony, managed to arrange to join them, if not to drink then to share in the tired mood they'd all found themselves in. Jenna didn't even bother a quip towards him when he sneered about having to arrange his social hours then--or be locked up on Voyager, still in the midst of its refit.

Hell, even I've missed him, Jenna thought without complaint. He had, after all, been her company and comrade for seven years, and though she'd only admitted it once, she knew she'd fight for him too--if they'd give a damn what she had to say on the matter.

When B'Elanna sat by her husband and handed him his tonic water, Jenna couldn't help but remember his own mother, the elder Alaine Paris, not three tables away, running her long fingers around the perspiring glass. Her eyes had been equally wrought with anger and helplessness, her fingers just as thoughtful as they traced the cool glass.

And B'Elanna, busily fidgeting with a bowl of pretzels and her own glass of wine, just as she'd always been, despising those things she couldn't fix herself, those temporary things that frustrated her so thoroughly, so faithfully.

"You look tired, Thomas," Jenna finally said.

"I haven't been sleeping much," he admitted quietly.

The others looked up at that, and then to B'Elanna, who likewise was a little pale that day. She said

nothing, but moved her hand from the pretzel bowl to touch Tom's hand softly. Their fingers entwined.

"Well, that's round four--I think," Kathryn said, breaking the sudden silence as she joined them at the table and fell back in the well-worn chair. Turning a tired look towards the man at the bar, she attempted a grin. "Whiskey sour?"

"Four?" B'Elanna asked. "Four thousand is more like it."

"And then some," Chakotay joined.

Kathryn turned an eye to her friends at that. "Tom, B'Elanna, you can't keep speaking out like that. It'll do nobody any good. And I thought I said--"

"They're rolling you over the coals until you agree to get on your knees," Tom told her, "and that'll be good for *no one* in the end. Kathryn, they've had plenty of time to study your logs before deciding to call you on them. You know as well as I do what these formal inquiries are usually about."

Even Chakotay assented to that. "Damage control."

Her drink arrived and the captain took it. "If I choose the coals, sobeit," Kathryn told them all. "You want your ship back, --Harry, I know you want to stay with Voyager after the refit, as do I. --Chakotay, you want to stay with Voyager, too; the Doctor wants to retain his program, and Jenna wouldn't mind having her son--heaven help me--be recommended to serve with us, too, if it's possible. Neelix wants to continue his work--heaven help Tuvok."

They all laughed a little at that, including Kathryn. "I'm willing to put up with whatever they have to offer to get those things. You're my crew and my friends. I'm not about to let you down--not before now, not now."

B'Elanna was shaking her head well before her friend stopped talking. "Kathryn, we can't sit and watch them pick your record apart like they did today, not in good conscience."

The captain shrugged, took a drink of her cocktail. "Well, now that it's moved into closed court, you won't have to." Her tone was slight, but it only made B'Elanna's face harden further. Kathryn sighed and offered her a smile. "I know you don't want this to happen, and I appreciate what you and Tom and Tuvok did today. But I am the captain, whether or not you're obliged to take my orders. I captained Voyager for seven hard and wonderful years, and I'm not sorry for too much of what happened out there."

She looked around the table at her comrades. "We all knew there'd be challenges in coming home, this is just another one." She took another sip. "We'll get through this--just like we've gotten through the rest. If we could survive the Delta Quadrant, surely we might have a couple successes here."

"I hope you're right," B'Elanna told her, barely feeling it.

"Maybe we could go off sometime?" Harry offered. "Maybe some rest, warm sun? It might do some good for you and Tom to get away from it a while. There's room at my cousin's summer house in Texas."

B'Elanna grinned briefly. "Sounds nice."

Tom shrugged. "Yeah. Maybe some time away."

But Kathryn could only sigh at that. Neither of them seemed excited by any sort of diversion. They'd already been diverted enough. "I wish there was more I could do."

"That's the problem," B'Elanna said. "Everybody wishes they could do more. We just have to wait until Starfleet makes up its collective mind and let us get on with it."

Sitting across, Seven's lips pulled inward. "For a collective mind, Starfleet is vastly inefficient."

"Got any more nanoprobes to spare them?" B'Elanna smirked.

"The idea is tempting," she replied.

"So is kicking them in their collective arses," Jenna said, "but it'll only shove their thumbs farther in."

The Doctor snorted. "I didn't necessarily require that mental image, Nurse Harlowe, but thank you."

"Anytime, lover. Hope it comes in good use." Jenna winked and turned back to Tom with a shrug. "Well, perhaps getting away from all these black clouds might be a help. Heaven knows being here's not done a thing for you."

"Who knows, maybe we might go there a while...or to China, or the Caribbean..." Tom's voice faded off with his shrug. "It doesn't really matter right now. The scout's not going anywhere at this rate."

"How's the Marseilles coming along?" Harry asked, suddenly reminded.

Tom frowned. "We can't touch it. They've delayed every inspection--probably to coincide with the hearings. Alynna's been trying to speed it up. But they're still convinced we're going to take the kids and go on a murder spree in Cardassian space." He held his hand up against the protest written on Harry and Kathryn's faces. "I think they've done enough to ensure the scout's safety--more than enough. They know the cloak's gone, there's no torpedoes..."

"We have four children," B'Elanna pressed. "Why the hell would we risk their safety?" But as soon as she'd spoken, she sank back into her seat. "I just want to get the hell out of here. I hate this place."

Kathryn paused at that, seeing both their faces harden in a way she hadn't seen in years. "But your father..." she started, and revised that. "Are things still going well at home?"

"At my father's house?" Tom asked, shrugged. "He's been great. But he won't talk shop with either of us, even when we try. All of this is out of his control, anyway. It's not his department--and I won't ask him to make it his."

B'Elanna grinned. "Not to mention Mother's enjoying him."

Tom snorted. "They've definitely tested that new treaty for holes." He let out his breath, looked at the captain again. "It's not the people here, Kathryn. We love having our families around us again, even if I'm still working on mine. That's not the issue."

"Then what is, Tom?" Chakotay asked.

"We'd might as well be in prison here," Tom told him. "We're not free to come and go--we've been forbidden to so much as touch the scout. Avarar's off limits to anyone who wants to settle there. They follow us around--I think Starfleet gives more trust to complete strangers with more weapons. When we got here, we were told the scout would be held until it was safe and legal. It is, and they're

suddenly balking, as if we never spent a day away from the DMZ."

"You might have some influence with other surviving Maquis, Tom," Chakotay said. "I can see why they'd think that, since you never did give up your titles, or your ship. We were a pretty well known group in our day--and your reputation was renowned."

Tom grinned. "Well, everyone used to say I'd do great things when I grew up."

Chakotay couldn't help but laugh. "You did: You were a noteworthy pest," he told him.

"And dangerous," Kathryn added, not as amused and rather unsure of how to feel about that memory revived. Taking another drink of her cocktail, she regarded that man whom she'd once despised, distrusted, found every reason to avoid--with good reason, she'd once thought, long ago. "I remember your scout, too, Tom. Did you ever know that?"

Tom's brow rose a bit. "You did?"

"I was on the Lipking about six months before I got Voyager, surveying the boundaries of the Demilitarized Zone. Ring a bell?"

But both Tom and B'Elanna looked at each other, then back to her. "I remember it well," B'Elanna told her.

Kathryn was surprised, and showed it. "*You* do, B'Elanna?"

B'Elanna's mouth turned up. "Chakotay wanted to keep Tom and I busy--he was making us wait a little before we got married. --Remember Chakotay?"

The former captain grinned, nodded.

B'Elanna shrugged. "Well, Tom and I were off just patrolling, testing the sensor nets that had been set up near Quatal..." She looked at Harry. "The Federation had only just declared the Maquis official enemies the week before, and had laid out a new set of traps. Since we had the cloak, we could more easily map them out. We knew it was busywork: Chakotay thought we were rushing into things, as usual."

Chakotay laughed. "Well, you two *did* do fast work on each other."

Tom grinned. "We liked keeping you on your toes. You reacted so well."

"Thanks, Tom. I'll keep that in mind."

"Anyway," B'Elanna continued, "Tom had to go down into the hold to make some adjustments, and I was on the bridge with nothing to do when I saw the Lipking. I ran a sensor sweep and found a storehouse of medical supplies. --Kathryn, if you knew the hell we'd been going through with medical supplies, especially then, you'd have *given* them to us."

"You think?"

"You weren't there," Tom said soberly. "Children and teenagers, and their parents, dying of simple, painful infections after Cardassian attacked their worlds; our own people suffering from easily treatable injuries because we often didn't have tricorders that worked... There were docs, but not many. Gangrene from lacerations, pneumonia, frostbite from exposure, burns...a lot of burns." He

drew a breath. "We saw some pretty hard lives. It was a war, and a lot of people who never fought paid for that, this aside from the people who did take up arms."

Kathryn and Harry shared a respective glance. The former Maquis members had all quieted with the memory, as they often did when a "DMZ issue" was raised. Even Jenna, known for passing off such a thing to less serious topic, didn't bother, but downed her half glass of wine in three concerted swallows.

"So, *you* attacked the Lipking?" Harry asked B'Elanna, trying to get away from at least a part of what had paled his friends.

B'Elanna nodded herself out of that other time, and suddenly laughed. "What was bad about that was that I wasn't all that good at flying the Marseilles at the time. I jumped a little *too* hard on them."

Likewise glad to be back on the topic, Tom nodded, chuckling. "I remember getting thrown clear across the lower corridor and hearing B'Elanna screaming at me to get up to the bridge. So, I scrambled up to find B'Elanna transporting left and right. I finally got to the conn and helped. That was probably the fastest raid we ever did."

B'Elanna sighed off her laugh, looked at the captain again. "At the time, we didn't think about who was on the ship, Kathryn. We just tried to get what we could and not do too much damage in the process. I know we weren't always successful in that--but we did try."

Kathryn was silent for nearly a minute, shocked at her former engineer's admission, so much so that she didn't bother bringing up what injuries had occurred on the Lipking--three officers injured were the children of high ranking Starfleet officers, many others were civilians. *But how *could* they have known? They were scavengers.*

"I'd blamed Tom all that time," she said quietly. "Everybody did."

B'Elanna straightened as she leaned her arms on the table. "Almost every raid that Tom committed, Kathryn, I was a part of, if not having planned it in the first place, I tracked the ships we were going to raid. You take on the responsibility as a captain--but Tom and I shared ours, at least between each other. Everything that happened on the Marseilles was also my doing."

Kathryn took that in, and wondered why she'd never considered it before. But finally, she shook her head. "It doesn't make you any less distrusted."

"Maybe even more so," Tom said. "And they'll never let us back on Avarar. Never. Not thinking what they already do. At this point, I think we'll be lucky to get our ship back."

Harry frowned. "It doesn't seem right. Starfleet should know you wouldn't start any trouble or commit treason."

"According to their records, they're still Maquis," Chakotay said.

"So, where *will* you go, when the Marseilles is released?" Harry asked.

"First off?" Tom asked. "We'll go to Danula-two to see our old friends. Azro and Isabel were good friends of ours on Avarar. We tried to contact them, but we haven't gotten a reply."

B'Elanna grinned sadly. "Losing Avarar must have been even worse for her. She was born there, grew up there. Everything she knew was on that world."

"Have you made arrangements at Oslon, yet?" Kathryn asked.

"K'Karn's lined up a position for me in a transwarp research team," B'Elanna said.

"It's a nice colony," Chakotay offered, knowing both from instinct and their tones that neither wanted to go there. "Good population, peaceful, diverse, busy."

Tom nodded. "There's land available near a range. B'Elanna and I wouldn't mind having something like that. The kids would like it."

Kathryn's mind started working on that, as she ran her finger along the brim of her glass. "Who was in charge of those so-called inspections again? Admiral Peozet, was it?"

B'Elanna drew down her brow. "Yes. Why?"

"Well, I was just thinking," Kathryn said quietly, "that nobody really knows you or the children. They don't know any of us, really. Why not let them get to know you again? Make them see you're not what your older records say."

"If they won't listen to what you've said," Tom said, "why would they look at that?"

Kathryn smiled. "A wise man once told me that official records only paint in black and white." She looked at Chakotay, who was already smiling at that. "Maybe showing them some color would help? I'm attending a luncheon on Thursday, and I know your father will be there, too. It's the prelude to the Stellar Anomalies conference here next week. You might want to attend. I noticed Peozet on the list."

"Yeah, he's a regular social butterfly," Tom smirked.

"And he doesn't know you very well, either," Kathryn pointed out then looked at B'Elanna. "It certainly couldn't hurt."

B'Elanna thought about that. She and Tom had been careful to retain their privacy since Voyager's return--which was not unlike how they had been on Voyager, only that it was a conscious effort on Earth. They took their own time to themselves and the children, socialized only lightly and maintained their close group of friends. They were not interested in becoming food for gossip or the newswire--and they definitely didn't want the children to be exposed. However, it was just a luncheon, and other children would likely be there, along with normal people...and Peozet.

Sharing a look with Tom, she shrugged

Owen bolted up at the first scream, and jumped from his bed to blindly throw on his robe. The baby was hollering spastically, echoing through the upper floor of the house. Like hell had ascended, he thought, wondering if the baby somehow fell from her crib, if there'd been an accident--or worse.

He ran into the hall and activated the lamp on the table in case they needed to go out again. But before he could continue on, he felt a tug on his robe. He jerked around and looked down at four surprisingly unbothered eyes.

"It's okay, Grandpa. Daddy had a scary dream," Kiarn told him. Alaine was behind him, nodding.

"It happens sometimes," Alaine said, "but Mommy and Daddy say it's okay. It wakes Isabel up, though, and Mommy can't get her back down right away. But it won't last long."

"It just sounds bad," Kiarn added.

Owen continued to stare at his two sober and unafraid grandchildren. He had come to know they were very strong-spirited youngsters, like their parents. But in that chaos, they were unaffected as their baby sister hollered in the other room, loudly enough that even he had rushed from his own bed. He couldn't help his shock.

Reigning himself, he gave them a firm nod. "Well, go back to bed, then. Like you said, it'll be all right."

"Mommy doesn't like other people to go in right now," Alaine warned him.

Owen almost grinned at the girl's knowing tone. Apparently, she'd seen *that*, too. Even so, he had to shake his head. "Your mother might need help. It wouldn't be right for me not to offer. Now go to bed."

Alaine opened her mouth, but decided against it. Eyeing him wisely, she took her brother back to their room. They did peek back out the door however, once their grandfather turned back to their parents' room.

"He's gonna get it," Alaine told her brother.

"Yeah," Kiarn said, waiting.

It tore her heart, but B'Elanna couldn't go to Isabel just then. She had before and Tom's choking, strangled gasps started again, followed by cries that stirred Isabel anew. Tom had already scratched his face and arms. He'd do worse to himself, she knew, if she did nothing. Isabel had great volume, but she wouldn't be hurt. So, she decided one thing at a time would have to do it.

Wrestling her husband's wrists into hers, she kept talking to him, telling him to wake up, she straddled his torso and prepared to get him up the hard way.

"Goddamnit!" he spat and bucked, trying to writhe away. "Go away!"

Isabel cried out again.

B'Elanna gripped his wrists hard.

"No! Stop!! --I won't!"

She was ready to pin him when she heard the door open behind her, saw the hall light in the corner of her eye. "Leave Daddy and I alone, please," she called. "I'll come tuck you in soon."

"B'Elanna, have you--"

She spun around at the admiral's voice and glared at him. "Get out, Dad! Now!"

Owen shook his head numbly at the sight of his convulsive son and his wild-eyed wife--hair strewn about her shoulders and face, trying to hold Tom down as their infant hollered nearby. "Is that what's--"

"I mean it! *Out!*"

"He needs professional help, B'Elanna! Look at him!"

She ignored that as she felt Tom still a little. Turning, she yet quickly backed up when one of her husband's hands got free. Before he could swing, B'Elanna jumped to her feet and rushed upon the admiral, pushing him by the chest out of the room.

"You *listen* to me when I talk to you, you fucking idiot! You don't know anything and it's none of your business! GET OUT!!!" she bellowed and shoved him back, slamming the door after him. She heard him crash against the hall table and didn't care. She had enough problems.

Flipping her hair to the side, she went back to Tom, got his hands under her knees as she straddled him again, and cracked him across the face. "Wake up!"

Owen was silent when B'Elanna all but crawled into the kitchen late the next morning to prepare Isabel's meal. Even so, she greeted him with her usual brief smile before moving to the counter. The baby sat on her hip, leaning contentedly on her mother's chest, sucking on her pacifier like nothing unusual had happened the night before. B'Elanna might have let that be, too.

He still could see the tension etched in her face, her tiredness. He could hear the other children outside. They had eaten early. He sipped at his coffee at first, waiting for her to say something. She didn't.

Finally, he drew a breath. "Is Tom all right?"

She didn't stop her preparations. "He's asleep," she replied, mixing the cereal and milk by hand for the right consistency. The replicator never did get it right. Glancing back at the unmoved form, she sped the spoon. "Tom and I have been handling this for years, Dad. It's something he and I have to help each other with. Stress makes his mind work overtime, brings the memories back."

"Which memories?" Owen almost didn't ask, but somehow let slip past his tongue.

"The girl on Avalor," B'Elanna told him. "Tom wrote you about it, right?"

"That same dream?" He was truly concerned. "Still?"

"It hasn't come around like this for a few years." B'Elanna shrugged, less bothered by it. "This...move, it hasn't been easy for him. He always feels like he should be able to do something, and that's definitely not the case right now. It's stress."

"The children woke up last night, you know."

"Of course I know," B'Elanna returned, "Tom put them back to bed. They know their father has bad dreams sometimes, just like everyone else, just that his are a little worse." She was still for a moment before continuing her stirring. "We're not perfect, Dad," she said quietly. "We do our best, what we can. The children know it and so do we. We just try to keep going, stick together and take what comes one thing at a time. It's not always pretty, but it's all we can do."

"Are you certain you haven't exhausted all your options for psychological treatment?" Owen suggested gently, but immediately saw her dismissal of that idea.

B'Elanna was still as patient as she could be. "Tom doesn't want a professional--or sedatives," she told him, "and I support his wishes."

He was concerned, she knew. He meant well. In a way, she was glad to have the topic on the table, so he would understand more. Yet she wasn't finished with what she needed to say.

"I know I should have told you earlier, but I'd appreciate it if you allowed us our privacy when we're dealing with it, Dad. Tom doesn't like other people to see him like that, and though you're kind to be concerned and to offer, I don't need the help."

"Very well," Owen resigned reluctantly, realizing that was the closest she would come to an apology for her behavior. Though tiredly neutral, he knew she was not sorry in the least.

And perhaps she has the right to be, he thought, imagining again the look on her face when she'd turned to him the night before. She had enough to deal with without other people involved, and he understood that need.

"I will leave you to him, then." He sipped at coffee again, though it was growing cold. "You do know there are neural devices that can control those sorts of disturbances."

B'Elanna shook her head, turned to tap on the replicator. "That only made it worse, Dad. There's no good in pushing it away. No, when he gets up, before we go out, Tom will take his bundle where he won't be disturbed and work with it on his own."

Owen paused on that. He'd already seen the device, been told about the meditative practice by Commander Chakotay. "And you truly believe that's enough?"

She nodded. "Yes, I do. It's been good for us."

He was surprised--the commander hadn't told him that much. "For you too?"

B'Elanna brought the small bowl of food and a replicated bottle to the table, allowed her father-in-law to pull her chair for her. "Thank you... Yes, I started using it, too--at first out of curiosity, then later because I saw what it could help me with."

"Well, if it does help."

B'Elanna knew the admiral wasn't convinced--not that she expected him to be. But she didn't bother pressing it, didn't dare tell him it hadn't been very easy on her of late, either. Her own recent explorations had been confusing at best. Of course, it wasn't his business, anyway.

"It's just not an instant solution; nothing really is, I guess." Giving Isabel her bottle, she looked to her father-in-law again. "I hope you were able to get back to sleep."

"I was, after a while." He finished his cup and stood from the table. "So, what have you planned for today?" he asked, sliding on his tunic.

B'Elanna shrugged, caressing Isabel's soft hair. "Same thing as usual."

At the same time, she knew that the usual wasn't going to get them anywhere.

*But there is something we *can* do*, she knew as she tapped a spoonful of Isabel's cereal against the bowl, her eyes drifting in thought, *that nobody would mind at all.*

"It's a good idea," Alynna said as she watched Tom pour B'Elanna a glass of wine and some seltzer for himself. Then he took his seat by her, leaning back into the patio seat as if he belonged there. "As you said, it won't hurt."

"I don't expect much from it, though," Tom dismissed, stretching his arm out on the backrest behind B'Elanna.

"Maybe not now, but later, it might be a point in your favor."

"Let's hope."

The admiral couldn't help the small smile that found him as he relaxed against the cushions of his chair. *When did my son get so refined? he mused, so comfortable? Even with me, he's so at ease.... It's hard to believe he can't sleep well, he's so relaxed--but of course, perhaps those dreams do release that negative energy.*

For whatever reason it was, it still surprised and pleased him when he let himself notice it, the difference. He would never have expected, for example, them to even consider attending a Starfleet luncheon. He'd been convinced they'd rather have been left alone, for all the other invitations they had turned down.

Needless to say, Owen was very supportive.

"I for one think it would be an good opportunity for you to get know some of the people involved in your case," he told them. "Just because they're required to investigate you doesn't make you their enemy."

B'Elanna smirked, eyeing him. "Dad, you know why we're going to this, don't you?"

"Don't you think I've played the politician for a while, B'Elanna?" he replied knowingly. "Scooping up information at a get-together is an unspoken tradition here."

"And don't think they don't know it, too," Alynna added.

"Hobnobbing," Tom said sourly. "Trust me, if we weren't desperate for some kind of progress at this point, it wouldn't happen."

Owen quieted a little at that. "Are you so anxious to leave, Tom?"

Tom did not mistake that turn. He knew it well--and refused to play. He had enough games to worry about before playing them with his father. "Yes, Dad," he said, catching his father's gaze. "The Marseilles is our work, our research, our transportation, our house away from home. Sure, we're anxious to have it back, and be able to fly her again and land her on a home where we can get on with our lives. We're not going to be able to do any of that again without our ship."

B'Elanna nodded, swallowing a sip of wine. "We put the Marseilles back together after we discovered it. There's a lot of history on that ship, Dad--and not just Maquis history, but seven years serving Voyager, too. That's not something you get over, something you just give up."

Owen sighed, still grinning slightly. "Yes. I suppose you have become attached. Reminds me of Kathryn, the way you talk about it."

Neither Tom nor B'Elanna said a word.

Alyna had closed her eyes, but tapped her glass with her fingers at the unintentional insult Owen had tossed at the couple--and she didn't know whether to grin at the fact she knew Owen hadn't meant it. "Well," she said opening her eyes, "I might throw some invitations creatively around, make sure some people show up?"

"I think I can come up with a few names," B'Elanna said. "Some of our friends from Voyager who are still here on Earth are coming, too."

"That sounds good," Owen said. "I could see about some introductions as well."

"But remember what you said about not expecting too much," Alyna warned. "This should only be a notch in swinging some favor your way."

"We know," B'Elanna told her. "Nothing but a foot in the door, as Tom puts it."

"And you might even enjoy it, too, you know," Owen said.

Tom shook his head. "No, I don't think so, Dad."

"You don't know that for certain," the older man countered. "You might make some new connections."

"But not much more than that," Tom told him, then took a drink of his seltzer. Leaning back on the patio chair again, his eyes drifted outwards.

"This is just business," B'Elanna clarified quietly, her own stare having drifted to the void Tom's inhabited. "Nothing more"

"And you are pandering to these...people for what purpose?" Miral queried, raising her eyes from the bowl of peppers she was preparing for the children.

B'Elanna did not smile as she quickly finished packing bottles from the replicator into a bag. "It's a luncheon, Mother. We're all just going to get to know each other. That's all."

By her responsive expression, the mother knew her daughter's real meaning and snarled at it, anyway. "It's pointless."

Tom grinned a bit, and unconvincingly. "How do you say it? *Hoch 'ebmey tljon?* --You were the one who suggested it."

"Your pronunciation is wretched," Miral replied, "and you were the one to speak of waiting for the right opportunities. But this...garden party?"

She looked at her children, dressed not unlike themselves, though she could tell the clothes were new. B'Elanna in particular looked pretty: She had braided a side of her dark hair, brushed the remainder to neatly curl around her shoulders. She wore a long, light tunic with trim around the square collar, black leggings and matching heeled shoes.

They liked as though they were on show for purchase.

"It's...sickening." She shook her head with a growl. "Even I never bothered with such idiocy on Kessik."

"You never had to," B'Elanna pointed out. "It's all we can do--our hands are tied in every other way. We can't go out and beat up everyone that gets in our way. You know damn well things don't work like that here."

Her mouth was ready to say more, but her mother was too thoroughly disgusted to make any good use of whatever else she could say. So, B'Elanna turned to her husband. "I'll go get Isabel dressed." Offering her mother one more look then left the kitchen.

Miral could only shake her head to watch her child. "My daughter has chosen her life, but I never imagined she would have to resort to this."

"Trust me," Tom said, "we wouldn't bother with most of those people if we knew of any other options right now. We just want to get settled, Miral. Anything to speed it up won't hurt in the end. And they *will* drag their feet if we don't bother them. They have to know our faces in order to know what's bothering them."

"Your officials are the truest cowards I have ever encountered, and it is a dishonor for you to have to endure it."

"I can deal with the dishonor for now if it gets my ship back," he told her. "B'Elanna's not the only stubborn person in the family, you know."

Miral nodded firmly. "If only for now," she replied simply and went back to her peppers

The wind had shifted to the sea, and the sun had begun a downward path towards it when B'Elanna gladly sank back into a big garden chair after they'd finally waved goodbye to Chakotay, and then to Jenna and her children, who had walked them back from the Starfleet grounds.

It had been a wonderful lunch. Everybody had a wonderful time. The food was wonderful, the discussions lively and interesting.

With Isabel on her hip much of the time, B'Elanna had made many contacts with fellow engineers, discussing the latest releases in commissions and tests--everything that was public knowledge, anyway. She told them of her experiments with transwarp drives, more efficient plasma usage, of a safer intermix manifold, which she herself had installed on Voyager. She let them compliment her and her children.

Tom had spent more time with Alaine, Kiarn and Andre, herding them around and watching them explore the park. But he had also struck up some conversations with several captains curious about some stellar phenomena in the Delta Quadrant, and Tom told them everything they asked to hear, good naturedly describing those things that he too had shamelessly been thrilled to experience first hand--subspace rifts, transwarp, collapsed stars, and so forth.

When Harry and Seven gravitated over--many of their friends had shown up for moral support--Tom quickly included them in the conversation before easing himself out to go see if the children were hungry. Looking back to them, he caught Harry's grin, and returned it.

Throughout the luncheon, they spoke with many people, from fellow civilians to admirals, diplomats

and representatives to Daystrom scientists, and their spouses. They joined in with Kathryn to meet one captain or another doctor. They allowed Owen to introduce them. They studiously avoided Admiral Peozet, only letting him see them.

Everyone ended up glad to have met the Parises, hoped they would meet them again. They were a witty, intelligent couple with handsome, well-behaved children and a lot to look forward to in their respective careers.

Tom and B'Elanna were glad it was over.

"That went well," she said emotionlessly, though she smiled as her two boys crawled up on either side of her on the chair. "What did you think, Kiarn?"

"I dunno," he shrugged, leaning into his mother's open arm. He looked up at her, his mouth turning up only slightly. "It was okay. Not like on Voyager."

She smiled, stroking Andre's curly hair when his head landed on her lap. "Nothing could be. But Kathryn and Jenna and Chakotay were there."

"Yeah. But it's still not like Voyager."

Tom had taken a seat across from them. "So now it's back to the waiting game, then."

B'Elanna nodded slowly. "I guess so. When's our next petition date?"

"Monday."

"That's right."

Alaine snuck up behind her father, but decided again, seeing they were tired. Instead of playing a game on him, she went around to likewise get up on the chair with a parent. He immediately lifted her up onto his lap, started fussing with her braid, pulling it apart. She patiently allowed the habit, peered up to him. "Daddy?"

"Yeah, sweetheart?"

"Are we ever going to go home to Avalar?"

Tom didn't answer at first. He knew without looking that B'Elanna had tensed at the question. "I don't think so, Alaine."

"What about our ship?"

"That's what we're waiting for."

The girl sighed and turned to hug him, squeezing his ribs. "I'm sorry, Daddy."

"You don't have to be sorry," Tom said, trying not to choke on his words as he stroked her hair. "Sometimes things just don't work out as you plan them. You just have...to move on, do something different. As long as we're all together and we're safe, though, it's not all that bad."

"But you and Mommy are sad," Kiarn said. "Alaine and I know you are. And Jenna says you are too 'cause it's taking so long. So, you have to be. Right?"

"Wite," Andre chimed tiredly. "You hafta cause Denna said."

B'Elanna grinned. "Well, far be it from Jenna to be wrong. I guess we are disappointed. But Daddy's right. As long as we're all together and we're okay, we'll be just fine."

Straightening at the window, Miral shook her head tersely. Even she could tell at that distance her daughter hated every minute of that day she had to spend at that gathering--as had Tom. The older woman had yet to see her children's hearts in their attempts. Waiting to see it again was becoming just as frustrating for her.

But she knew it would never happen: Not in that place that was not their home. Not in that place that trapped their souls, not in the least. Not doing a thing that no matter how well executed, was unwanted and useless. They had tried again, and failed again--and knew they would fail again. *How long must this continue?* she wondered as she watched them talking quietly in the garden, beginning to lighten their conversations with the children, as they always did. *How long will stubbornness--in inaction--serve them? Or does it serve them at all?*

They were now becoming more desperate, more willing to display themselves prettily among the people whom they had once fought bravely, proudly, honorably, in order to produce change. A sickening prospect.

"You are cowards to make them walk on this path," she told the man behind her, just arrived and grinning until she spoke. In a way, she was glad to see his satisfaction melt away. The smile had annoyed her yet more the moment she saw it.

Owen rolled his eyes. "Miral, I refuse to debate with your opinions."

"I am telling you what I see--and they are smothering in your...customs. Yet you allow it to happen, let them become so willing to sacrifice their pride. It's disgusting."

"I can't snap my fingers and make things happen over there."

"Have you yet tried to help your children?" the other woman countered, still glaring at Owen. "Or are you still wondering where your own heart lies?"

Owen breathed deeply, let it out. "I came to terms with my son years ago. The rest isn't your business."

"Perhaps. Still, you do nothing for them. You let them parade themselves around like items and insult themselves for these strangers who do not care for them. I would act--I would demand and fight them all. But on this world, it would be their defeat. You, on the other hand, might cooperate with their desires--you have the power and reputation to do so, to fight alongside Alynna Nechayev--"

"There's a conflict of interest that I don't think you understand Pra--"

"*qoH!*" the woman spat. "Your political world and its comforts. How easy it is that you hide behind social mores and be excused for not acting! You remind me of the man I divorced." She leaned on the table, as if ready to pounce at the man. "You are useless."

Owen almost spoke, but just shook his head, moved away from her. "And you're not worth arguing with," he muttered and walked out of the kitchen.

The Maquis pilot had what gear he could carry, slung over his shoulder, his other arm around his wife's waist as the Voyager's chief of security escorted them to the assigned quarters on deck five.

The engineer wasn't carrying anything--her husband said they'd go back for more some other time. They walked wordlessly, emotionless as the Vulcan that preceded them.

B'Elanna had already been assigned to engineering. Actually, Chakotay had all but begged her outright to take the commission. He needed her there, especially then, with as much work as they would need done to get them home, much less repair the ship. Growling, she finally agreed. As much as she had always wanted to get her hands on the new Starfleet technology she'd heard about, the thought of wearing a Starfleet uniform disgusted her.

"Unless you're desperate for someone at the conn," Tom told him plainly when the attention turned to him, "don't even bother asking me. And I'll never--I mean this--*never* wear a Starfleet uniform again. --Please Chakotay, don't ask me to go against every oath I've made. I'll support everything else here, but don't ask me the impossible. I'll just feel bad about shoving it back at you later."

"But we might need you in navigation, doing--"

"Chakotay," B'Elanna interrupted, "you might get me into that engine room, and I'll do it for you and because I believe you when you say I'm needed. But don't pressure my husband into doing maintenance any child could do. It's an insult and against his best beliefs. End of subject."

With a steady breath, their captain nodded. He respected them too much to argue them, especially then with half a ship full of raw feelings, and a full ship of homeless people. Besides, he still had Jenna's assignment to take care of, and Tom had also been useful in Sickbay. Until he could convince the captain otherwise about a position at the conn, he let the subject go.

Some hours later, though, they did agree to leave the Marseilles and go to their new quarters, another thing they didn't want any part of. Their new "home," as some unthinking ensign had called it before Tuvok, the spy, had dismissed the young man.

When the door opened, they simply stood at the entrance, looking in as Tuvok activated the lights. Plain and gray with a blue cloth couch and artwork that didn't appeal to them, it said nothing to them but that they'd be sleeping there. There wasn't even a window.

With a sigh, Tom led B'Elanna in and set their bags on the carpeted floor. "Thanks, Lieutenant. You can go now."

Tuvok's brow twitched upwards at the casual command. Withholding whatever the twitch had put in his mind, he offered a nod and left. The door shut with a whoosh and Tom dropped the duffel.

B'Elanna crossed her arms. "I hate it."

"It is Starfleet ugly, isn't it?" Tom agreed sourly. "Guess we can't call in a decorator, but we might as well live with it."

"*You* live with it, Tom!" she returned, glaring at him. "This is a nightmare and we both know it!"

"What do you want me to do, B'Elanna?" he demanded. "Put the array back together chunk by

chunk? That might take a while."

She growled and spun to grab their bags. "I just want to go home," she snapped, stomping off to the sleeping area.

"So do I!"

She threw the bags on the bed. "I hate this."

"So do I."

"I hate that woman for stranding us out here."

Tom drew a slow breath. "So do I."

She stopped, feeling his intent reply, realizing--as if she didn't know before--how equally angry and powerless he was. More, she knew how much more likely it was for him to not express it, and how useless it was for them to fight over it. It was done. They could do nothing. They had to take what they'd been served.

Taking her own slow breath, she held her hand back for him. "Might as well unpack now."

"Yeah," Tom said, and moved to take her fingers in his. There, however, he stopped, ran his thumb over her small, warm hand. It was rigid from palm to fingertips, he noticed, even though she'd been the one to offer it. "I'm not being much support right now, I know."

"This isn't any easier for you," she admitted. "I don't expect you to work miracles, Tom."

"And I don't expect you to just live with it. Let's just get through today, see what happens tomorrow."

She nodded. "I guess that's all we can do, isn't it?" she said, sighed. She stilled for a moment, looking at the homely bed linens without focusing. "I wonder what Isabel will think when they start believing we'll never come home," she said numbly. "She was so thrilled to find out we'd be there for each other, with our babies... Tom, her baby."

"Azro will take care of her," he assured. "He's still got all those texts, and a COMM line to Palod for emergencies, remember? Isabel will be just fine."

B'Elanna nodded slightly, pulled her stare up again. "We're going to be here probably the rest of our lives, Tom. On this...ship."

The thought was just as happy to him.

She lowered herself to sit on the side of the bed. He sat next to her. They silently looked over their quarters again. For many minutes, they examined it. There wasn't much to see, but they did it anyway, mainly for lack of anything else to do.

"We'll need something bigger after the baby comes," Tom finally said, quiet above the hum of the ship.

"Good. These are horrible." Her fingers caressed his hand softly; he embraced hers, warming it. "Maybe then we'll have decided what to do with it? Make it more bearable?"

Tom almost grinned, but feeling his heart well up again, he instead pulled B'Elanna into his embrace, needing a hug himself. "I love you, B'Elanna," he whispered thickly. "I said it before, and I mean it more than ever. --You are my home now."

B'Elanna drug a breath and finally let it go, feeling the tears escape her despite her better impulses. She clung hard to him, closed her eyes as they wetted. "You're mine, too."

"The entire shield array?!" Tom was stunned as he read the report, glad that B'Elanna was with Jenna and her children with the kids that day. Kathryn and Harry were there too, as they'd all planned a picnic on the bright green, hilly land around Jenna's mother-in-law's house. B'Elanna had left with them so he could drop off their latest inquiry and get an update. He was glad she had gone ahead. "What the hell would you want with the entire array?"

In his mind, he ticked off all the days it would take for them to reinstall it. His heart pounded with dread, even as he felt himself heating.

"It was connected to the cloaking device."

"The cloak's gone to space dust right now," Tom told the woman at the desk. "I want to file a formal protest against this--now."

"The decision of the panel is final, Mister Paris," said the commander neutrally, yet trying to be kind. She'd been through the same conversation with the pilot so many times, the entire topic of protest had become redundant--and she hated that. The Parises were not a bad couple at all, despite their understandable stubbornness.

He took a long breath. "Where is Admiral Peozet?"

"At the Lagaran conference."

"I thought he was assigned to the Marseilles' case," Tom said tersely, quietly, fighting his reddening face. He could feel his pulse begin to pound.

The commander visibly paled. "Sir, I am sorry. I wish things were different, but Admiral Peozet does have other concerns at this time. If you would check back next week--"

"Next *week*?!" Tom threw up his hands. "This is pointless!" he exclaimed. "Next week, next month: I'm willing to bet next time they'll be telling me next *year*! You people... How in the hell did I ever *function* in this place?" He shook his head, waved away any words she was preparing to say. "Forget it. I'm going. This is useless."

With that, Tom spun and strode out of the office, found himself looking for something he could get away with hitting--and he wondered to himself how long it'd been since anything had made him that angry and frustrated that he'd want to do that.

He went to Alynna's office first. She was in a meeting. Managing to leave a clear message for her, he left again, shouldering around the passers-by, wondering where he was going in the first place. People were staring at him as he strode past them. He didn't address them; he didn't look or even care about

them.

*My ship, our equipment--as if it's their property...I *know* exactly where I stole my parts from! He laughed bitterly to himself on that train of thought. That's just it--we're nothing but reformed thieves to them...Nothing more.*

Seething his breaths, he found himself darting up the familiar staircase to his father's office, down the hall, to the left--a path that came back naturally to him, even after so many years. But his mood then was certainly not one of a nervous teenager. Even he realized it when Klenman started back a bit at the look he greeted her with.

"Is my father alone?" he asked her.

The captain nodded. "Yes, Tom, but--"

"Thanks." Tom spun and punched the door panel button.

In four long strides, he was at his father's desk and glaring down into his eyes. "I need your help," he stated plainly and dropped the PADD in front of his father. "They're going to strip the entire shield array out of the Marseilles, and Peozet's having lunch with resort proprietors!"

"Calm down," Owen told him and took the PADD to read it.

Tom paced a little through the office, barely looking at the pictures, or out the window, but turned back only when he heard his father sigh. "Well?"

"I'm afraid there's nothing I can do," Owen said. It was the truth.

"I didn't think you could," he said impatiently, "since you're nowhere near any of this. But is there anything I can do--or maybe Alynna? *Anyone?* I need advice, some serious advice, because I don't know what to do anymore."

Though pleased his son had thought to come to him, he couldn't help but wish it'd been on something else. "This was decided by the command panel overseeing your case in private hearing," Owen said, shaking his head. "I and Alynna both have no business even reading this, much less interfering."

Tom laughed bitterly. "Then what the hell was the use kissing up to those assholes in the first place?! God! Miral was dead on. It was idiotic!"

"Calm down," Owen told his son, more firmly that time. Standing--with Tom in that mood, he felt an urge to be more on his level--he caught Tom's stare, and was a little surprised how strongly it was returned. But he knew what he had to say, and said it plainly. "Now, for one, Tom, you should feel fortunate that you and B'Elanna were not given prison sentences. What's happening with your ship is normal--and generous, I might add--considering the extent of the crimes you committed in them."

"That was years ago--two wars ago! And what we did then was try to survive and protect our own."

Owen grit his teeth. "You were terrorists," he said, the words coming hard to his tongue, "and you were thieves."

"By *your* law, Dad," Tom answered.

"And yours too, now," Owen countered. "You are Federation citizens again--and you have to comply

to the laws contained within it."

Tom nodded slowly, not breaking eye contact with his father for an instant. "You're right that it's good we didn't get sentences," he stated. "I won't argue that with you. But I will never believe that what the Maquis was doing in the DMZ was the wrong thing. If believing that's a crime, you'd better put me away for life."

"You know as well as I do you're perfectly free to believe what you will," Owen said. "But in the light of Starfleet's leniency in your case, you should feel lucky you have been accepted as a citizen again, Tom. Some people still would not have allowed it."

"I'd rather give it up all over again than live like this."

Owen paused at that, furrowed his brow. "Live like what, Tom? On Earth, with all your needs met, in a good home with your fam--"

"This isn't my home," Tom told him. "I don't belong here--if I ever did, I haven't in a long time. As for how I'm living--seeing my friends under the Starfleet grill for *surviving*? Seeing Kathryn have to fight for her command for keeping two shiploads of people alive and functioning thousands of light years away from a Starbase? Our doctor fight for his very existence because Starfleet thinks he's just an old model with a smart mouth? They're just not satisfied with anything once they get their hands on it, are they? They take my ship, rip apart years worth of my wife's work on it; they take our home away, make us wait around while they screw with protocols and kowtow at conferences, send people to keep an eye on us. --Yeah, Dad, if you think I don't notice the "observers" when I take my children out to the park, you're wrong.

"They will never trust us, never forgive us, when we would have helped you, Starfleet--if you'd let us. We'll never work hard enough, do what they want enough to gain an ounce of their trust. At least in the Maquis, a person had a chance at that. And working on Voyager, I'd actually changed my mind about it, actually started forgiving Starfleet again. --But I guess I was wrong, because now I get to deal with Peozet, who's too balless to take anything to my face, and a whole league of self-satisfied officials who think it's okay to treat us and our friends like puppets. All this in addition to what's happened to all the other colonists who were unfortunate enough to ever have contact with the Federation? You're damn right I don't want to live like this--sucking up to people who don't respect us and don't give a damn how we feel or how this is affecting us. If I could just get my ship back, I'd get B'Elanna and the kids packed up and leave for Oslon *tomorrow*."

Owen held his son's glare, though he felt his blood rise and his heart thrummed with an unusual nervousness. He had never seen his son so bold. His son, the Maquis, did not back down. At the same time, his eyes narrowed, too. "Well, at least I know how you really feel."

Tom somehow held his temper in check. Though practiced at it, his father had unintentionally made that very difficult. "This has nothing to do with *you*. This is *my* family, *my* wife, *our* ship, *our* situation, I'm talking about--not you." But Tom gave up on the rest. Arguing with his father would get them nowhere. "You can't suggest anything that I might do, look into--anyone I can talk to?"

"I'm sorry," he said, almost unwillingly. "No. I know no one off hand that can tell you anything new, either."

He nodded slowly, accepting that. Slowly, Tom went to the desk and picked the PADD up. "Thanks anyway," he said, his voice tinged with an ironic gentleness, even regard.

Owen watched the man turn, the hem of his gray coat catching the air slightly in his momentum as he made his way to the door. Leaving. On a last minute thought, he said, "Where are you going, Tom?"

Tom glanced back, notably calmer yet distant in tone when he answered, "To break the news to B'Elanna."

An hour later, PADD in hand, white faced with that latest development, B'Elanna walked into Admiral Nechayev's office. After waiting in the corridor for Alynna's meeting to end--eyes on the floor as the various officers filed out, talking amongst each other, hardly noticing her--she slipped back into the office. She totally ignored the admiral's secretary.

"It's all right, lieutenant," Alynna told the young officer who followed B'Elanna in. B'Elanna gave her the short version, and the admiral stilled. Even Alynna hadn't been aware of it that time. Putting aside her other report, she read the PADD. Her mouth pursed as she, still reading, reached out and contacted Peozet's office.

A half-hour later, B'Elanna had not moved from her place when Alynna cut the last connection with a heavy sigh.

"I'm sorry, my hands are tied," the admiral had to say.

The younger woman seemed intent for a moment on just reigning herself in, taking deep breaths between half-laughs of disbelief. "You mean there's *nothing* we can do anymore?"

"I never said that," Alynna said. "I just said I couldn't do anything about this decision." She moved around to the other side of her side, taking a seat there, folding her hands. "I'm afraid I can't stop the removals."

B'Elanna bent her head, turning from side to side in utter disbelief. "Those fucking bastards are going to take my engine apart piece by piece," she growled. "They don't have the right, Alynna. They don't... God, I wish we'd never come back."

At the same time, she knew well how grateful she was to the admiral--the only one in Starfleet Command that was openly on their side anymore, the one who'd ironically done more for the Maquis than anyone. B'Elanna also knew that Nechayev had taken some flack for it all as well.

But she wished she could curse at least something just then. She felt as if her head would burst with frustration. "I don't know how your people get anything done," she said, shaking her head. "How do you *live* with this bureaucracy?"

Alynna grinned. "Well, it's worked so far--with a little ass kicking, anyway. B'Elanna, I'm a field admiral. I'm usually not even posted to Earth. But when I heard that Voyager had come home, I requested some time here. I wanted to see Tom, meet you again." She eyed her young friend. "I can poke around and ask questions here, but I don't have any real power but my word."

"It's more than anything else we've gotten," B'Elanna told her. "Nobody else trusts us, and we've tried to get things going fairly. After all our petitions, all our talking, even after that insipid garden party--Tom and I really didn't want to do it--"

"I noticed," Alynna replied with a wise grin. "Believe it or not, though, it did help a little. It at least loosened a few opinions about you."

"It didn't do enough," B'Elanna returned. "We're still here and our ship is still at Sonoma--most of it,

anyway, as far as I know."

Alynnna sighed shortly. "Well, Peozet's an old nit with a small heart. It's why they gave him the case in the first place. Is that what you want to hear?"

"It's what I expected to hear," B'Elanna replied dourly. "Let's just face it: No matter what Tom and I do, they'll look at us and always say--'Maquis terrorists, thieves, criminals.'"

"But you are Maquis, B'Elanna. You and Tom were the ones who held on to that."

"Yes. But doesn't fighting for what we honestly believe in mean anything here?"

"I think it does," Alynnna answered thoughtfully, "but not everyone's going to see things like you do. You know that." Her eyes drew away for a moment then found the other woman's again. "Tell me something, B'Elanna: Did Tom tell you much about his mother?"

B'Elanna nodded. "He liked to talk about her. Why?"

Getting up from the desk, Alynnna walked to the window, almost aimlessly. "I see a lot of her in him," she said, "even if he's become more outspoken than she ever was. I even see a little of her in you, the way you are with the children, around the house...how cautious you are. Alaine was very...controlled. She buried a lot, though she was still very much herself, too, very sociable and cheerful. I guess a better way to say it is that she had a knack of having people know only what she wanted them to know. You and Tom are both like that."

Alynnna turned at the window, leaning back against it. "You know I was assigned to hunt you--all of you, the Maquis." Alynnna stared hard at B'Elanna, her ironic grin disappearing. "I didn't like it--but I did do it. I did it well. I was given a commendation for my action in the field."

B'Elanna nodded. "You took down the Iseran cell," she said, and smirked at the other woman's slight surprise. "We had good informants."

"I helped make the situation you lived in. I made the deals, B'Elanna."

"You also helped the colonists--and us--when you thought *that* was right, too. We know that. Why bring it up?"

Alynnna's lips twitched upwards briefly; for a moment, her eyes averted. "You'll think I'm crazy," she said quietly, then looked up again, "but I'm glad Tom was there, in the DMZ, the Maquis, seeing how things turned out. And I'm damn glad I never was able to arrest him. I'd have put a man I knew as my godchild in prison... No, that would've tested me. That would have been hell. It was hard enough trying to. I think that more than ever now, seeing what being a Maquis has done for him--criminal or not." She watched her friend agree with a blink. "B'Elanna, if continuing to embrace your Maquis ideals makes you two happy, makes you what you are, then that's fine. It doesn't bother me."

"That's blasphemy," B'Elanna told her, crossing her arms to regard the Alynnna anew. "You're an admiral telling us to be more Maquis?"

"I'm also free to believe what I feel strongly about," the admiral countered. "I know you wouldn't do anything to harm anyone unless you knew you had to, to defend yourself or others. That's what the Maquis were doing, at least in the beginning, when you and Tom were in it. It got out of hand after you were gone, when the incursions became more bloody, and the Maquis became downright ruthless and got on the offensive, rather than the defensive. Those people I had little sympathy for. But I did

know that fight well enough to know the difference.

"You're completely right--many people here will never stop thinking about you as criminals, and there are others who are still too fresh from the war. Some people won't separate you from the more violent Maquis who didn't give a damn about what they were shooting at. So it will be hard to make things happen for you here."

"So I've noticed."

"At the same time," Alynna continued, "I didn't get to this rank without raising at least a few hackles. I'm also free to kick any uniformed asses within the boundaries of etiquette and protocol. I haven't worn my boots out yet."

B'Elanna knew how true it must have been, and yet shook her head again. "Somehow at this point I don't think even that's going to work. The Marseilles is being dismantled--just like my life. I know I hate change, but this... I never thought I'd hate limbo more."

Alynna nodded, seeing how much the younger woman was trying. It was plain in her face that she was losing patience and losing heart--and Alynna could understand why. Unfortunately, she also knew Peozet wasn't about to bend down to anyone, either. *That old codger*, Alynna thought, pursing her lips. *They're waiting to see if they'll give it up.*

"Go back to your friend's house, B'Elanna. Go be with your friends and your family. Keep your ears open at the next hearing, and--most importantly--don't let them wear you down. Or at least don't show it. In the mean time, I'll keep trying."

B'Elanna met the admiral eyes again. "Thank you," she said quietly, and did as her friend suggested, knowing there was nothing else she could.

Gritting her teeth, she left, drifted silently, numbly, through Headquarters, returned to the transport. Once there, her eyes latched onto the equipment, thinking, devising...A hundred different and creative uses for that simple panel alone flew through her head.

But she instead told the computer where she needed to go.

She started up when she awoke. *Where's the cradle?* her mind flashed out as her eyes darted. Suddenly, she remembered she wasn't home. Another few seconds and she realized she wasn't anywhere near home, either.

Then the alarm reactivated, making her insides jump again. Tom called it off. He was already awake. She felt his hand reach up to her, touch her back, soft and warm. "You okay?" he asked.

She nodded, willfully relaxed a little. Turning to kiss him good morning, she managed some pleasure in feeling his hands touch her, his fingers sift into her hair as they pressed together.

But she had to get up. He did too. Slowly, they rose and started their morning. He laid out the uniform she'd had to replicate the night before. She looked at it and growled before passing to the bathroom. He got himself a plain, gray-blue shirt, gray trousers, boots. Nothing fancy, nothing

official. He laid them on top of his coat and joined his wife.

They showered--a sonic shower. He shaved; she made up her face a little. He brushed her hair, taking his time, braided and pinned it in a bun. "It'll save you the aggravation of getting corrected later," Tom told her. She grudgingly agreed.

When he was done, he put his hands on her shoulders, stared into the mirror, into her reflected eyes. A tiny grin appeared on his lips. She felt his warmth spread through her, and smiled briefly back, finally allowing a tiny nod. His hands remained in their place as her shoulders relaxed a little.

She saved dressing for the very last minute, taking a cup of coffee beforehand, not giving a damn about the proposed rationing for at least that day.

Tom had dressed and joined her in the dining area. As they sipped, both sets of eyes turned the room upside down, wondering how in the world they could do anything with any room like that one.

They remained quiet, an uneasy quiet desecrated by the hum of the ship beneath it. They didn't bother to fill it, anyway. What they might have said had already been said.

They finished their coffees, checked the time. B'Elanna moved to get dressed. Tom watched her.

Looking down at the issue engineering tunic, gray turtleneck, plain black trousers, provisional insignia, black socks and shiny black boots, B'Elanna let out a deep breath.

"It's tomorrow," she said quietly and removed her robe.

"B'Elanna!" Tom whispered loudly and shook her.

Her eyes flew open, went straight to his. Two tired eyes were staring down at her, darkened with concern. She was shaking; she couldn't stop. Tangled in her clenching fingers was the edge of a rented sheet. She felt tears in her eyes.

Her eyes darted around before finding him again. "Are you okay?"

Tom furrowed his brow. "I woke up, but you were the one having the nightmare just now."

"What? I don't..." Taking a full breath, she tried to think in a suddenly woken mind. There were but bits and pieces..."I was running," she finally whispered. "Everything was dark and... I remember running."

Tom touched her face. She flinched a little, and then relaxed, and she could feel her own trembling. Then she realized she had flinched at her husband's touch.

B'Elanna shook her head and stood to go check Isabel. Thankfully, the baby was undisturbed that time--by either of them. They had brought her crib back into their bedroom, thinking things were okay again. For Isabel, at least, they were. She lay unmoved by her father's waking, her mother's own incubus, her little fist pressed to her full, slightly open mouth.

B'Elanna didn't dare touch her child--her own child, warm, beautiful, and so forgiving of her messed up parents. B'Elanna wanted to touch her, but she knew she was still shaking, and her hands were clammy. She could still feel herself running...away...and suddenly felt that urge again. She hadn't felt like that in a very long time.

This is their fault, all of this.

She jumped a little when she felt Tom's hands come down on her shoulders. She sighed a short breath, damning herself. But his hands were understanding, kneading her tense muscles and stroking her neck with his thumbs. He bent his head sorrowfully into her hair as he pulled it back over her shoulders again. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

"I am too," she managed.

"We should have kept Isabel with the kids," he said.

She closed her eyes, tried to swallow what was building in her. "How long do we have to do this, Tom? It'll only get worse. We both know it."

He shook his head. "I wish I knew."

"The children can tell how unhappy we are; you haven't slept well in weeks..., now me. I don't even remember my dreams, much less have nightmares... It's all this, uselessness, Tom. We're just going in circles. Mother's right. We can't keep doing this."

"I know." It was all he could say.

He kissed her hair, moved away to the bathroom, slowly. She remained beside the crib, feeling his absence before her own thoughts took over again.

How long do our children have to know how miserable and helpless we are?

When Tom appeared again, he left the room to look in on the other children. B'Elanna drug her still difficult breath.

How long do we have to live like this? Always wanting?... Why the hell did I ever come up with that brilliant plan to get us home? It's helped no one here...except maybe Joe and Sam...and Frank, and... If only we could have taken the Marseilles before they got their hands on it.

She blinked, tried to shake it away. It wasn't doing any good.

How many more times will I have to placate Dad--or Mother? Explain to them why Tom looks like hell and I'd rather not talk about it.

B'Elanna thought it, yet fought her own dwelling on it. It would do no good, she knew. But she couldn't push down her impatience any longer. It had been almost five months, and she knew it'd be all too easy to double that time in that bureaucracy, triple it, and so forth.

How long will we have to live going in circles? Dreaming of a way out that will never come?

They could go on indefinitely, disjointed, and at the mercy of a government they had once fought, and at one time came to terms with, even came to respect again.

Just so they could betray us again, control us.

Isabel stirred, and she backed away, crawling back up onto the bed. But she didn't move back into the pillows, to those sheets she'd torn, only watched her daughter there, wishing she had her rocking chair in one stray thought, somehow, suddenly, numb to the rest. It spun too hard in her head to focus on it.

But the numbness washed right back out of her when she saw her husband return to her side, sit by her and look to her with sunken eyes. He was suffering. She was frustrated. What made it worse was that they yet had those things around them they treasured--friends, family, a nice house, a beautiful planet. But only for the children could they enjoy that...

Tom's hand reached to her, and he breathed with relief to feel her take it up, wrap her fingers gently around his. "I wish I had an answer."

"We always wish we have an answer," B'Elanna told him quietly. "But every time we seem to come up with one, something else goes wrong, or that answer's useless." She swallowed again, tried again to shake her head of it.

"No, B'Elanna," Tom whispered and took her in his arms. "It's okay. You can."

"I can't afford to," she muttered, her throat closing.

"We both overspent our accounts long ago," he grinned humorlessly.

She laughed sadly and choked on it, feeling her eyes grow unnaturally wet. "All I ever wanted," she whispered thickly, "was to have a life where I felt useful, and settled. A place, a home, and something to do. Was that all that selfish of me?"

"No, B'Elanna. I wanted it, too."

"If we wanted it that damned much, why don't we have it?" She choked again, feeling hot tears fall unwillingly over her cheeks. "You always say we'll find a way, we'll always straighten things out, find a solution..." She dragged a breath to continue in thick mutterings, "I just want to go home. And I can't. We don't have a ship, our friends are all over the quadrant or dead, and we're stuck here. We were helpless all those years on Voyager, because we thought we were too far away, we could live there. Now we're here and... I wish we could go back to the Delta Quadrant. It's insane."

She clutched his arms. "I just want to go home, Tom," she wept. "Please. I'm selfish and ungrateful--I know it and I don't give a damn. I want our ship back and I want to get the hell out of here."

"Me too," he whispered.

"I don't want it to start again, Tom. I don't want to have to live with things I just settle on. That's not how we'd chosen to live--but nothing we're doing is working--and now they're saying we can't even try to fight for Avalar, they're ripping our ship apart... I hate them."

Tom held her warm, tried to loosen his own throat. "God, B'Elanna," he breathed, rocking her gently, tenderly stroking her head as she cried in his arms. She had never cried like that before, except when they almost lost Alaine, that one day. Even when they had been trapped on Voyager those first few days, she hadn't cried so mournfully.

For that reason, though, he let her, soothing her without any urging for her to stop. He had known before that eventually they'd have to reach that point. He had, in his bad sleep, his own feelings overflowing into crying out for help to a dead child. She then, finally succumbing to the knowledge that she would not hold up forever.

The game had already been played--with somebody else's rules.

Knowing it made his indignation well up all over again. Seeing his wife, who'd always been so strong for him, reduced to tears of frustration and bitterness over that worn out game, made his pulse speed, his mind begin to work.

But as he kissed his wife, stroked her gently as she wept upon his own heavy chest, he wondered exactly how they could do what his mind was suddenly screaming at him to do, what B'Elanna had begged him to do--and get away with it.

"I'm here, B'Elanna," he breathed. "I'm right here."

"I know," she choked and clutched herself to him. "Thank God."

He held her warm, closed his eyes, and spoke softly, "You say I am repeating something I have said before. I shall say it again.... Shall I say it again?" He grinned a little as she coughed a laugh on his chest.

"Are you going to read me bedtime stories now, Tom Paris?" she whispered in a slight, sad laugh.

"It's always helped me."

She swallowed, wiped her cheek before putting her arms around him again. "Me too."

He kissed her forehead, then nuzzled the crown of her hair then paused to remember when he left off. "In order to arrive there," he continued softly, "to arrive where you are, to get from where you are not, you must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy...."

She drew a shaky breath, her tears ebbing, and her body slightly relaxing.

"In order to possess what you do not possess, you must go by the way of dispossession...."

He could feel her eyes closing upon his skin. She still held close to him, though. He drew another breath.

..."And what you own is what you do not own. And where you are is where you are not."

Owen walked into the garden, having seen the kitchen empty--seemingly unused, in fact. Over the last months, he'd become easily accustomed to the activity, swarming grandchildren and their parents trying to get the day started with some semblance of order. B'Elanna always had coffee and replicated croissants, and at least a small smile of greeting as she tried to keep the children civilized. If Miral decided to attend breakfast--she was often up very early and off somewhere by the time the others were getting up--she would be telling Klingon stories to the children, which Owen had found oddly intriguing after he got used to them.

Tom usually was the one who cooked--often whipping up easy omelets and asking Alaine and Kiarn to

set out plates and napkins. Andre, too, had begun to help--though he was never given anything breakable.

After breakfast was done, they'd let the older three out to play so they could enjoy a quiet cup of coffee together. Isabel usually slept in a few hours later than the others, so they took what time they could before preparing the day's school lessons and bringing the kids inside again.

Even in the last month, as Tom and B'Elanna had grown quieter, likely because of the new round of hearings and the new inspections on the scout, they yet made meals a good time, most likely for the children's sakes. So, their absence in the kitchen that early was a slight surprise to Owen, especially as he hadn't heard any disturbances the night before.

Hearing the children playing busily outside, he ventured out to find Tom. But the only adult there was Miral. She stood solidly at the edge of the yard, arms crossed, her long, brown-gray hair and the long skirt of her usual drab dress turning in the morning wind. She was looking towards the sea.

Curious, he went to her, and saw only when he got to her side that she looked not on the water, but on their children, on Tom and B'Elanna. They were kneeling, still and separately on the sand, which was slightly damp from the rain the night before.

They did not move, nor did Miral as she watched them.

Owen squinted. The couple was...praying.

He took a step, but Miral's hand came out and touched his chest, only enough to stop, nothing more.

"No, Owen," she said, quiet yet firm. "Let them speak with their souls."

Realizing, he nodded. "Yes, of course," he said.

He might have left, but strangely found himself intrigued by the scene below, the still couple on the sand, moving only in extremities, when the breeze would touch the woman's hair or the man's loose shirt. The sea beyond them rushed and ebbed unnoticed; the gull cries echoed around them unheard. This went unchanged for many minutes longer, and he thought at some point that he felt like he was examining a painting somehow, looking for the symbols in the images before him.

Praying... *Who would have guessed it of Tom?* he thought. But there they were, practicing the faith they'd picked up all those years ago without a care that someone might pass by, or watch them from afar.

He wondered what they saw in those "visions," what they were doing inside their minds, wondered if they truly believed in that spirituality Commander Chakotay obviously took to heart, or if they saw it for its psychological resonance alone. They never spoke about it unless it came up. Even then, they rarely spoke details.

Of course, Owen did not believe it was his business to ask.

Yet at the edge of the yard, he remained transfixed, wondering alongside Miral, until the two below moved again, opening their eyes to each other.

She was buried in her work, a pile of PADDs she'd brought to their table there in the mess hall. She'd let her hair loose and changed out of her uniform. Her dark eyes picked at the data as if determined not to look elsewhere.

He too, was studying, though instead of being slouched over, he had kicked back to look over the information with what looked like only a casual regard. He appeared bored, even as his eyes did not waver from whatever he was reading.

They paid no attention to those coming or going, and barely to Harry until he stood there for a minute, trying to pry. Finally, the Maquis pilot offered the younger man a seat.

The pilot's wife glanced over at him, gave him a brief smile.

The younger man had brought his ration lunch, and the engineer squirmed a little. "Are you sure you want to put your life on the line, Harry?"

"It's not that bad."

"Only if you've had your taste buds permanently removed," the other man quipped. "I've known better tasting scrub moss."

"Well, even you ate the ration dinner last ni--"

"*Please* don't mention that, Harry," the engineer said bluntly and reburied herself in her reports. She said nothing after, and remained tightly contained throughout their friend's meal. She managed another brief grin or two as the men conversed, but was otherwise keeping very busy.

It seemed but for their new friend they stayed as long as they did. But as soon as he was gone, the engineer collected her assigned engine reports, part of which went into her husband's coat pocket. The Maquis pilot, always the gentleman with his wife, took her hand and helped her to her feet.

Without word to anyone, they left, her arm looped in his, their heads held up in what might have been deemed defiance. They definitely didn't look at the captain sitting nearby, even though it was hard to, and even though she was looking at them. They purposefully avoided her eyes.

Nevertheless, Janeway watched them until they were out the door then took a sip of her allotted coffee. It troubled her they were like that. They seemed to be influential among the Maquis crew--and with her new first officer. She hated to admit it, but she needed their help, needed their support. Unfortunately, one had been nothing but dissension in her first two days in engineering, and the other had turned down any commission whatsoever--this aside from the captain's first and tense conversations with the admiral's estranged son, which had done nothing to bond them in any way. Indeed, she did not trust him or his wife for both her association and her willful independence in an engine room that desperately needed some teamwork. It was equally clear to her that the feeling was mutual.

Well, at least she's a good engineer and he's a good medic. That's better than nothing. But she sighed at it, anyway.

"Problem Captain?" Chakotay, sitting across, asked.

"Just wondering how the Parises are adjusting our situation," Janeway said.

Chakotay didn't think it'd be wise to admit the Parises' very honest answer to his same question to them the night before. He rightly believed it would do more harm than good at that point to share that with the captain, who had enough to think about. Instead, he said, "Like everyone else, it's been difficult for them."

Passing nearby, Jenna overheard that and snorted. "A pretty living hell is more like it," she muttered, just loud enough for them to hear--and completely ignoring the two officers' reactions--before joining Mariah and Frank several tables away from them.

Janeway sighed, but showed nothing further than that sound. The commander closed his eyes for a moment, catching hers when they opened again. "It'll take time, Captain, for all of us--and everyone's going to deal with it differently."

"Time," she muttered. "One thing we've got plenty of, it seems." She withheld the rest of that though, not wanting to be overheard again, especially then, in her doubts. It was difficult enough admitting as much privately without giving the impression she was anything but confident to anyone but the man she was going to have to trust, and Tuvok, of course. Even then, she had tried to bolster them, too.

Glancing aside again, Janeway noted the red-haired lady, not but a couple years younger than herself, and like Tom Paris, completely unwilling to join the crew as an officer. She was picking up a forkful of her ration and displaying it like a biology experiment.

"Cripes, I'd take Cardie war rations over this slop," she stated dourly, then snorted. "You remember what our boy Thomas did with them the day after the fight with Gul Muroz?"

Janeway watched them all laugh, and observed even Chakotay unwillingly cracking a grin. She wondered how they could laugh--laugh publicly about things that happened after they likely destroyed Gul Maroz's ship and crew... Though she also knew they, those Maquis, were not her people, and the Demilitarized Zone had not been her place. She wouldn't get the joke because she hadn't been there.

To her credit, she didn't ask, either, but observed, "Ms. Harlowe seems to be very popular with the crew."

That time, Chakotay did not hold back his grin. "It's even odds you'll either like her or hate her when you get to know her. She won't cause any trouble, but I'd better warn you that she doesn't hold back often. She means well and dedicated herself to her job, but she'll annoy the hell out of you sometimes, too."

The captain nodded. "Her records say she was a colonist at Tinalat," she said, recalling what happened there, wondering how it had affected the woman, who still laughed and chatted at the other table.

Chakotay didn't offer much on that, however: "We were there when it was claimed. That's when she joined my crew."

"It must have been difficult for her."

"Her husband was executed, her vineyard burned down. She sent her children to Earth and stayed behind to do what she could, hoping she could work out what she'd seen and been through."

Janeway was shocked. That had not been a part of Regena Harlowe's records, as they hadn't known about the children. Bending a bit to him with a quiet voice, she asked, "She sent her children to Earth

after they lost their father?"

Chakotay could understand the captain's confusion--it was one he'd had once--and suddenly wished they were somewhere more private. Even Janeway was being cautious with her voice though no one was sitting too near to them. Despite it, he took a deep, slow breath, and then released it, thinking of how to put it. "There's a kind of...rage with Maquis. All of us had something happen to us that made us join the fight and made us stay with it even when everything looked hopeless." He watched her blink, seeing her understanding--as best as she could understand, as it was.

"It was about more than survival," he said softly. "It was...almost as if we were insuring we didn't have to give anything else away, even if it cost our lives, our families. We didn't always show it. We laughed a lot and had down time. Sometimes, we acted as if nothing was wrong. But it was there, and it didn't go away. Even if we'd ended up fighting for the rest of our lives, most of the Maquis I knew who came from the colonies would never exorcise those demons because of what they'd seen or had been forced to give away."

She eyed him. "And you, Commander?"

He paused, shrugged slightly. "I know I need to do what I have to here, to make this situation work for both our crews. So, I guess you could say I'm working on it, keeping my priorities straight. Just like you, Captain, the crew comes first."

Though she might have argued the colonists' staying in the DMZ in the first place was much the cause of their trouble, the captain did believe him. That sad but simple fact to him was a potential danger to her. She truly hoped the crews would eventually come together, if only for that reason.

In all honesty, however, she knew she was making the Maquis come to her, become part of the Starfleet crew, on her terms. It wasn't a bad thing at all to her, of course, as she truly believed that most of them were probably better off away from the trouble they'd started in the Demilitarized Zone, away from the battles they themselves had incited.

But what the former captain across from her said was true, too: She could not honestly expect them all to concede, nor let go of their loyalties lightly if at all. She wished they might, though.

"A bloody mess that was," Jenna Harlowe said and speared another unwanted forkful of ration into her mouth. Swallowing, she grinned at Ensign Henley. "Never knew Cardie brains were so ocherous--as if I'd wanted to see it beforehand." With that, she took another bite, as did the others, unaffected by their gruesome topic.

Janeway drew her cup to her lips again, but did not drink. She thought for a moment, lowered the cup slightly. "If I'm going to assign Ms. Harlowe to sickbay as you've suggested, I would prefer she did join the crew in a more...official fashion." Seeing the man's reaction to that, she continued, "But maybe we might give it some time, to make the transition as smooth as possible? Without a real doctor on board, we do need all the experience we can get down there."

Chakotay was more than willing to nod to that--even though he knew that Jenna would wear a Starfleet uniform "the day Captain McPriss grows a halo and wings and joins all the other pigs flying in space," as she'd put it, not long after he'd visited with Tom and B'Elanna. At least they were more willing to do what needed to be done and had ironically supported the captain, even when they cursed her decision to destroy the array. Of course, they also knew there was nothing to be done about that but do what was necessary to improve their most immediate problems, then move onto the next ones. It was their only option in a situation largely out of their hands.

Though she essentially held the same view, Jenna was yet as unafraid as ever to share her mind, and couldn't give a damn what anyone thought of it.

"A slow transition would be easier," Chakotay agreed, and took a sip of his tea, thinking all the while about the other thirty-three he had under his protection, namely, two.

"I'm sorry to inform you that the decision of this council to release the Marseilles to you, Thomas Paris and B'Elanna Torres Paris, is still pending a full investigation and the resolution of the issues surrounding its unofficial assignment to the Starship Voyager. Your repeated request for resettlement in the Avalaran System has been duly recorded and will be taken under advisement as the region you wish to inhabit is reconsidered in its uses to the Federation."

Tom's face was a model of neutral amusement. "In other words: No."

"We do regret the inconvenience--"

"Oh come off it!" Tom cut in. "You know, we've been patient for months now. The Marseilles has minimal defenses, now that you've stripped them down to the bones, and now they're talking about realigning our comm manifold. You might have the right to reclaim Avalar, but you have no right to take our ship away from us!"

"Considering the offenses it was involved in, Mister Paris--"

"Eight years ago!" B'Elanna shot back. "And if you people had such a problem with what happened, then why aren't we in one of your cushy prisons?"

Tom snorted. "God knows they haven't kept us out for the kids' sakes. It's never stopped them with anyone else."

The officer was insulted. "Might I remind y--"

"Children without a home and parents who're all *but* in prison because of your sitting back on your haunches!" Tom snapped.

"Mister Paris--"

"*Captain Paris!*" came a shout behind them.

Tom and B'Elanna both stopped at the sound that burst out from the entrance of the hearing room. Turning, B'Elanna choked a gasp.

"This man is properly addressed as Captain Paris," said Azro Osol, his maroon eyes set upon the JAG bitterly enough to see through the officer as he straightened his coat lapels with a sharp tug. "But since you're just going to do nothing as usual, you mind adjourning this circus?"

Tom could have laughed--and only seconds after he too might have gone after the officer's throat. Striding swiftly to the back of the room, he grabbed his old friend and embraced him tightly. The shorter man laughed and returned the sentiment, then went to B'Elanna to repeat it.

"What are you doing here?" Tom asked, shaking his head at the sight before him. "We'd tried to contact you, but you never answered."

"We were going to come to you once we got the Marseilles back," B'Elanna told him.

Azro shrugged. "We read the news--a lot. And...well, I don't like talking over subspace. Never have." He took B'Elanna's hand. "Isabel couldn't wait any longer, and we both hate Danula, so we decided to take a vacation. Go see her, B'Elanna. She's outside."

"I'll stick around for the end--you go," Tom said and kissed her brow.

Nodding, then patting Azro's arm affectionately, she gladly did just that, walking quickly out of the forum and through the corridor, then out onto the Headquarters' grounds.

At first glance, when she actually did pinpoint the hair and figure of her old friend of only months, B'Elanna could have sworn she was dreaming. Isabel stood, arms crossed on a plain tunic, feet planted evenly on the sunny, pristine lawn. There, she watched her children run about in the garden as the wind brushed strands of her shoulder length hair into the air.

Just like I remembered her, all this time, B'Elanna thought, feeling her breath catch and her lips turn upwards as she steadily descended the front steps to the ground.

"Isabel?" she called.

The woman turned, and B'Elanna stopped to see the other woman already had tears in her eyes, eyes that looked tired with the years.

But in spite of whatever emotion that'd caused them, a smile immediately grew on Isabel's face as she set off back up the grounds, her steps sure on the earth and speeding as she neared. Gratefully, she met B'Elanna in the middle way, hugging her tightly on arrival.

"Oh, my dear B'Elanna!" she wept. "We thought you'd died in that place!"

B'Elanna swallowed, nodded, meeting the strength of her friend's embrace. "We didn't know what'd happened to you, either, after we heard about the DMZ."

They pulled apart, and the younger woman saw again how much older Isabel looked--or perhaps it was just sadder, despite her smile. Lines etched into her face showed those seven years, the slight hollow of her eyes was proof of the strain they'd undergone. Traces of gray stood out in her black hair. Her face had fallen somehow.

The memory of war, maybe. Or prison. Or Danula.

"There's so much we need to talk about," B'Elanna told her.

Isabel, still looking over her younger friend, nodded. "I met your sweet Alaine when we looked at the house first--she's just like you and Tom. And those boys! The images of you and Tom, all of them." She swallowed, shook her head in amazement to see the woman she thought dead so long, then believed she'd never see again, there, before her. "It must have been hell to be torn away," she told her. "But you were lucky, so lucky to have gone away from this place. You survived... Your children are so beautiful."

"And you with twins," B'Elanna returned, her friend's cheerful sadness making her start to force her

smile. "How did you manage it?"

"I just did, I guess... They said you were petitioning for Avalar," Isabel said, suddenly moving to her next thought. "Was that was you were doing just then?"

B'Elanna nodded. "Might as well add our own objections to the policy for the record."

"Good for you," Isabel whispered and hugged her friend again. "We've all been doing the same thing for three years."

Embracing Isabel back, B'Elanna felt her heart drop like a stone.

Isabel's mouth fell open as B'Elanna proudly put her namesake into her arms, and introduced them formally before she took a seat next to her, showing off the baby's golden curls in the sun of the garden.

The older four children, the Osol twins and Alaine and Kiarn, had already taken off at their older aunt's bequest to run on the beach. Andre was driving his mobile in circles around the fountain, his stuffed mok'la hooked precariously on the steering column.

Tom, standing beside Azro, smiled at the scene. So normal, so natural, his wife and her old friend, speedily catching up with one another, as they all had on their walk back from headquarters. After what looked like what was to be yet another undone day, Tom was sure he hadn't felt as good about anything on Earth since he'd seen his sisters again.

Certainly, Tom knew, it was good to be getting along with his father--not to mention odd to see him so often, and Moira and Kathleen. Good, but still strange when he let himself think about it. Miral--it was great to finally meet her, satisfying to see her and B'Elanna mend their ways. Alynna, too, had quickly come to be a good friend. The children loved her.

But there was something different in having Azro and Isabel there.

Maybe because they really do understand where we've been, Tom surmised, watching their friend pick up baby Isabel and blow a playful kiss on her tummy, making her gasp and wriggle. *Like Chakotay and Jenna and the other Maquis. They understand--maybe even too much now. They've had a rough time. But this feels right, somehow.*

"You know," Tom said, "if you've got nothing else planned, we ought to drop by on Jenna."

Azro raised his brow. "Jenna Harlowe--now that's a name I couldn't forget. She's still on Earth?"

"With her children in Ireland. I know she'd love to see you. We'll comm her in a bit and barge in for lunch tomorrow."

"Then we do have a plan," Azro said, then looked over again as Isabel returned the baby to B'Elanna and began chatting with Andre, who'd driven by and stopped at her knees. "I haven't seen her this pleased in four years," he said.

She didn't look too happy to Tom, and thinking it he examined Azro again, noticing anew the shadowing in his friend's face. He knew those creases, a squint of having seen too much, even if he tried now to show it. "Yeah, Alynna told us how hard it'd been for you."

Azro turned his gaze away. "Isabel cried for weeks. I cried, too... She still cries; she's terribly depressed. I was the one who brought her here, Tom. She wanted to come, but she was afraid that you'd have forgotten us somehow."

"Forgotten? Why would she think that about us, of all people?"

"Things changed, Tom." His statement and expression were plain.

Tom gave Azro a long look. "If only you knew how often we talked about you two, wondered about the baby--babies, as it turned out." He let his stare return to B'Elanna. "When we heard what happened to the Maquis, and to the colonies, it was hard on us. And we couldn't do anything about it. B'Elanna gave up the commission she earned over it, even if it didn't help anything but her conscience."

"There was nothing you could have done, really."

"Tell me about it," Tom said. "We could have been there with you, though. It's not easy hearing about things like that when you're fifty thousand light years away from it."

Azro blinked an agreement to that, attentive again on Isabel. He would take in her good mood while it lasted, feel his heart thrum for her as it hadn't in a while. He grinned with the effect, his memories seeping back to his tongue with the pleasant view. "Schiller, the old cat, took your instructions very seriously. You should have seen him Tom--he looked after your place as if it were his own, warding people with a stick and working your hills harder than his own plots."

"I'll be he did," Tom grinned.

"But Isabel got in, anyway," Azro added, "made sure it was clean, visited with your things."

Tom furrowed his brow a little, but didn't comment.

Azro, his eyes still on his wife, didn't notice. "She used to sneak in when she got it in her mind to--told me she felt like a criminal sometimes, even if she was doing nothing wrong. I mean, we both knew that your medical stores were there and we were allowed to them. But after we borrowed the set, I didn't bother going up but a couple times. But she did, and she'd seen that letter you left when she walked around front one day--but since it wasn't addressed to her, we never knew what it was about until Schiller came and read it to us. Good thing, I think, because she didn't take the letter very well when she did hear it. Helen and Niscol were just born then, and she...well, it was difficult." He looked at Tom, then, saw his concern. "She did very much admire you and B'Elanna, thought so much about you that thinking you dead wasn't easy on her. Many things were harder on her after then, when we had to leave..."

Thinking suddenly again, Azro called out to his wife, "Isabel, where's your bag? Maybe we can give it to them?"

She nodded distractedly. "Yes, go--it's at the door, I think."

Azro did, and led Tom back to the seats where the women were sitting. "We thought you'd like having it back. I remember how much you liked it, B'Elanna."

Isabel smiled as Azro brought the bag, watched her old friends stare at the next thing handed to them, the blanket from the bassinette in the bedroom on Avalor. She shrugged, a little guiltily. "The sun was staining it, so I cleaned it up and had it sealed. I didn't think you'd mind."

B'Elanna shook her head. "Oh I don't mind," she breathed, laying the bassinet blanket over her daughter to look at it again. "I can't tell you how much I missed it with Alaine." She picked up a corner and pressed it to her nose. "God, I think it even smells like home somehow."

"I only took it out of the seal this morning, so it just might," Isabel told her and took a breath to will down yet another set of tears. Without thinking, she reached out and touched her friend's arm. "I did miss you so much, B'Elanna--and you Tom. I didn't want to believe them, when they said you were dead."

"Well, we didn't die," Tom assured her, "and neither did you. I guess that counts for something."

Azro grinned. "We should have figured you'd find another way to cheat it. Just like you to be one step ahead of the game."

"Maybe at one time," Tom replied.

"No," Isabel said quietly. "You survived--a good deal better than most of us had...When we heard you were alive, I knew you would have...I knew that much. You two were like that--survivors. Being away...must have been difficult."

B'Elanna drew a deep breath, looked down to her baby again. Her old friend's eyes had tinged again with tears, though her smile remained. *What's hard is looking at her now*, she knew, forcing her own grin to stay in place.

Below, Andre grabbed his mok'la and shook it at his mother. "I'm 'ungry!" he growled playfully, breaking the pall and making all the adults laugh.

Possibly as relieved as B'Elanna was for the change in topic, Tom pushed himself to stand and scooped his boy up from his mobile. "Can't have a mok'la with an empty stomach, right?"

"Wite! Daddy, are dere more wiches?"

"Sandwiches? Sure. --B'Elanna? You think we all should just grab some lunch now?"

"I wouldn't mind eating something," she said, glad for something to do that she knew Isabel might enjoy.

To the same question their friends agreed, so Tom gave his younger boy a kiss on the head--"Wiches it is, then"--and went to call down to the beach and announce lunch was coming soon.

With Azro's hand, Isabel stood. Hesitantly she looked to the woman beside her. "B'Elanna..." she started, but swallowed the rest, seemingly unable.

Azro sighed, knowing what that next part was. They had planned it during their trip to Earth, and he had known even then that though she wanted to break the news herself, she probably wouldn't get through it without a good deal of help. So, he drew a breath to finish it for her. "We need to tell you something," he said, "something about one of your friends in the Maquis."

B'Elanna's eyes locked with his, and she felt her stomach shrink a little at his seriousness. *I should have known we couldn't just go in and have lunch*, she thought, bracing herself at their dead serious expressions. "What is it?"

"Inside," Isabel said quietly and went to the door without invitation

..he asked us to let them take us to the safehold..." Isabel told them, her voice growing tired from the long story she'd related as she played with her uneaten meal. The story of the worst week of her life, leading to a life devoid of anything she loved--her work, her land, her family possessions, her friends, her world, her feeling of security and belonging, everything but her husband and children, all she had left.

"Some safehold that turned out to be," she continued, a bitter little laugh etching her tone. "Though, even now I know it wasn't his fault. No one counted on the Federation being as careless as they were."

"Alyna Nechayev told us about your capture," Tom said.

Isabel nodded. "Yes. Admiral Nechayev was good to us. I am still indebted to her."

"We all are," Azro added, almost in a whisper. "I would like to meet her again, Tom, if possible, to thank her again."

"We'll drop by, maybe have some lunch," Tom nodded, though his mind was still spinning from hearing what Andre Rodrigo had done for them, and for Starfleet. Risked his ship, his crew...for a memory. Gone out of his way to save the colonists of Jinara and Avalar, and whomever else he could fit on his small ship. By doing so, he'd essentially set himself up for his death--put himself in the wrong place at the wrong time, really, only to give himself and his crew up to save a larger Federation ship.

Died in a Cardassian prison...not far from where Atara was killed, too...

He swallowed the thick breath that rose with that image. He could see them, handsome and young. He was the consummate nice guy; she was so clever and worldly. They were probably tortured until they finally gave up and thankfully died.

Hearing about their sacrifice made him miss them painfully, as if no time had passed since he and B'Elanna had first learned of their deaths, opening the wound of a familiar anger far more frightening than their recent frustration. Looking over to B'Elanna--her dark eyes were pinned on her coffee cup, her mouth closed and straight--he could tell it wasn't doing much good for her, either.

"Anyway, Captain Rodrigo was more than thankful." Isabel still had not looked up at them, her eyes still focused on nothing. "He said it was important to him, for your memory. He said he wouldn't have been alive if it hadn't been for you, and a life was a hard thing to pay off. He knew how much you adored your homeworld--even if you wouldn't admit it--and thought that preserving it, and your friends, was the best thing he could do."

B'Elanna laughed sadly. "If we'd have stayed around, I think we would've either adopted him or he would've driven us crazy with gratitude... Poor Andre." She shook her head for the rest. Vocalizing it at that point would only have made it worse.

Yet Isabel had a quiet laugh at that memory, that common, pleasant thing shared between strangers. In her downcast eyes, it seemed, she could see the entire scene playing again. When she finally looked back to them, she saw how humbly Tom and B'Elanna took that. "It's true, you know. If you'd been on Avalar that night, you'd have convinced them much more easily than I did."

"Maybe," Tom said, honestly wondering about it.

"But I'm glad you weren't there," Isabel said, suddenly quieted by her own words as she pulled herself

back into that present. "I had no idea, no idea, how hard it would really be." Pausing a moment, her head numbly turned from side to side. "You lived that war, every day well before I ever knew you. I never knew the hell you went through until I saw it..."

"Only a few days later, we were packed and on our way to the bunkers...I started crying and I didn't stop....I don't think I ever will." She pulled a slow breath as the tears fell down her cheeks. "I hate this life," she whispered. "Waiting, unsettled, knowing my home is there, waiting for me, and I will never see it. I'll never..." She quickly wiped her cheeks. "Forgive me. I never really have spoken about it this much before."

B'Elanna reached across the table and took her friend's hand. "I'm so sorry, Isabel. I know what you went through--even if it was easier on us. I can't imagine what I would have done if my children had been taken away from me. It would have killed me."

Isabel laughed shortly, dabbed her moist eye. "I think you do know. You and Tom had planned to go if the fighting turned our way. You would have for your baby. It was for mine that I agreed with Captain Rodrigo and convinced the others to take up shelter elsewhere."

"But you should have been able to go back," B'Elanna said.

"Unfortunately, that wasn't the case--just like you'd planned, ironically enough." Isabel's lips turned up humorlessly. "God, I was so sure and arrogant then, saying that everything would be all right. I even believed it when I left Avalor, that the cycle of life would always be there, and things would always come back. I told you that, remember?"

She squeezed Isabel's fingers. "You have no idea how much it helped, then, believing it. It gave me--and Tom too, when I told him--a lot of hope when we were in the Delta Quadrant. We needed that, especially in the beginning."

The older woman snorted bitterly. "I was wrong," she assured her, "at least in how I meant it. Things to have beginnings and ends, of course, but that middle ground... God, I had no idea how miserable things could actually get until we left Avalor, sitting and waiting for four years now. Oh, we've made some housekeeping on Danula, but we're just biding our time there. Nothing will ever be as it was at home. I never stopped thinking about thinking about it, or waking up, thinking I'm there, and I'll walk outside, and..." She stopped, shook her head again. "I feel like I'm lost."

Sighing out again, B'Elanna simply moved to the chair next to her friend, and despite the threat of Isabel's tears returning, she hugged her warmly, squeezing her tightly. "I sometimes do, too," she whispered.

"Maybe this is what was meant for me," the older woman whispered thickly. "Not everything has a solution, after all. Maybe I was meant to live like this."

"You deserve much more, Isabel," B'Elanna insisted, and kissed Isabel's cheek. "And you don't have to lose that much faith. Tom and I have better connections here. We can at least make *them* as miserable as we are. Please, Isabel, don't give up, not now that you're here for a while."

The older woman laughed quietly through her misted eyes. "How young and strong you've always been."

"And you used to be," B'Elanna countered, yet at the same time forced herself to swallow what her friend's misery welled up in her. She had never imagined Isabel becoming so sad and retiring--in fact,

she'd never even thought it possible of her, to that extent, anyway. Somehow, she'd always thought her friend as standing up on whatever had come, digging up radishes on a coal black world and always embracing those simple, time-tested ideals. It seemed to be her philosophy, keep moving, keep standing straight, keep fighting with the belief it will end as best as is possible. But the times had tempered them both.

Isabel nodded, brought one of B'Elanna hands up and kissed it, patted it gently. "I'm okay, B'Elanna. I got by this long."

Cued to shift the topic again at B'Elanna's slightly pleading glance, Tom looked at Azro. "So, was that the last time you saw Andre? When he dropped you off at Bianlos?"

"Yes," Azro said, finally joining the conversation again, having let his wife tell the story he knew she'd wanted to tell for so long. "He brought us rations and water a few times. We came to know him somewhat well. He spoke so well of you both, like siblings."

Tom grinned, though his eyes remained soft but planted on the table. Theirs was some of that information which was classified, the details Alynna couldn't tell them, what his father probably never would. Their friends' admissions, like much of the other news in their lives of late, was even worse than they had imagined those four years ago. Tom was certain there was a lot more where that came from. Yet all he said was, "The feeling was mutual."

The side door opened then, breaking the pall as a Klingon woman entered and looked over the new faces, a man she recognized as Bokoran, a human woman, obviously his mate. They were plain, in dress and expression, and turned their stare up to her.

"Back so soon, Mother?" B'Elanna asked.

"I saw nothing of interest at the lab, and have had no updates, so, yes, I have returned early. These are friends?" Miral asked.

B'Elanna stood to introduce her mother to their friends from Avalar. Hearing their origin, the older woman raised her brow and bowed her head slightly. "I am honored," she said. "My daughter and her husband have spoken of you, and often." She looked at B'Elanna again. "You have been talking about your world again?" she queried.

"That and Andre Rodrigo," B'Elanna answered.

Miral was pleased to hear that name, too, and gladly assented when the Osols invited her to join them. She didn't even complain when Tom pulled a chair for her, but made herself welcome to hear the rest of their story

He walked in to hear them all talking, children and adults all alike. When he closed the door, quietly, he knew he didn't recognize some of those voices. Putting on a pleasant face to greet the people his son and daughter-in-law had brought for lunch, he neared the back of the house. Hearing their topic, however, he stopped in his tracks.

"Andre," B'Elanna breathed. "I wonder sometimes if he realized how much he really did, or if he was ever satisfied with himself, as much as he did."

"I have no doubt that had we remained," a quiet-voiced man said, "we would have been attacked.

We heard only two days after we left that the fleet had passed Avalar on its offensive."

"And he was captured in it," Tom added thickly. "Chakotay told us, when we heard about the DMZ on Voyager... God, of all people. He'd suffered so much. You should have known him before--he was so...young. So damned likable, B'Elanna and I weren't the only ones who wanted to adopt him."

B'Elanna sighed. "Atara loved him so much. She died near him, we heard, only a few cells away. She always used to tell me how lucky she'd snared such a handsome man--and even after he was injured, she loved him... And he taught her a mean game of kickball."

Tom laughed. "Andre loved playing kickball after a good fight, blow off steam," he explained, "Everyone would go down to the bay and get in these wild competitions, even mock battles if Jenna got into it. Andre could always make people feel good, no matter where you were or what you were doing."

"He died honorably," Miral said, unusually gentle to Owen's ear. "He gave himself in battle beyond his duty--and even his loyalty. He gave his life nobly."

"He still died in a Cardassian prison," B'Elanna said. "Honorable or not, he died in the worst way, at least by Maquis standards."

"We feared that more than anything," Tom agreed quietly, pausing there before adding, "He was the one who tried to tell us we belonged there, on Avalar...."

Nobody said a word, for almost a minute, and Owen almost crept away, lest he be discovered by the children playing in the other room. The conversation in the kitchen, he decided, was not for him. Then...

"What happened to our other neighbors? After you were released?" Tom wanted to know.

"Oh, we all fell apart," a woman sighed. "The Losaels went to Bajor--they never liked Aldebaran. The Fairneys went to another colony just inside the border. Darrow--he writes sometimes, but he never found a place. He travels still, so do the Longs.... We've all been uprooted, Tom. We never wanted to leave Avalar, and it was so sudden. Now that we can't go back... It's not been easy for any of us."

"Hate to be relieved that we're not alone," Tom said. "What about Schiller? Where did he go?"

There was a noticeable pause. "He died on Bianlos," a man said. "When Starfleet came, they knocked out the defenses first. Schiller was killed in the blast."

There was an even longer pause that time among the adults. The children's continuing play in the other room was almost an insult to their silence.

"Damn them," Tom finally muttered. "Damn them all." A chair ground against the tile floor, and then another.

"Let me help you with that," said the woman. Then the reclamator activated.

"I hope they're real happy with what they did," B'Elanna muttered tersely. "No better than the Cardassians."

"They have no honor," Miral agreed. "Only fools would attack the weak."

"I'll bet they thought they had the right," B'Elanna said.

"Well, they still think it," Tom said, "and I'm getting pretty damned tired of it."

Owen stood still in the hall. Before hesitant to interrupt, he then knew he wasn't welcome. Their embittered voices--Tom's bitterness--made his breath slow, his heart thump hard in his chest.

Turning, he went to the den, sat slowly down. Taking a deep breath, he flipped on his monitor. He looked at the display, barely read it. Then he turned it off, leaning heavily back in the chair....

He held her warm in his arms, her back pressed to his chest. Sighing out her last deep breath of the day, she pulled his arms closer still, her hands on his.

"It was so...strange, seeing them again," she whispered, her eyes set on the wall but unfocused.

"Yeah," he whispered back. "It brought back some memories, didn't it?" His eyes were open, staring at nothing.

"Yes. A lot of memories."

For many minutes, he said nothing, but felt his wife relax in his arms--relatively. She hadn't been truly relaxed in some time. He caressed the back of her head, nuzzling his brow and nose in her thick locks, taking in its rich yet clean scent, its softness. She burrowed back into it a little, caressed his hands.

"I think visiting Jenna should be good for them," B'Elanna said after a long pause. Her voice was dull.

"It might cheer them up a little," Tom agreed softly.

It didn't make him feel any better, though. The Osols had lost heart after losing the life they'd built--more understandable still as they had invested a lifetime there, survived everything in the DMZ, Avarar's attack, Starfleet's attack, Federation prison, only to be exiled....like he and B'Elanna had survived the Maquis and the Delta Quadrant only to feel the same sense of limbo upon returning.

Tom had to wonder if Andre had been exiled as well, and that was why he had acted. If not, he would have been too perfect.

Would B'Elanna and I have ended up like that, lost--if we aren't already? Or did being on Voyager save us in more ways than that? Would we have really left Avarar, as we'd planned? If we'd been in their shoes, would we still be here at all--or would we have been any stronger?

Tom watched B'Elanna's fingers curl then straighten over his hands. She was so still. Her mind alone was working, remembering their day.

We were more experienced in the war, had seen a lot more; we were ready for the traumas that struck Isabel and Azro... But would we have settled on the inevitable, like they have... Or have we already?

The thought of it played over in his mind. For all their experience on Avarar, leaving it had stripped the Osols of their home, their identity, their belonging, even their innocence.

He and B'Elanna had begun to wear thin, after only months. He knew her well enough to know that B'Elanna wasn't used to that much insecurity in her life anymore, as if she'd ever liked it. He hated it, too.

Or maybe we'll adjust to Oslon once we're settled in, been there a while, get busy again.

But he knew what would happen if they did nothing--they'd seen it.

*Starfleet's waiting for us to give up the ship, our petitions, to give in. B'Elanna said they were trying to wear us down. They're not dragging the Marseilles' inspection along for Voyager's term. They're waiting for *us* to give up. And they'll keep delaying until we do...*

From there, Tom's mind started turning faster.

"B'Elanna," he breathed, curling his fingers gently upon her gown, knotting a slip of it in his fists, smoothing it out again on her stomach, "I love you." He put his head fully in her hair, closing his eyes. She squeezed his arms.

"I love you too."

"I'm sorry you've had to go through this."

"We're all sorry," she said softly, understanding.

"I mean it when I say I could live anywhere with you, B'Elanna. Our home is where we and the kids are together. I believe that. But it's not enough, is it? Anymore?"

She thought about that. "There's a difference between being at home with somebody, and living in a place where you feel at home." Their eyes met again. "We're all together, and I'll never be sorry about that, either, no matter where we are, Tom. You know that. But that's not the issue. I think we both just wanted Avalar so much...that it was easier accepting we couldn't have it from a distance. Because we *knew* we couldn't do anything about it."

"You're right."

Yet B'Elanna sighed. "At this point, all I want for us is not to live in a vacuum anymore, like Isabel and Azro have. Just like everyone else from Avalar and the other colonies, we're just drifting. We can't live like that, not now, definitely not for as long as they have. It's no good for us, and it's no good for the children, living this temporarily and knowing we're depressed about it."

"Very true," Tom said, feeling his own heart ache anew at the thought of their children knowing--even if it was him and B'Elanna that had insisted on being as honest with them as they could. It hurt anyway.

She turned over and back into his arms, and when he drew a lock of her hair from her face, she looked up to him. His eyes were so gentle... Against her will, she felt her eyes mist. But she couldn't stop at least that much.

"We need to get to Oslon, Tom. We have to get out of this...waiting. It's bullshit. I'm tired of it."

Tom nodded. "Me too."

"But damnit, I won't let them have our scout," B'Elanna added, feeling her throat tighten. "The worst

part about it is that I might have considered it if I thought it'd wipe the slate. But it won't. We've all given up enough for those bastards, and we've played their game long enough... The Marseilles is ours, and they have no right to it--none. If we give it up, they'll have won their cheap trick and we'll regret it the rest of our lives, selling out to them for an easier out. I can't do that, Tom. I won't."

He touched her cheek. She queried him with her eyes.

"Is that what you want?" he asked. "Do you want to start taking some more radical steps, give them a kick in the ass?"

She blinked, his intent gaze, barely lit in the dark room, was suddenly in her watery one, and she knew in a beat that his question wasn't a facetious one. He meant business with his question. She moved her hands up over his shoulders. "Tom..."

"Do you want me to get us out of here?" he repeated.

"I know you want it, too," she whispered.

"Yes." It was that simple. But that wasn't his question. "Do you want me to bend a few rules to get things going?"

She knew what that meant. But she couldn't lie about her answer in spite of it. "Yes. I do."

"Then we'll fight on our own terms," he told her. "No more limbo. But if anything happens, I take the blame."

"But--"

"For the kids," was all he said, and was glad to see her relent. "I don't plan on getting in that much trouble, you know. It's just in case."

"I know," she muttered, drawing another steadying breath lest she allow more of those emotions that'd welled over a few nights before, and seemed to threaten again. "I just don't... I feel rotten asking you to do this, like this."

"You know I'd do anything for you, B'Elanna," he told her softly, and saw the water in her solid eyes well over and onto her cheeks. He brushed them gently with his warm fingertips, holding her stare, unblinking. "You know I'll always take care of you. I've always wanted to, from the day we met. I'm definitely not stopping now. "

"You spoil me," she whispered.

"You deserve to be spoiled."

She looked away. "I don't know about that sometimes."

"You're my wife," he quietly told her, and continued despite her catching breath, "my lover, my friend. You gave me four gorgeous children, the happiest life I could never have imagined, and stuck around all this time." Reaching down, he stroked her jaw with his finger, caressing her neck with the others. Her wet eyes turned up to him. He smiled tenderly, feeling her gaze deep within him. "You belong to me, Miss Torres, and don't you ever forget it."

"Damn right I do," she whispered, and pressed her lips upon his neck.

He lifted her chin and kissed her, gently, surely. "So, I'm going to see Alynna tomorrow. Whether or not she can help, we're going to do this. We're starting--tomorrow. You do want to help your partner in crime, don't you?"

A small curl found the corner of her mouth, and a quiet, yet welcome laugh followed it as she embraced him. "I wouldn't miss it."

"Get your hands off me, you p'tahk!" B'Elanna screamed, the butt of her hand already en route to the man's face then striking the underside of his nose with a strength far exceeding her size.

Joe Carey respectively hit the opposite panel, crying out in shock and pain. Struggling to keep his footing as he held onto the wall unit, he turned a shocked stare back to the glowering half-Klingon he'd been forced to work with. "You're a lunatic!" he choked.

B'Elanna spit on the floor at his feet. "And you're an *idiot!* You'll get us all killed!"

By then, another Starfleet crewmember had called security, and B'Elanna threw up her hands. "I'd *rather* have the brig than deal with fools like you!" Spinning on her uncomfortable issue heel, she stormed out and met the security detail on her own, ordering *them* to take her to her quarters.

Hearing of the incident, Tom met her there. Somehow, his face remained perfectly straight as Tuvok instructed him to keep his wife in quarters until a suitable punishment could be decided on.

The door swished shut. Tom's lips turned up. "Had a nice day, then, sweetheart?" he asked.

"Leave me alone," B'Elanna growled, already curled up on the ugly couch she'd have thrown out the window if that cell of a room had one. "Goddamned Carey wouldn't know a duotronic probe from his dick, and he thinks he can run an engine room!"

Tom's brows rose. B'Elanna cursing could only mean one thing, he knew--utter frustration she couldn't do anything about.

She slumped further into the hard cushions. "I just want to get in the Marseilles and get out of here. I want to go home, Tom."

"I'd take you in an instant if I knew how. You know that."

"Yes." She blew a breath. "They hate us, you know--those Starfleet."

Tom grinned, and moved to sit, welcome or not, next to her. "Well, I'd say we gave them a damn good reason to. We were pretty good at what we did."

"Were." She breathed a bitter laugh, shook her head. "We're already talking about it in the past tense."

"It is the past tense," he replied, none too easily.

She looked over to find his face tensed, his eyes solid, and her shoulders fell slightly. "Well," she said

quietly, "I guess it is."

"I miss home so much, you know. As much as you do."

"Of course I know that."

"But we have to live here, B'Elanna. It's not an option. We have none here. Chakotay, Jenna, the others...they need us. It'd be crazy for us to go away, with the baby."

That sudden reminder made her swallow any other escape plans that'd welled up that day, and her eyes turned down in a final defeat. "Then I guess we really are stuck."

Tom's grin faded. "But at least we're stuck together." Turning to her, he let his eyes fall into hers. "I know it's rough for you down there, B'Elanna, all those competing loyalties and ranks. But at the same time, I know we need to make a life, somehow--even if we're only here for ten years, or twenty. It doesn't matter. We still have to make a place for our child."

"Even if we hate it," B'Elanna agreed grudgingly, then stilled. "I still think about our baby growing up on Avarar, Tom. I dream about it all the time."

"I think about it, too." He laughed mirthlessly. "I still wake up expecting to go outside and pick some lunch...see the hills, the rocks..."

"The wildflowers," B'Elanna said, "and the sun coming over the rise--and that air. I never had trouble waking up there, everything felt so new and clean--once the soot washed away, anyway..." She grinned, shook her head to distract the memories a little. "God, Tom, when did we get so...natural?"

Tom shrugged. "The day we set foot on the place, I think."

Sighing, B'Elanna leaned towards him, and instantly felt his arms move around her, felt herself being pulled into his warmth, then his kiss on her hair. She closed her eyes, smiling sadly. "Thank you."

Tom pressed his face against her head. "For what?"

"For staying alive...and with me."

"My pleasure," he whispered, and kissed her hair again. "Whatever comes, I will keep fighting with you."

"You'll have to do more of that now, I'm afraid."

Tom grinned again. "You're worth fighting for, though I think you also have some apologies to make.--To Chakotay, B'Elanna. This is going to come down on him."

She growled--though mainly at herself. She hadn't thought about that. "Damn."

"He's dealt with worse," Tom told her, stroking her back comfortingly, trying to will her muscles back down. "And we'll make something of the rest of it, too, if not make a home, then a house--something we can live with. We'll find a way around it."

She nodded slightly, relaxing a little, gladly warm in his arms. "Good."

A few minutes later, the door beeped for admittance.

"Here we go," she muttered.

"It'll be okay." Kissing her brow, Tom got up and went to it.

Not surprisingly, it was Chakotay. Less shocking still, he wasn't looking pleased. Reigning herself, B'Elanna did not move from her seat, but met his eyes, ready.

"Here," he said shortly.

Her eyes went down to the PADD in his hand. "What's that?"

"Read it."

B'Elanna straightened. Her former captain was understandably angry. Reaching out to take the PADD, she glanced at Tom. "Maybe some coffee?"

"Good idea," Tom said and turned to make some.

"I can't stay long," Chakotay told her. "I have to meet with the captain."

She nodded shortly. "I had a feeling you'd have to, if you hadn't already. But can you sit for just a minute? I think we need to talk about this one...about Carey."

"I think so, too," Chakotay said, and accepted the seat when she gestured to it. "B'Elanna, you can't go killing everyone in Engineering, not when I've got plans for you."

The replicator whirred behind them as B'Elanna's eyes narrowed. "What plans?" she asked slowly.

Tom started chuckling--seeing the man's face at the door alone, he knew his friend was up to something. Handing him a mug of tea, he took another look and laughed aloud. "Chakotay, you've got balls if you're thinking what I think you are."

Hearing that, darting a glance to her husband, B'Elanna turned her look askance, feeling her heart start to skip. "Cha-ko-tay..."

The former captain merely grinned and took a sip from his cup. "Read the report, then I'll start giving you hell--*Lieutenant*."

"Do you mean to tell me you'd actually be foolish enough to take this into your own hands? Your ship won't even fly right now."

Tom threw up his hands, turning away from the admiral. "Alynnna, that's not what I meant!" Stalking a circle, he faced the woman again. "Look, all I want is my own chance to get this done faster--I want to exhaust every option on my own terms, and I want to see the Avalaran records. I *know* you've done everything you could. But there's got to be another way about this!"

Alynnna sighed and shook her head. Leaning back in her seat, she gestured to the chair. "Will you sit for at least a minute and hear me out?"

Reluctantly he did. He never had liked sitting or standing in one place for an admiral--or any other officer for that matter. On Voyager, Kathryn and Tuvok had gotten used to him standing during much of their meetings; Chakotay had rarely known differently. It was hard to shift gears, even if might get him something.

"After their releases," Alynna explained, "a few Maquis did try to return to the Demilitarized Zone. This was before the war ended, and they caused quite a few problems."

"I know that. But B'Elanna and I just want to settle there."

"You're a security risk."

"I'm a colonist! You know that! Unfortunately, I'm a colonist on a long list Starfleet would rather bury than face up to!"

Alynna laughed. She couldn't help herself. "My God, your mother got what she wanted, all right! You really have become more than what pips and a respectable ship could offer, haven't you?"

Tom shook his head. "Don't change the subject, Alynna."

"In a way, I'm not," she grinned. "You're more than your reputation--you made yourself into that on your own. Unfortunately, as I've already told B'Elanna, a lot of people aren't able to see that. No matter what you do, Starfleet will always remember all the equipment you lifted off their ships."

"They won't even see the reason why I did that, either."

"I did," she said quietly, "as well as I knew you were too damn good at it." She eyed him solidly, seeing the frustration glaring out of his intense, blue eyes. Sitting, his strong, off-kilter stance had been replaced by his leaning towards her, straight-postured, as if ready to pounce again to his feet. Ironically, she wasn't sorry for his defensiveness. "They *are* going to try to wear you down no matter what you do."

"They won't," Tom told her. "They almost did, but I won't let them go any further. Whether or not you can help, Alynna--and I'll understand if you can't--I'll warn you now: I'm not playing their game anymore."

She nodded slowly. Drawing her gaze to the window, her own posture unhampered in the least, Alynna let the pause stand a few extra moment, considering his words.

"Your mother would have been so proud of you, Tom," she eventually said. "Finding a life you loved, a woman you adored, a real spirituality--which I still want to grill you about sometime--and those children..." She laughed. "She'd have spoiled them rotten."

Though a little confused by her second turn of subject, he couldn't help but grin at the idea of what might have been. "Yeah, she would have."

Another pause and Alynna's eyes drew down to the lawn below, where the people milled and walked, cadets and commanders alike. Starfleet was a great organization, she knew, reminded herself. It was a place of knowledge and learning and exploration. So many fine people were a part of it. It had done great things, and would continue to do so, no matter what happened there and then. She knew that. Truly believed that. But she also knew that it was political, often unforgiving, and at times stuck in its own gears....

"Is K'Karn still expected to come for Miral at the end of next month?" she asked.

Tom nodded. "If we get the Marseilles back and fixed, we'll probably leave with them, yes."

Alynnna sighed again. "I haven't given up, either. You do know that, don't you?"

"Yeah. I'm in your debt for that, too. But tell me this: Did they ever plan to release it? Or did they know all alone what they were doing?"

"You know I don't have to answer that--because you know the answer."

"Then maybe we should find a way to take the attention off B'Elanna and I," Tom suggested, "since they won't change their minds. Anything, Alynnna, at this point, would be better than what we've got."

She looked at him. He hadn't moved, not in position or expression.

A slim, neutral smile creased her face.

"It's a nice day outside," she replied abruptly. With a deep breath, she pushed herself up from the chair. Ticking off a few things on a small PADD, she pocketed it and looked to her godson.

Tom stared intently at her, rose to his feet. Her face was perfectly neutral. *Holy God*, he breathed to himself, feeling his heart beat faster under his calm facade. "Yeah. I guess it is."

B'Elanna crept into the bedroom, having gotten the kids down and, soon after, the baby settled in with them. She was greeted by Tom's back, hunched over a remote monitor as he tapped on a PADD. He'd been on it since his father retired for the evening.

At first, she didn't even know what he was up to, even though he'd shown her the "roadmap" Alynnna had palmed him earlier that day--a pretty serious breach of protocol B'Elanna would be forever grateful to the woman for.

Getting to travel that map was another thing, she discovered, and a thing that had to wait while his father was still awake and in the house. The last thing they wanted, after all, was for Alynnna to be indicted right behind them.

Yet looking on him then, B'Elanna couldn't help but smile and think how wickedly familiar it all was to her--and welcome. They'd been static for far too long.

"Come here, B'Elanna," he said quietly, not turning. "I think I have something."

She flipped her hair over her shoulder so to look over his. "Tom, you're in," she breathed.

"Not all the way. I still have to get through four more lockouts. Wanna help?"

Grinning, she sat halfway on his lap. "Where's the encryption sequence?" she asked, and giggled a little when his arms went around her waist to hug her. But then she was to work, pecking through the system, her eyes following every scrolling bar like beacons. "Sort of like the good old days, isn't it?"

Tom was smiling. "Kind of nice. You're pretty damned sexy when you're breaking into Starfleet records." He ran his hands from her belly downward, pressing.

She had to steel her breath for that one. It'd been a few weeks since they'd made love, so she was certainly enjoying his sudden...friskiness--more than she should have just then. Distractedly, she told him, "Tom, behave yourself."

"Yes, dear." He reached up to pull her hair a bit to the side then twist his fingers into the long locks as he looked on. "What's that?"

"Override protocol. Give me a minute."

Again, she started tapping in code after code, and Tom added the sequences he'd been given. One block after another began freeing them into the files that'd been barred from them.

They stopped only when they saw it begin to scroll.

Avalar.

If they had ever forgotten their love of their homeworld, they would have been lit anew to see that familiar globe. As it was with them then, it instead made their hearts warm--with fire.

More details they'd never known, as B'Elanna growled and opened some more files: Jaros, Andre's homeworld, was gone, burned to the ground with five thousand of its inhabitants. Riva was similarly destroyed, killing two hundred Maquis, as well as Xorlen and Kieno-three and all their other old bases, plus fifteen more former colonies.

They similarly grew very, very quiet as they perused the devastation.

Starfleet did not defend those worlds, but fought the Dominion on another front. Understandable, considering their ignorance of those who had been there. The Cardassians and their new allies, meanwhile, had only decided to wipe out what it could in colonies, take out one distraction--the Maquis--before moving onto its challenge: The Federation.

Starfleet had cleared Jinara, Diradin, Palod and Ronara, among several more planets during and after the war. Over six thousand petitions for resettlement stood pending, well after the DMZ had been relabeled as secure.

They were just another entry in the databank.

"Those bastards," Tom muttered as B'Elanna started tapping on the small console again. "All of them, keeping us dangling."

"Little wonder they're so good at what they're doing to us," B'Elanna muttered and commenced with another decryption sequence.

"You have no right to tell me what I can and cannot put on my hands!"

"On the contrary, Lieutenant," said Tuvok as he stared plainly up to her, "it is an extraneous personal object of--"

"It's my wedding ring, you Vulcan *butlh!*"

"There is no need to insult me, Lieutenant Paris."

Captain Janeway sighed heavily. "B'Elanna, I think we all need to stop and try to find a solution to this."

B'Elanna reigned in her breath. "With all due respect, the only *solution* to this, Captain, is for Lieutenant Tuvok to drop his request."

"I think we can make a compromise."

"I'm afraid we can't Captain," B'Elanna said. "I refuse to take my wedding ring off, not part of the time--not ever. I've never dropped it in a warp chamber, and it's not distracting." Straightening, crossing her arms over her heavily protruding belly, she gave the tactical officer her most stubborn glare. "You can court martial me for all I care. You can find yourself another chief engineer, for that matter. I won't budge."

"Lieutenant," Tuvok said, "it is a bad example for the other crew for one of the senior officers to willfully display--"

"Well, then here!" she spat and ripped off her provisional rank bar and communicator, throwing them at him. They skipped like stones over the table and flew past onto the floor. "Take it, *Ha'DlBah!* Otherwise, when you get Chakotay down to Sickbay and order the Doctor to rip off his forehead, then--maybe--I'll *consider* it."

Janeway didn't say anything at first, and didn't dare glance again at B'Elanna's husband's reaction, either. *If looks could kill, the whole quadrant would have been wiped out--and I don't feel like starting a war on my ship over a ring.*

It wasn't really a dress code breach, as she'd tried to explain to Tuvok--and tried to pass it solely to him. But he went ahead and sent his request to her in his daily reports, in perfect Starfleet fashion. Naturally, it bounced right back onto her plate when Mister Paris contacted her in her ready room and requested they "clear this issue up--now."

I could be down on Sikaris enjoying myself for a change, she sighed to herself, but yet knew her priorities. More, she knew she would either bend an old rule her security officer wanted to uphold or lose a damn good, and rapidly more pregnant, chief engineer--both adjectives likely lending to her current temper.

"Lieutenant Paris," she said quietly, "you may pick up your insignia now. Tuvok, you and I can discuss this privately. But this issue will be closed."

Tom was the one, though, to step forward for B'Elanna when she nodded shortly. He said not a word as he bent to pick up the pieces from the carpet, and Janeway didn't expect him to. Instead, she said as he passed her by, "Mister Paris, it might be advisable for you to take your wife to Sikaris for a while. They are very generous, and it might be relaxing for you both."

"We'd planned to," Tom said, not lost on her frosty hint, even if he agreed with it. "Thank you..., Captain. I hope you can do the same." Without so much as a glance at Tuvok, he gently took B'Elanna's hand and escorted her out.

As soon as the doors closed behind her, she growled. "That stupid son of a bitch," she said. "How

dare he even think... He actually thought it wouldn't matter."

Tom shook his head. "I think he did, but he thought you might listen. That's not stupidity; it's arrogance. Anyway, I also think Janeway won't make you do anything you're that opposed to. She needs you too much."

"How nice to know."

"You know what I meant." Tom eyed his wife, grinning slightly. "So? Think it's about time to have a break for a change? Go down to a nice world have a nice dinner? Eat stuff called food?"

She smirked. "Try to fatten me up some more?"

Tom laughed and pressed the panel for the turbolift. "You're not fat, B'Elanna. The way you eat, you'd go down the drain if I didn't keep an eye on you."

"Well, I *feel* huge."

"You're beautiful," he countered, and led her inside the lift when it opened. "Deck five." Taking her hands, he backed her up against the wall, pressed himself slightly against her swollen midsection. "You've only got about five more weeks, you know. And I happen to think you're gorgeous--big belly or not."

She stared at him. "You think it's that big?"

"Yes," he answered guilelessly, "and it's getting bigger--and *bigger*. And frankly, I happened to take great pleasure in *making* you big." He grinned. "You've got a *baby* growing in you, for God's sake--our baby, who we made together. So, that makes you the most precious..." He kissed her. "...beautiful..." And again. "...and incredible woman....that I've had the amazing luck of claiming as mine, for keeps. Take that, Miss Torres. You can bludgeon me later."

She smirked up at him, amazed to that day she ever let him get away with as much as she did--but glad she did, too, glad he could always tease her into letting up on herself a while. "Fine. --But I still feel fat."

Tom laughed and put his arm around her. "Yes, dear."

The doors opened and they headed back to their quarters--new quarters assigned about a month after her pregnancy became shipwide knowledge. They still had to stop and remember to go around to the left instead of the right, though. Force of habit.

When they got there, B'Elanna gladly pulled off her tunic and turtleneck en route to the closet. Minutes later, she was already dressed again, in an earthy high-waisted blouse and trousers they'd managed to crank out of an uncooperative replicator with only so many rations.

"Maybe I can find some decent clothes when we're there," she said as she pulled her hair loose of its braid, walking into the main room.

Tom stood up from the couch. "I've already heard they're eager to please--and craving new stuff. We might barter for a good wardrobe."

"Not to mention the list I already have for engineering," she added. "They're too nice...way *too* nice."

"It is a change of pace from our normal acquaintances here. We'll just keep our eyes open. But I think it'll be okay."

B'Elanna nodded, and looked around their quarters after straightening a throw she kept on the couch. It was much bigger than they had expected--not that there were many choices on Voyager. Instead of just enough space, they got a cabin with a large main room and two large bedrooms on either side, and a large window to the middle and right of that main room.

Surprisingly generous of whoever had decided on it for them--or perhaps they'd gotten lucky--it was still ugly, they thought. Knowing that, her mouth turned up a little.

"Maybe we can barter for some furniture, too?" she suggested, turning a tiny smile back his way. "Some *real* furniture, not these...issue pieces."

"Oh, you *really* want to go shopping." Tom grinned back at her. "I thought you'd never ask."

"You don't think Tuvok would take exception to that?" she queried.

Tom chuckled. "B'Elanna, if he bothered, I promise, I *will* fire up our ship and get us the hell out of here, 'cause I'll know he's nuts."

Satisfied, B'Elanna took another look around the room, making a mental list. "If we do have to stay here, we'd might as well make it livable."

On that, Tom paused, and smiled more gently when she looked to him again. "Build another nest," he said.

She looked up to him, drew a breath in her own pause. "Something like that," she agreed softly.

He held out his hand. "Then we'd better get started."

She took it.

B'Elanna was still asleep when Tom tapped up the next screen. He'd been working since before daybreak, reading, filing and uploading, when he came across a file he hadn't expected to do him any good. Thankfully, he was a good skimmer.

"This is interesting," he remarked to himself in a satisfied whisper, feeling a clever grin cross his face.

Minutes later, he was dressed--a good blue shirt, black trousers and coat--and kissing B'Elanna on the forehead. Her eyelids fluttered. "Be back later," he whispered.

Her groggy reply was enough to send him.

"Admiral Caldwell," Tom said but an hour later, "I'd like to file a formal complaint against Admiral Peozet's inspection methods on the Marseilles." He set a PADD before the man. "According to Starfleet Protocol 285-dash 15, subsection-f, it is against Federation policy to dismantle or disengage ships' systems belonging to their imported citizens, regardless of the configuration except within the

boundaries of Federation law or when the owners are under criminal investigation. The cloaking device having been stripped from the *Marseilles*, and my wife and I--to my knowledge--not being under indictment, any further action not granted by my wife and I can be sued upon as unnecessary damage."

"Admiral Nechayev has already pressed this code. But your case is different. Your ship, Mister Paris--"

"Captain Paris to you, Admiral."

"--was a ship which participated in the *Maquis* action--"

"Seven years ago--which is one year beyond the official term of ship-bound criminality." Tom's eyes narrowed, magnifying his intensity. "You want to go in circles with me, too, Admiral? Admiral Nechayev has a schedule and duties to live up to, but I have all the time in the world, thanks to all of you. I'm more than willing to play the policy rat race with you all day and night if that's what it takes. But my ship is not to be dismantled further."

"Tom, look at this," B'Elanna whispered, and accepted her tea when he handed it to her. She sipped, gestured with her chin to the monitor. "The *Marseilles* is not the only ship belonging to 'reformed' *Maquis* being drydocked for *inspection*."

His eyes slowly lit into a gleam as they scanned the page. His lips curled into a clever grin. "I love it when you're thorough."

"It's true," B'Elanna said and transmitted the information to the understandably suspicious captain. "Take a look for yourself," she said and smiled evilly. "You'll want to talk to Admiral Cauldwell, by the way. If you can find Nedril or Salloway, pass it on to them. Tom found Vuenec and Earling already."

"How did you come across all this information?" the captain questioned. "My case had been sealed for three years."

"Tom and I have our sources. Yarrow, I wouldn't have bothered finding you if it wasn't true."

The lady on the other end of the transmission looked at the data that was coming in, grinned a little before looking up again. "They were the good old days, weren't they, B'Elanna?"

She nodded. "In a way, yes. I'm glad the fight's over."

Yarrow laughed. "The fight's not over," she told her. "It's just changed arenas. We still have to wrangle with the Feds to get by."

"I guess you're right--but I'm also glad I'm alive to do it." B'Elanna gave her old acquaintance a stare through the monitor, tucking back a strand of hair as she leaned forward. "There's not many of us left, so don't do anything stupid. Just get your ship back, get out of here."

Her correctness put a sober nod on the captain. "So, you're saying I can't petition to get the *Brittar* back until the term is over but I can keep them from tearing it apart?"

B'Elanna grinned and began to explain how Tom had argued the case

Tom couldn't help it--he turned his wife's face to his and kissed her fully, not stopping until she turned the rest of her body to him and moaned a little for his attentions. They hadn't been in that good a mood in a while, and with the rush of joy she'd just allowed them, she found herself definitely up for more. Parting from her open lips, he touched her jaw. "Jackpot."

She smiled back. "Come back here," she whispered.

He did, tasting her more when she pressed their kiss and ran a hand on the inside of his thigh, moving upwards and around expertly. Groaning as her grip tightened, he parted from her once more, forced himself to withdraw his fingers from her soft hair, her warm skin. "Wait right there--just like that."

"You make that sound easy," she said then giggled at what she saw him doing. "Oh, you're bad, Tom Paris. Very bad."

"Can't wait for my punishment," he returned, sending the information with a tap of his finger before returning to B'Elanna's waiting lips and happily receptive body.

Alynnna spit her coffee all over the desk, and she coughed out even more, trying to hold back the rest. Yet even as she took off her tunic to catch a little of the mess, her eyes were pinned on the display before her.

"Where the hell did you get that?" she breathed, scanning the page with a growing grin--and in spite of the fact she *knew* she shouldn't smile at it. Where they were going that time was positively wicked. Finishing her reading, she called her assistant to get her a new tunic.

Meanwhile, she compiled that data and re-encrypted it, removing it from the system as quickly as she knew how to.

Little bastard--no one else would have dared... At that, Alynnna straightened. *Well, not just anybody. I am a licensed JAG, after all. But even I wouldn't have dug for this dirt...unless I felt I had to.*

Her tunic replaced, her hair straightened, her appointments arranged, the admiral leaned back in her seat again to read again the...arrangements Tom had discovered on the part of Admiral Peozet and a few others she knew from myriad debates over the years.

There was nothing illegal, certainly nothing all that surprising to the admiralty, among whom many would not have gotten where they were without a couple concessions on occasion. But those were also things Peozet and Starfleet certainly would not have wanted to become public knowledge...a few under the table deals, a couple illicit tradeoffs for information, a regulation here, a policy there...a few too many trips to Risa....

At the bottom of Tom had simply pasted the COMM line code to the Federation news wire, and then the header: *Well, Aunt Neckie?*

Her reply was simple: *I'll have more use for it.*

"Can we go out and play? Please?"

As they put the last of the dinner dishes on the counter, Tom and B'Elanna shared a smile at Kiarn's request, and upon B'Elanna's unspoken okay, Tom gestured to the door. "What are you waiting for?"

"Thanks, Daddy!" Alaine said jumping straight from her chair to the kitchen door, only a second behind Kiarn, who was already down the steps.

Moving around the table with Andre, Tom stopped to give B'Elanna a kiss. "Unless you want to go?"

B'Elanna shook her head. "You go ahead. Have fun."

Tom leaned down and kissed her again, rubbing his hand around on her hip before giving her a pat on the backside. "I will--later, too," he said softly.

Her eyes shone right back to his. "Don't wear yourself out, then. I like my men still squirming."

Tom laughed and moved to catch up with his son. "I don't think there'll be much squirming in my designs on you, Miss Torres."

"Glad to hear it," she replied, lightly predatory as she watched him stride out the door. Turning back, she caught her mother's eyes and giggled as she reached down to take Isabel's food tray, replacing it with a cracker. The baby immediately grabbed it and started chewing.

Miral couldn't have grinned more brightly to hear the playfulness between her daughter and her mate, and continued to smile as B'Elanna tended to her youngest. "She will grow strong," she noted. "She eats as you did."

B'Elanna glanced to her mother. "Alaine was the same way. Sometimes I've wondered where they put it all--or how the boys get so big when all they do is play with theirs."

"Klingon girls usually eat more sooner, boys later, when they are ten or more. It looks the same with your children."

"I never ate that much," B'Elanna said.

Miral laughed, loudly enough that little Isabel, cracker in mouth, turned at the sound. "B'Elanna! How would *you* remember your infancy? You ate like a Schigrak boar until you had seven years!--and one would never know it to see you, until you move and show your strength. Where the children put their fuel is in their wild little bodies, and it's all the reason your mate has to run them like beasts after every feeding! You will not tell me you were not the same."

B'Elanna smiled. "I guess not," she said, kissing Isabel's curly head before moving to the reclamator to finish the dishes. "I'm just glad Tom's got the energy to keep up."

"Not bad, for a human," Miral quipped.

B'Elanna turned back a clever grin. "Trust me, Mother, he'll put any Klingon man to shame for stamina when he sets his mind to it."

Miral grinned at her child's innuendo. There had been much of that of late. Much of *them*, she

noticed, talking and teasing, their wits ready, their talk more active, with each other and with the children, their hearts beating strong inside them. For several weeks, the opposite had been true. Even in their cheer, there had been that disturbing pall. Finally, that seemed to have broken.

"It is good to see you like this, B'Elanna," she told her daughter.

"Like what?" the daughter asked, still pleasant though not looking up from her work.

The older woman nodded, moving past B'Elanna to look out the window. Tom and the children were already descending the step to the beach, lit with the sunset, disappearing from her view. "To see you and Tom alive."

It's starting all over again.

Owen had enjoyed a rather good day, with a new arrangement made with Bajor for exchange scientists to study different stellar phenomena in one of the branches of Federation space, and with the Niora on new information exchanges. Both contracts he had taken on himself and had worked on for some months. With his usual care, he'd brought the necessary people together and wound up finalizing the agreements on the same day.

He wondered if Kathryn, who'd made quite a mark at the recent stellar phenomena and anomalies seminar, would like to take the former assignment. The hearings were finally nearing an end after nearly two weeks of closed-door inquiries and another set of general hearings. Voyager's refit was complete, waiting for its new assignment. Nobody had decided quite what to do with her or the ship, though.

Her captaincy, of course, hadn't been as much the issue. She behaved very well in her situation, completed her mission, and came home willing to continue her career in proper style. Nobody questioned how good she was at getting the job done. As usual, however, her methods were in question. But a nice, safe, routine science mission would not--in all likelihood--offer any difficulties for her to wing around. He could arrange that.

Coming home late that day with those things in mind, he went straight to his den and called up the Voyager's records to compile some arguments before presenting them. *Best to be prepared for the hardliners in that group*, he knew.

Still, it was a surprisingly easy task--Voyager had been the witness to many excellent examples of data collection during its long journey. Kathryn Janeway was an excellent scientist with a penchant for getting herself out of trouble if necessary. She'd proven that many times over.

He noted and marked the files he had pulled for later reference, rechecked the files before standing to finally get some dinner, and almost left his terminal before noting a strange access code in his unit's base encryption bar.

Checking it, he found no author. Furrowing his brow, he pulled up the access record. It took him a minute to search through the search.

The contact list had been encrypted. The encryption pattern was....

He leaned back to stare at it. *No. Please, no*, moaned a dreadful voice inside him. Yet somehow, he knew who had received data, sent it, stole into who-knew how many files--all likely confidential,

from his own house, no less.

And I thought... I truly believed he wouldn't...in spite of it all.

He didn't look when he saw Tom in the corner of his eye.

"I thought I heard you come back," he said, not moving from the doorway. "Want some dinner? There's some left, you know."

Owen turned his eyes to his boy, and for a long moment held his gaze, regarding the man anew. Tom looked like he always did. The admiral sighed, casually reached up to turn off the monitor. "No, I'm not particularly hungry right now. Thank you."

Tom nodded slowly. He hadn't missed his father's move, or his silent examination.

In their pause, Owen reconsidered his reaction. "Though I'll admit, it does smell good. What did you--"

"You saw it, didn't you?" Tom cut in. At one blank look from his father, he shook his head. "No Dad. It's been five months, and you don't deserve the games I could play with you, so let's not start one. I knew it wouldn't take long before you found it."

Owen's eyes were frozen. His chest constricted a little, but he ignored it. "I suppose I can't blame you very much," he said, not feeling it. "Being who you are, I suppose you would have a...loyalty to the people you adopted."

"You think wanting to see what really happened out there, see what's happening now, is that much of a crime?"

He considered that for a moment, then admitted, "In itself, no. Your method, however, can easily be construed as criminal."

"My methods were necessary, Dad, and I won't regret it. B'Elanna and I need to make some changes--not in the Federation, but to get our life back, starting with our ship. We've already lost Avalar, and we don't want to stay on Voyager. We need to start putting things back together again, and the only way to do that is to get back what belongs to us and get out of here."

Owen pulled another breath. "I understand your determination, Tom. But you can't ask *me* to be happy with your choices. I can accept it, but I'll never think it might have been otherwise."

"I never asked you to agree with my decisions," Tom told him. "Not since I left here a decade ago, did I ever expect you to like what I was doing with myself. We're too different in that respect."

"Do you hate Starfleet?" Owen suddenly asked. "Do you still hate them for what happened?"

"Sometimes," Tom replied. "I sure don't like what they've been doing to our friends lately--putting Kathryn on the coals for getting us through the Delta Quadrant alive, debating to reprogram Doc just because he's a computer program, using Seven as a Borg database without giving a damn about her. B'Elanna and I are only a part of the crap that's going on--and *their* biggest crime was just coming back to Earth. This aside what happened to our friends out in the DMZ, you're damn right I've been angry."

"Are you angry with me, too? I'm Starfleet, after all, and always will be."

The younger man grinned at that. "Do you think I'm that narrow minded? It isn't your department Dad, even if you do have sway with them. I never expected you to go in there and make everything okay. I asked for your help, but... Well, maybe I should be sorry for blowing steam off on you last week. I needed an ear, I guess. You weren't expecting it. For that, I will apologize."

"Tom, it's been more than that," Owen said. "You've almost seemed determined not to fit in since you came home."

"Dad..." Tom shook his head, willing down his sudden frustration. He'd always hated it when his father cornered him like that. But at the same time, he knew he wasn't a scared kid anymore. "Did you really expect B'Elanna and I to settle down without complaint, just be glad to be out of the Delta Quadrant?"

"Aren't you glad to be back?"

Not answering that, he looked over towards the fireplace, collecting himself again. "You knew that we'd be detained here, didn't you, when you came aboard Voyager?"

He admitted that with a grudging nod, then added, "But I didn't know it would take this long, Tom. And perhaps I hoped you'd move on of your own volition."

"Fair enough." Tom got to his feet--easily, though, moving naturally to his feet and gradually away. "I don't know if I'm helping or hurting anything here," he said, "but you should know that I won't change my convictions. Unless you stop me personally, I will keep collecting the data I need. It's not as if I'm trying to take down the whole of the Federation. I'm just looking for answers, trying to get my life, mine and B'Elanna's, our family's, resettled. And I will get that, one way or another. I will do that."

Owen only nodded.

"But that doesn't mean we have to be enemies."

Again, he nodded. "Yes. The war is indeed over."

"In more ways than one," Tom pointed out.

"But you just cause more trouble by being dissatisfied with what you have. You've always been impulsive, Tom, always expected more than you could fairly get."

"Maybe, or maybe I've learned to have a goal and go after it. It's *not* trying that gets to me. It's a hell of a lot more frustrating than failing. I look at my old friends, the Osols, and see how it's worn them down. I refuse to go there, live like that."

"You might have asked me for the information you were looking for."

"You wouldn't have answered the questions I needed to know," he replied simply.

Owen took a deep breath. His son was right in that, he knew. "Get what you needed, Tom?"

The older man's statement was emotionless, revealing nothing--which to Tom meant he either was dissatisfied or had something to hide, probably both. But he didn't press it too much.

"Yeah."

"You'll be going to Oslon when K'Karn leaves with Miral, then?"

"If we have the Marseilles back, yes," Tom acknowledged. "We can make a place there for the mean time. But we're not leaving without our ship."

Owen drew a thoughtful breath, eyeing his son. Tom stood before him, solid, stable in his off-stance footing. His posture was straight, eyes straight to his...eyes that looked much more rested than they had been since he came back to that house...and totally unafraid.

If I don't do something, he will, a voice deep inside him said. He will escalate this...and I won't be the only one to know about it...

And the admiral drew another breath.

"Getting the Marseilles back," Owen said, "your freedom back, would that make you both happy?"

Tom turned back to him. "Dad, I don't want you--"

"Answer my question."

"Of course it would, but--"

"That luncheon a you attended was good for a lot of things, Tom. Not only for letting people in on how you and B'Elanna behave now, but it gave me the opportunity to know Gask Peozet. I know I said I couldn't do anything *official* about the situation. However, if Alynna and I both worked on him a little... --Don't say anything, Tom.

"But I should, Dad," Tom told him. "You said you had no business in the department I'm tangled up in--and it's no easier that you're my father. But Alynna's a JAG. She can get away with being nosier."

Owen grinned a little at that. "Whether or not you like it, I'm going to help you. You'll only get in trouble if I don't. I know Alynna's put everything she could aside for this, I might do the same without looking like anything but what I am--concerned for my son."

Tom drew a breath, knowing he wanted it too much to argue it. "Okay."

In the light of his victory, Owen's eyes considered the floor for a moment. His fingers rubbed along the carved edge of the desk. "She does it for your mother, you know, because Alaine would've wanted it."

The younger man nodded soberly. "Yeah, I know."

"Personally, I think Alaine would've laughed herself silly to see me capitulating like this," Owen continued. "But I think it's time you and your wife at least had the freedom to settle--even if you'll be missed here. In return, however, you'll promise me you won't go running off to that homeworld of yours."

"I can't promise you that."

Owen blinked back up to Tom's unbroken gaze. "I'm sorry?"

"I won't make you a promise I'll break if given a good opportunity to," Tom clarified. "On the other hand, I can promise you I won't support any anti-Federation initiatives, particularly with the

Marseilles. Everyone seems to forget that we wouldn't do that to the children."

He considered that, sighed. "Very well. Seeing how you are now, I suppose you wouldn't get in *too* much trouble."

"I think I could promise you that part, too," Tom returned lightly. "That is, *if* we get our ship back. Otherwise, I will raise some hell."

Owen reactivated his monitor, chuckling with the irony of his son's statement. "You already have," he noted. "You've become rather good at it, I will give you that."

With that, the admiral started tapping in commands.

Tom looked at his father again, still and solid in his large brown chair as he worked, almost as if nothing had passed between them. Yet the memories--not too many good ones--that came with them had a strangely comfortable familiarity to it.

For the first time, Tom could see his father there without any discomfort. For what he was doing, too, despite his better judgment and his obvious disapproval, warmed the son even further. He never expected it might happen--his own father helping him back to his ship, that Maquis ship, not fighting him tooth and nail and berating him about his stubbornness. Tom had asked, but never actually thought...

"Dad?"

Owen was already busy, his eyes scrolling with the page. "Yes, Tom?"

"Thanks again. --I mean that. I'm grateful."

He looked up to his son, standing again by the door. The intensity had left his eyes; in its place was a respect, maybe love, or maybe just accepted surprise. He had never seen Tom look at him like that. There was nothing held back in that gaze. If it weren't such a relief, it would have been frightening. In either case, he liked it.

Owen gave a nod of acknowledgment. "You're welcome."

The younger man turned and left, and Owen glanced at the portrait of his wife beside the door, at her bright smile and sparkling eyes. With a little grin of his own, he went back to work.

He checked his terminal again the next morning. Tom had broken in again, requesting historical files on Avalor and colonial policy. Nothing on the Maquis. Nothing concerning the Cardassians. He'd copied file photos, population histories, and some geological and botanical data taken years before. Little more. Those files had only been closed after the policy had been changed and the area closed off. It wasn't a terrible breach, and that time, Tom hadn't bothered to encrypt anything. His son was just looking for more information.

Tom *not* knowing something at that point, Owen knew, was far more threatening.

Slowly, then, the admiral reached over and deleted the anomalous access from the computer, then stood to get his tunic. He had some assignments to discuss, and a few other matters to attend to

"Alynnna, we need to talk. Mind if I sit?" With a raised brow and a gesture of her hand, he did, and began, handing her PADDs as he did.

She stared at him, her face amusedly neutral as her old friend discussed the issue with her, started laying out "strategies" of persuasion. Her smile revealed absolutely nothing, especially as she realized that Tom had said nothing of her involvement in the matter, that she had given him the codes he'd needed--even if she knew her friend was probably aware of that. But that didn't matter. Owen Paris was actually conniving to help. Finally.

She yet retained her well-trained poker face.

Alynnna had already discussed her own plan not only with Tom, but with Moira, too, who roundly praised her for being as bold, assured her that her brother would be the last one to reveal Alynnna as a conspirator if any trouble resulted--not that she expected any. "Everyone remembers Tom as getting caught," Moira recalled, "but he got in a lot *less* trouble than he could have." The admiral understood that point for certain, and was counting on its staying power.

So, as her colleague and old friend laid out his brilliant plan, Alynnna simply grinned and listened and nodded, as if what her friend was suggesting had never come to her own mind.

When he finished, she only pushed herself to stand and said, "Well, then, let's go to it." Cleverness was always better in numbers, after all--and his lectures and arguments had always been more effective than her own. Owen Paris had a way of playing verbal chess like few others. He'd poke and prod them, surround their defenses until they gave in. This was both a gift and a curse, she knew, though that day, she was glad to know the former would be on their side for a change.

However, before she left, she did unlock her bottom drawer and slip her hand within it. *Never hurts to have a little insurance*, she smirked to herself and hurried to catch up with Owen.

An hour later, they were indulging in a lovely brunch with Admiral Peozet. Baby greens with walnuts and broiled chicken, occasionally spattered with issues and accusations, rehashes of months old arguments and fresh rebuttals. But otherwise, the lunch was a pleasant one, and Peozet had agreed to schedule a couple more meetings with Owen to continue their discussion. When they finally said their farewells, and Owen was ticking off his points with a satisfied grin on the way out, Alynnna suddenly excused herself to double back for her reports, which she left on the chair next to hers.

Picking the PADDs up, she scrutinized one, frowned, and looked at the other man. "I'm sorry, but I think this one belongs to you, Gask."

To her credit, she held her composure until she and Owen parted for their own offices.

A few hours after that, they were assured the matter would be reconsidered.

Several days later, she was the one to go to Owen's office and replay the message left for her by Admiral Peozet. The news was enough to make them share a respective grin and turn to leave. Nothing more needed to be said.

Not too long after, the admirals found the pilot in the garden, rocking his nine-month-old daughter in his well-trained arm. The baby girl cooed and babbled back to him, reaching out to his nose and kicking her booted foot. He spoke softly to her as he put her empty bottle in his pocket, then caressed her curly gold hair, and tapped her nose affectionately.

Owen smiled on the sight. As if for the first time, he remarked to himself how different Tom was as

a man. Even in that duster he'd wore since his time in the Maquis, his hair a bit mussed and his grin as crooked, he had grown a certain presence over the years, even as the proud, affectionate father that he was.

Owen nudged Alynna, who grinned to approach the man. She handed him the PADD to peruse, and laughed as Tom's face melted into shock, then happiness. Suddenly, he was handing her the baby, careful but anxious.

"I'll be back," he said, making sure Isabel was secure in Alynna's arms, "stay right here--don't go anywhere!"

They grinned after him as he took off for the beach.

Tom jumped down the sharp steps, not caring if he fell at that point, then darted out to his wife, who was standing, arms crossed, on the lip of the sea, watching the other children. She'd been wading in the water. The skirt of her tunic was wet above her bare knees as she paced along the dark sand.

Without preamble, he sprinted across the loose sand behind her. Just as she turned, Tom grabbed her and spun her into his embrace, earning her shocked yell. "What the hel--"

Still turning, he kissed her deeply, carelessly opening her lips with own as he held her small frame warmly to his. His hands found her body, her skin, her hair, as he poured all his joy and relief into their display, and without a single care for his wet shoes or whoever could be watching.

Finally, he pulled back, smiling at her. Again, he touched her face, drew his fingers into her thick locks, caressed her temple with his thumb.

"We got the Marseilles back, B'Elanna," he said breathlessly. "They've released it."

Her eyes widened. "Really?" She watched him nod, and she coughed a laugh. "Alynna and Dad really did it?"

"Looks like it. We can go to the drydock tomorrow to start repairs."

Her smile brightened further. "It's about time," she breathed and kissed him again--then squealed when he hiked her up in his arms, turning her in a circle on the sand.

It was something--not everything, but a very good something.

The glasses went around, the bubbling grape juice soon after--to be fair, Jenna thought, to both of them that day--and B'Elanna accepted her own graciously, glowing as a woman at her stage properly would. Tom stood beside her, proud husband and papa, his arm draped around her small shoulders. He kissed her temple before raising his glass and waiting for everyone else to do the same.

"To B'Elanna," he said, then looked down to her, grinning gently, "my love, my friend, my wife, my home." He leaned down a little and rubbed his nose against hers. "I love you," he whispered, then more audibly. "Happy birthday, B'Elanna."

The same echoed back in the warm light of the holo-Sandrine's as the group of friends, all the Maquis and quite a few Starfleet, drank to her, repeated their sentiments personally as she made her way over to the chair Harry eagerly pulled.

"Too bad there wasn't a double birthday," he said.

Patting her overburdened belly, B'Elanna replied, "Well, maybe on Daddy's birthday. Any birthday at this point would be nice!" Despite her laugh, she meant it, being only a week away from her due date. Jenna was sure the baby would be quite content to stay put for a while, however, though she'd already had two false labors. "Now where's that cake?"

Neelix looked a little concerned. "But aren't you supposed to open presents first?"

Her lips twisted up as she made herself comfortable in the chair. "I'm full term, half-Klingon and might start craving poached Talaxian if I'm too late for my feeding. I can eat and open at the same time."

Neelix looked at Tom; Tom shrugged, grinned. "She's the birthday girl. She gets whatever she wants."

Vindicated, B'Elanna turned an expectant smile up to the cook.

As Neelix served the young soon-to-be-mother her cake, B'Elanna pulled an Ocampan candle bowl out of a delicately wrapped package. Chakotay grinned. He'd helped Kes replicate it, and he could tell B'Elanna loved it. She was already planning exactly where to put the piece--on the window table, next to the side chair in the living room.

"Good to see them in such good spirits," Chakotay said as he and Jenna watched B'Elanna rip into her presents from another table.

"Well, with the baby nearing, they're excited," Jenna said, grinning wistfully on the scene. "It's all they've got left, you know."

"What do you mean?"

"Of home," Jenna said.

"At least they're starting to make a home here, and they still have the Marseilles."

Jenna shook her head. "They've little choice but to live here. I'd not call it home. And a ship's not the same. You know that. Besides, your captain won't even let Tom fly it, do the work he loves."

"You know I've been trying to change that."

"I've not forgotten."

Chakotay looked at Jenna. Her eyes were still pinned on the scene. B'Elanna had moved on to Harry's gift--a real coffee press, which B'Elanna laughed at and said, "I suppose you really expect me to cook for you, now, hmm?"

Jenna only grinned, and Chakotay realized that he'd never really talked to her about her own losses. She had kept up such a brave face, plugging on when everyone else wanted throw up their hands, doing the needful, being the cheer--or at least lightening the tension with her usual humor when times

got tense, very much as she used to on the Liberty. She was even perfectly understanding when Chakotay suggested they have a platonic relationship. Of course, then, he thought she'd taken it *too* calmly.

"How are you, Jenna?" he finally asked.

She didn't look at him. "Fine as one can be. Why?"

"It's not the same for you, either." He caught her gaze. "You've got a job, friends around you, nice quarters--"

"I'm alone in those quarters," she told him bluntly, and finally turned her stare his way. "You won't touch me for the fear of complications. My children will never know me again. I gave them up because I had to help the fight, and now the fight's a lifetime away. Damn right it's not the same. It's penance for me being rash and tempered; I know it. But there's no use in nitting over the things you can't do a thing about. Just move on, try to right it somehow."

He drew a slow breath, regarding her. "You've never been one to lay back and take things before."

"And I'd never heard you so forgiving of Starfleet," she countered. "But we've all got to do what we can, take what we can, make of it what we will." But just as suddenly as she'd answered him, Jenna dropped her mood to smile and nod towards their friends. "Tom's gift."

B'Elanna opened the large box and sighed happily. "Tom..."

"There's more," he said softly.

B'Elanna looked through the box of portraits, all framed beautifully in glazed metal with glass, then pulled out one that caught her eye. "Jenna--look!" she called and held up the portrait her friend had taken of her and Tom.

Jenna grinned, nodded. "Gorgeous, sweets, if I do say so myself." She nudged Chakotay with her elbow. "And meanwhile, Chakotay was off bleeding somewhere."

The commander laughed. "You'll never let me live that one down, will you?"

"Not so long as I have lungs," Jenna returned.

Harry and Kes both took a better look at the portrait. Kes in particular smiled upon what looked to her like a happy memory, and on a beautiful world, far away. She'd been told so many things about their home, so much so that she could practically picture every trail and clearing.

It was Tom, about a week after they had started their work in the hydroponics bay, who prompted her to ask. The Parises always seemed kind, but caught up in their own world--pleasantly distant.

One day, when they were preparing a row of beds that would house some vegetable seeds he'd had on the Marseilles, he seemed unusually involved in his work, not chatting or making his usual comments, but taking particular care in what he was doing. So she asked him where his mind had gone, only to watch his face fall, his eyes drift away. Gently pressing him to tell her whatever might be wrong, he instead invited her to dinner with his wife. Knowing that Neelix would be busy that night, Kes was glad to accept.

"Good--and you can keep Harry company, too," Tom said, and went back to work.

That evening, B'Elanna, gladly out of uniform, welcomed Kes and Harry while Tom prepared their simple but delicious meal. Over that and an interesting cider that Harry complimented them on, the table was quiet for some time, an uncomfortable time with Harry too unsure to say anything and the Parises unable to offer anything at first.

Then, Tom told his wife, "Kes has never been to the Alpha Quadrant; she was wondering about our home today."

A slow, sad smile grew on B'Elanna's face as her gaze turned inward. "I still wake up expecting to see the Koellin lowlands," she said, softly, mysteriously.

"You loved it very much," Kes noted with a little more hope they would speak on it--and then because she felt for them. Despite her smile, B'Elanna's ache, her wanting, was palpable to the Ocampan, much as Tom's had been earlier that day.

"That's beyond an understatement," Tom replied, earning a sudden little laugh from B'Elanna. Yet with little more prodding from both Harry and Kes, they indeed did begin to open up, brightening with the not too distant memories of their homeworld, and fading only when they had to remind each other they would likely never see it again.

Kes felt her own heart breaking with theirs, feeling their loss with them.

This had been much the case all over their ship--and the Parises reminded their new friend of that, pointing out even Harry's missing his family, of other crewmembers' children left behind, husbands and wives, lovers. Kes agreed, knowing the difference in her case, as she had actually left her home to come with Voyager, giving up all that was stable and familiar for the possibilities and knowledge she would gain with them.

But the Parises, she could tell, had already lived many adventures, experienced full lives, perhaps even suffered, in life spans already three times her own. How opposite they--all those people--were to her, when meanwhile they had welcomed and accepted her. Still, it seemed right for the Parises to want what she had forsaken.

"So this is your homeworld?" Kes asked as she looked at their picture, not so much a question as an observation.

Tom nodded. "That's Avalor. It was taken the day after we found out about the baby."

"On a little flat just outside the gorge coming down from the cavern," B'Elanna added, knowing Kes would ask. The young woman was always inquisitive about those little things, and luckily for her, B'Elanna didn't mind relating them.

Rubbing her heavy belly, she managed little laugh at the memory, made even more alive there with Jenna still teasing their former captain. She could almost feel that day again, the sun on her face and the breeze tossing her hair, the echoes of Chakotay chasing Jenna, laughing as they cut across the sandy landing. Tom's warm arms around her as they too joked between each other, then Jenna scampering back to finally find her imager in her bag and call out to them... Snapped from their own conversation, B'Elanna leaned her head back into Tom's shoulder just as Jenna captured their image. It was a moment, among so many moments made on their world, and in so short a time.

She looked up at her husband. "Thank you Tom," she said, soft in her smile. "You know how much I love it. I know just where it'll go, too."

"I'm glad you like it," he said sincerely, then glanced at the box again. "Why not show them the other ones?"

She snickered a little. "Hey, Frank, Mariah--you too, Chakotay, come here." She pulled the next frame out. "Anyone remember this one?"

Several of the Maquis gathered around and laughed aloud as soon as they saw the informal portrait taken in the bay of the Liberty. Even Jenna perked up to see it. "Ah, my charming little bastard!" she laughed at Chakotay and threw her arms around him. "What a day that was!"

"We almost didn't *have* that day," Chakotay pointed out.

"But we did--oh how we did!" Jenna countered, moving up close to grin on all those faces, some with them still, some gone, some still home: Pag Krammic, Nola, Atara and Andre--Andre Rodrigo with that damned ball tucked back on his boot heel, grinning widely with his arm around his oh-so-worldly lady. Jenna felt her heart swell a little for missing them, too, for all of those she missed so much. "It was hard, alright, but there were some good times there as well...very good times."

"That was after the fight with Gul Hasec, wasn't it?" Mariah asked.

"And a bloody game of kickball after," Jonas grinned.

"Oh god, I miss that!" Mariah laughed. "Andre..." She shook her head, her smile fading a bit. "He was really a lifesaver with those games, wasn't he?"

B'Elanna nodded. "Yes..." Her eyes turned down at that.

Tom saw it, watched his wife offer the picture out to the others so they could see it up close, then place her hands on her belly again, caressing it. Knowing well, he kissed her hair, gave her shoulders a little squeeze.

At least, somehow, he and B'Elanna had regained some sense of normality again, some sort of routine and a circle of friends around them, and work to do they were needed with. It'd gotten easier, once they had quarters that didn't repel them, had positions that kept them busy, had the happy anxiousness of their baby, who'd be there soon, making them an official family.

At least their lives had become comfortable again, and they could live at least decently again, even when they knew they were still missing.

The sun was warm on the coffee table where they, Owen and Moira and Adam, Miral and all the children breakfasted, enjoying the children's quiet chatter, good food and steaming coffee, which scented that entire side of the house. It was a good morning, for all the good needs and work finally to get done. Even Miral was in good spirits, toying with Andre and making sure all the children were well satisfied in their meals. Outside, the gull cries were loud that day. They were feasting on what the late spring rains the night before had left behind.

Taking it all in, Owen leaned back in his chair, simply enjoying the peace and cheer.

Some of Tom and B'Elanna's friends from Voyager would be there soon. They would start working on the Marseilles, helping to get it back to flight readiness. It would be a good day for it, with few other people there at Sonoma due to an emergency Starship refit in Montana. Despite all those good tidings, however, Owen knew he would soon miss having that full house again.

As he continued to muse about how he would readjust, he heard a door hit an opening wall upstairs. His eyes averted, and Miral straightened too. Then there was a flurry of light steps across the upstairs hallway, then down the steps. Soon, in the hall, they heard B'Elanna excitedly talking to the baby as she neared.

Finally, she burst in. Her face was freshly washed but her thin robe was in disarray, and worse off were her dark curls, strewn all about in curly clumps and frizzes. But her eyes were bright as she beelined to her mother, kissing Isabel before setting her in the grandmother's lap.

"Give her a bottle from the supply in the preserver and some food, Mother? Thanks." Just as swiftly, she gave her other three children kisses and a "Good morning" before hurrying back out. "Daddy and I are a little busy now--alone time," she called behind her. "Listen to your grandparents. We'll be down later!"

Her orders given, they next heard her madly dashing upstairs again and towards to the rear of the house. Suddenly, she laughed, "Tom!"

"C'mere, you!"

The echo of B'Elanna's wild squeal echoed all the way back down into the eating area before the door upstairs slammed shut.

Moira and Adam both snorted at the surprise of seeing their sister-in-law in such a state. "Well, *that* was interesting," Adam snickered.

Owen furrowed his brow bemusedly. "Was that who I thought it was?"

"It looked like B'Elanna," Moira replied, straight-faced with an effort.

The older children looked at each other and giggled.

Miral turned Isabel to sit forward on her lap as she regarded Alaine and Kiarn. "Your parents must also be a man and a woman--as they are mates," she smiled at them. "It is how you came to be. But you know of this, don't you?"

The children giggled again. "Mommy likes alone time," Alaine told her and her grandfather. "And so does Daddy." Again she broke out in a flood of bubbly laughter.

Owen flushed, though he did chuckle. "*Alone time*, hmm?"

"Yeah." Kiarn said. "They play grownup games. We're not supposed to play 'em for... How many years 'till we're big enough?"

Alaine shrugged. "Daddy always changes the number."

They all laughed aloud at that one. "I wish I'd thought of that," Owen said. "Would've saved a lot of trouble."

Ten minutes later, the guests arrived to Owen's welcome at the front door. Beckoning them in through the main hall, he set them up in the suddenly crowded breakfast room. Seeing something lacking, Jenna made herself welcome to replicate a couple more pots of coffee, one of which she claimed for herself while serving the others.

"The Doctor's coming to Sonoma, by the way," she told the admiral. "It'll be good to see him again--poor dear--*if* they can get his program downloaded right this time. Maybe B'Elanna can install a brain or two on that end when she gets a moment." Thinking on that, Jenna peered around the room. "Where are those two, anyway?"

"Again?" B'Elanna purred, willingly trapped beneath her husband's hips and tender gaze. It was one place she could be trapped forever and not give a care. The sun through the window, adding heat to their bodies to spite the cool, wet summer air, was like a fond old memory to her.

His fingers were entwined in hers, above her head, pinning her gently as he tasted her smooth skin, ran his tongue softly up her neck, catching her skin with his teeth beneath her ear. A short cry escaped her; she nuzzled her face in his hair, breathing deeply, purred again. "Tom..."

"Mmm, only if you want to," he breathed, and kissed the mark, then down her shoulder. He was ready again, and he wanted to make the most of what time they had. He rocked his hips against hers again, letting her know that.

"Oh yes, again," she moaned, letting him continue to devour her, arching a little to direct him downward. He knew precisely where to go, purring himself when he found her breast, which rose and fell with her heavy breaths. He softly nibbled around and at its peak until she shuddered with expectation. "Yes, Tom," she breathed.

He pulled his head up to find her dark stare again, like polished onyx and far more powerful to him than any myth had given to such a stone. His smile was gentle, knowing, as he rocked back his hips. She instinctively arched to accept him, wrapping her legs around him. When he thrust forward, she groaned at that delightfully familiar completion.

Tom did not release her hands, but caressed them with his thumbs as he began moving expertly within her, watching with sensual awe the changes in her face, her tiny smile, her little gasps. From time to time, she closed her eyes and turned her head in ecstasy, moaning out to him, whimpering softly when he responded.

He would never get enough of seeing her do that, or the myriad other things they had discovered together.

B'Elanna gasped loudly--his rhythm was strengthening, his throaty growls filled her ears as his hands unconsciously clasped hers tighter as she rocked to his rhythm, milking him, encouraging him--as if he needed as much. But it was certain he appreciated it. Squeezing his waist with her legs, running her foot along his thigh, whispering to him, she gloried in his answers to her pleas when he brought her right to that point where he would hold her, hold himself, before...

BANG! sounded on the door. "I know you two rabbits are in there!" Jenna yelled. "I know you're after my record, too, so come on out of there!"

B'Elanna burst out laughing--and Tom winced and grunted, "Ow! Damn!"

"I *knew* it!" Jenna laughed from behind the door. "You think you'll be able to beat me out?! Well forget it!"

"Jenna go away!" Tom called back, trying not to laugh himself. B'Elanna was already killing him. "B'Elanna--stop! You're...ugh!"

"Not so long as you're after my number! Not a chance, Charlie!"

B'Elanna couldn't stop laughing, despite what it was doing to Tom, which ironically made her laugh even harder. Gasping for air, she managed, "Jenna, it's not my time! So leave us alone...please!"

"Bah! That's what they all say! Now get downstairs so we can go fix your ship, you buggers! Getting me *more* elves to sit after. La! I know your objectives. Well, go on! Knock her up for all I care--but get another babysitter! I've got a life, too, you know!"

There was another voice outside the door, to which Jenna responded, "They're *copulating*, damnit! I *knew* they'd go for my record! And this is *your* fault Chakotay! You bullet-proof bastard!"

Tom fell on B'Elanna, finally unable to hold back his laughter and forced to disengage from his wife. She squeezed a tear from her eye, convulsing more to try to hold it back. "Oh God, she's just as bad as she was ten years ago," she said.

"Worse," Tom snorted. "Much... God, B'Elanna, stop laughing! We'll never get downstairs at this pace!"

"I can't," she giggled as Jenna continued to rail on their former captain all the way down the hallway. "She just won't--"

With a concerted effort, Tom grabbed her wrists again, threw them down on the pillow above her head and thrust hard into her all he had left, replacing her laugh with a shocked gasp.

Catching his intense--if not still amused--stare, her mood reverted almost immediately. "That'll do it," she panted, her own mouth still curled up.

He moved again, and harder, squeezing her hands. "Where were we?" he grinned and determinedly picked up the pace until they were back where they'd been.

Not that she minded one bit

"Are we in the right place?" Jenna breathed, stuck in her paces, like everyone else, upon climbing up into the back of the scout. She looked at Tom and B'Elanna. She didn't have to ask to find out what was going on their heads.

The children, sent ahead, already celebrated as if it was Christmas day as the stunned couple stood in the middle of their engine room, staring around at the wreck that was left for them.

They all saw it, and even Owen could not believe his eyes when he climbed up last and looked around at what they were witnessing.

The Marseilles' engine room looked like scavengers in a salvage yard attacked it. Entire panels left hollow, open bulkheads stripped of its machinery, much of the warp assembly left in chunks,

equipment stores had been emptied...

B'Elanna, had she not been gifted with a higher form of control, would have cried outright.

But her control did indeed take over, and she took a PADD from her work kit. "Dad, do us a favor?" she asked curtly. "Could you ask Peozet what the hell they did to my engine? I'll make a list of their butchery, if you don't mind. I'd like the originals back, or replacements, please?"

He was too much in shock himself to argue with her request. "Of course."

Kathryn also looked at the stripped down engine, the disengaged relays and missing components. For years, she'd known the Marseilles as a fine ship, meticulously clean and expertly tended. She, even in her recent experiences with Starfleet Command, could not have imagined they would go so far. "B'Elanna, Tom..." She shook her head. "I'm so sorry."

Tom drew a slow breath. "Thanks," he said blankly, turned. "I'm going to the bridge. See what else those bastards did to my ship."

With a stare from Jenna, Chakotay nodded. "I'll come with you. Doc?"

The Doctor, too, moved to follow, though he wondered what use he could be up there--until he found the medical store he himself had put on the ship. "This can't be right," he said and opened the panel there.

B'Elanna took a few more breaths, then set herself to work to compile the list. "God, I can't wait to get the hell out of this place, away from these people." Moving to a console, followed by Harry and Seven, she started rattling off a list as they too ran a few diagnostics.

Turning, she even ordered her mother to start taking notes, and tossed her a tricorder. Surprised but impressed, Miral complied, glancing at the nearby admiral. She said nothing, however, only grinned and went to her work.

Owen had not moved, even as his son left. Echoes of the children in the cargo room nearby, thrilled to have their belongings back, was almost painful to hear. They couldn't know how bad it was in there. He too remembered how neat and well-placed the ship had been, how proud they were of it.

Maquis or not, there was no reason for what he was looking at--and what he was looking at was an insult. No question. They had left it like that for a reason.

He tapped his communicator. "Paris to Nechayev."

A moment later, "Yes, Owen?"

"We have a few problems down here. Have a minute?"

A slight pause. "Sure. What--"

"Good. I'll be right there. Paris out." Tapping off the COMM with her, he tapped it again and arranged a site-to-site transport--to her office. *Once every thirty years isn't bad*, he thought before telling the others he'd be back. A moment later, he disappeared.

An hour later, their shield array, gravimetric inverters, plasma and deuterium supplies appeared in the dock, as did a fresh sample of dilithium.

Tom, who had already been to the bridge and back with more bad news, stood with crossed arms beside his wife as it appeared. "Well, it's a start," he said and looked over the supplies before bending to it. "Good old Dad and Alynna."

"I wonder what they did to get it," Harry said.

"I don't care," B'Elanna replied and plucked up a shield coil grid. "They got it, and I'm just glad they did. Let's get to work"

The night had grown late for them all by the time they took a long enough break to take the children back to their grandfather's house, put them to bed and tell both their parents good night as well. Soon after, Tom and B'Elanna returned to exert at least a little more of their remaining energy on their beleaguered ship, concentrating on the inertial dampers, warp drive and the shields.

B'Elanna, mainly, refused to stop. Her tunic was soiled, and she'd relented to Tom braiding back her hair before she crawled into another access port for yet another replacement. She knew she wouldn't sleep right until it was done.

Yet finally, she wound up crawling back to the upper deck, where she all but collapsed into the rocking chair Tom had brought from the cargo room. The others were still there, too, equally worn and served with coffee--which she waved off. "Wine, please, Tom?"

He nodded and went back to the replicator Chakotay had reinstalled a couple hours ago.

Sighing deeply, she accepted the glass he returned with, sipped then closed her eyes. There was so much more to do, to have restocked. Even Tom's medical equipment had been taken. For what reason they had stripped the Marseilles' medical stores, they still didn't know. Why they hadn't disclosed all of the removals in general was a mystery. They hadn't been afraid of telling them about the large removals.

But it didn't matter anymore. It was done. The admirals were trying to get it back. They could do nothing but reinstall what was returned to them and be thankful they had as much help as they did.

It made it no more pleasant a situation, however.

"I remember the day we got this ship," B'Elanna whispered, her eyes closed. A small smile creased her face, almost relieved for her own need to think on those times. "We were going through absolute hell. Fight after fight after fight--somehow the Liberty survived it all. We were so tired, so damned hot after the coolant assembly went offline...about to kill *each other* because it seemed like it'd never end."

"The Tarsel skirmishes," Tom said, recalling it well.

"Not the easiest couple weeks, alright," Jenna said. "And, by God, it was hot." She laughed a little to herself. "Sometimes I wonder why we're still around, when I recall how much we'd been through."

"Too much, from what I've heard," Isabel said.

"And don't think we didn't think about it, either," B'Elanna told her. "We knew damn well we were getting beat up, and those two weeks were probably the worst we had in the ship. But eventually, we got out of the Tarsel systems, got the ship halfway repaired, when we found out we had another fight

to get into. That's when we found her floating in space."

She opened her eyes, smiled at Tom. He was grinning back. There were many difficult times they yet could remember with an ironic fondness. The day they found the scout was one of them.

Chakotay grinned, too. "She really was a mess, but I'm glad you two convinced me. She's been a hell of a ship over the years."

"From the day one," B'Elanna said quietly, "it's been a lucky ship, I think, starting with that fight."

Isabel watched all four Maquis in that room become individually reflective in their different memories, knowing they'd all been together there, but all having had a different experience. "Was it a large battle?" she asked.

Tom shook his head. "Actually, it went very quickly. We got lucky... It was the day we got Gul Alorek, one of our biggest enemies at the time."

"What happened?" Isabel was curious. B'Elanna had never gone into detail about those days--not that when they'd spoken on such things she'd been interested in hearing the grisly details. Not then. She hadn't wanted to think about it then.

"It was your typical defensive. We faced him, telling him without words that we weren't going to let him get by, and he fired on the Liberty. It wasn't ready for much if anything, but Chakotay ordered us to take the scout out and take the heat off him. After a few minutes of tapping into their shields, we managed to squeeze through a crack in his ship's shield bubble. I pulled the scout around, and B'Elanna fired into their aft grids, imploding their warp relays. We almost thought we'd go down with them, since the engines were pretty wasted as they were, but Chakotay tractorized us back out. --Sorry, I'm a little too tired to give you the action-packed version."

But Kathryn's eyes had widened at their tale, recalling in her own right the day that news broke about the death of a gul that even Starfleet knew was a monster but could do little about. "You never told me about that--and neither did you, Chakotay--that *you* were the ones who destroyed Gul Alorek's ship."

"I don't talk about Alorek very much," Tom replied. "Besides, he's dead. That's all that really mattered to us then, and now. Anyway, that was the Marseilles maiden flight."

"And your reputation grew thusly," Jenna smiled, sinking back into the bed pillows.

Azro grinned, too, remembering in his own right the few excavation trips he had on the scout to the Seti-moon. He'd never imagined collecting ore to be as much fun, or so exciting. He could only have imagined--despite the dangers he'd readily admit wanting to avoid--how thrilling it must have been to have been on the scout in a battle.

Those, ironically, he knew, were good days--before his friends were thought to be dead, before Avalar found itself cut off from even the Maquis. It was before Schiller opened the letter they left for him and Isabel became so lonely for them, before they had to leave and defend themselves on Bianlos, where his wife all but suffered collapse for the stress she endured their short time there.

That was before he was released from his incarceration to find his dear wife so changed, so hurt...always crying for their home, their friends, their land, for everything. Then, she was utterly silent, wanting to cry again but withholding.

She cried the day they had to leave their world, wept as she clutched at the blanket she had taken at the last minute from that bassinet Captain Rodrigo had constructed for Tom and B'Elanna--and wanted to take that cradle with them as well. But there had been no time, it was too big, there was no use for it. They could bring only what they could carry. So, choking on tears he'd rarely seen in her before that day, she took the blanket. It was little, but it was something.

Those good times had been long before then.

Yet, he knew somehow it was possible again, seeing the strength and influence of his friends there. If not at Avalor, then somewhere they would make good things happen--and Azro planned to follow them. Isabel seemed to find strength in their friends. It had been a long time since she had been so stable. Not since they left home.

No, he thought, they will make things happen, as they did before. Their souls are worth claiming if only in closeness.

"I know we would never have gotten enough done on Avalor if hadn't been for your fine ship," Azro finally said, then caught Tom's still reflective stare. "And she will again, my friend. Soon enough, with all of us helping, you'll get it back to perfect shape, and be able to continue from there. I have faith in that."

B'Elanna looked at him, as always, glad for Azro's placid cheer. He'd always had a kind way of expressing his hope that made people just simply believe him. Isabel did, too. It was good to finally see again. "Thank you, Azro. I think you're right."

"I believe that would be him," K'Karn smirked as he pointed out Tom in the bay. Waving away the young officer who had brought him into the bay, he paced steadily towards the man in his usual long coat, hanging under the wing of his ship, talking to himself as he adjusted a bussard collector.

Not announcing himself until Tom had jumped off his platform, landing on his gray boots, K'Karn finally jumped at him, grabbing him around the neck. "So here is where you hide yourself, cousin!"

Tom laughed. "You're late," he told him and turned to share a smile and brace the other man's shoulders. "Good to see you again, K'Karn."

"Miral sent me here," K'Karn said. "She battles valiantly under the insufferable challenge of human tea parties."

Tom laughed. "My sisters?"

"The younger one, and two guests."

"Why didn't she come with you?"

"One of them is a paleontologist, whom she interrogates with much skill." Looking at the ship, he gave a firm nod. "It is looking worthy."

"It's got another week before she's ready," Tom admitted. "Since the kids are coming along, we want it to be right."

"Prudent. And your friends: I have heard they are reassigned to their ship."

"Finally. They finally got tired of trying to teach Kathryn policy and decided instead to give her a nice, uncomplicated mission," Tom acknowledged, and nudged K'Karn towards the hatch. "Come on, everyone's inside. I know B'Elanna will love to know you finally got here. What kept you, anyway?"

The diplomat growled. "Ferengi trades. They wish to claim the mineral rights on Sabaros-six but refuse to return but a ninth of their ore shares because of collection cost."

Tom chuckled. "Ferengi trading? Isn't that an oxymoron?"

"No, only useless without the threat of letting their thin blood. It will be good to have you at Oslon, Tom." He grinned at his cousin for that. "The Ferengi make me even more tolerant of human foolishness. You would likely deal with them more efficiently."

"Thanks for the nod of support," Tom chuckled and led the way into the upper level of the ship. There, he stopped a few times to let K'Karn greet his friends, whom he'd briefly met at the reunion, and then meet the Osols, who were helping with what they could in the front cargo room.

"I have spoken with Doctor T'Gera," the Klingon said when they were alone again. "She wishes to speak with you when we get to Oslon."

Tom glanced back to K'Karn. "You mentioned her before."

"She is in need of a new medic. She is interested in your hydroponics experience, and is impressed that you are also a pilot of known skill. Are you willing to earn a full medical degree and to travel to other colonies?"

"I might be," Tom said. "I don't want to be away more than I'm home, though." He shrugged. "I'll arrange a meeting after B'Elanna and I are set up. Thanks, K'Karn. I'm also willing to help with those ore settlements. I studied a little about it some years ago, and it's pretty clear a ninth is a cheat, even without looking at the data. We might find a loophole you can catch them in, though."

K'Karn nodded. "I accept."

Taking his cousin up to the top deck, they stopped once more to say hello to Kathryn, on her way forward to help Harry with the last of the sensor recalibrations. Then they followed her as far as the front cabin.

Tom immediately stopped, though, halting K'Karn with a hand when he saw B'Elanna was putting Isabel down, or at least getting her there, as she rocked the baby in the chair, holding the nearly empty bottle for her. Isabel's eyes were just drifting closed, her hand flaccid in the air. Luckily, the baby hadn't noticed the distraction appearing in the door.

But B'Elanna did glance over with her eyes alone, and her look lit in a hello to her cousin before softening to her husband's, who was, as always, entranced by the sight he'd nearly disturbed.

"Are you okay? Need anything?"

Even though she was exhausted, and felt as if she could fall over from the front weight alone--not in

her belly, though, anymore--B'Elanna giggled quietly. "I'm fine, Daddy."

Tom fretted over her anyway, as he had since he'd brought his wife and daughter back from Sickbay a few days before. He made sure they were both warm enough, woke up before even B'Elanna did--it was the least he could do after giving her so many months of bad sleep, after all--to bring Alaine to her. He even learned how to change diapers, a concept a little more difficult for him, in fact, than waking up had been.

Helped B'Elanna down into the rocking chair she'd only just gotten the hang of, he brought her a glass of wine. Jenna said a little watered down wine was good for nursing women, a factoid B'Elanna didn't mind a bit. At her invitation, he finally did settle down enough to join her on another chair, and there he watched her.

They had come to accept their life on Voyager, for the most part, anyway. It wasn't easy there, not with some of the lingering because of their backgrounds, and more so because of the dangers they faced. But they had made another house, and had decided to live in it, for their daughter's sake.

For their little Alaine, his mother's namesake, they would make their life there as good as they could.

Rocking gently, B'Elanna managed to guide Alaine's tiny red mouth to her nipple, and only flinched that time when the tiny girl latched onto it with the strength of a bearcat--and mewed happily like one, too, when she began to suckle.

Soon, B'Elanna relaxed, and for a while was actually entranced by the sight--a part of her body giving food to that baby, who had come from her body. It was still so strange and new to her. But then, she enjoyed that newness--aside from feeling as though she could drop dead.

Drawing her head up so to lean back in the chair, she caught a singular look of awe in her husband's face, and couldn't help but smile at him. He had been so engaged by her entire pregnancy, he ended up being more anxious for feeding time than she was. He took it all as miraculous, the entire process, and its upkeep. And the way he looked at her then was no exception.

But then his eyes sparked anew, and for no apparent reason. He blinked and looked to her, poised on something that had popped into his mind.

"What is it?" she whispered.

"Avalar," he breathed.

"Avalar?"

He didn't answer, just shook his head distractedly before standing to leave the bedroom. Following him with her eyes, her brow remained furrowed. In fact, her ear perked more to hear him shuffling around in their desk in the living room.

A minute later, he walked in, PADD in hand. He waved off her question again, getting back in the chair beside hers again. Quickly, he started clicking on the controls, adding parameters as quickly as he could translate them in his mind. "We were saying how all we wanted was that Alaine could see our homeworld?" he said softly then turned his gaze and the PADD towards her to view.

B'Elanna's eyes moved from his to the readouts, and a slow smile grew on her face. She looked up at him, her eyes shining despite feeling like a fool for not thinking of it first.

"Have I told you recently how much I love you?" she asked.

He grinned gently. "You do every single time you look at me, B'Elanna. So this is also for you."

She turned her stare askance, both complimented and knowing better. "As if you won't love having it, too," she smiled then looked down at the PADD. "Okay, where should we start?"

Isabel was asleep, but B'Elanna kept rocking her a little longer, so to make sure she wouldn't stir when she stood to put her in the corner crib. Adjusting the blanket on her ten-month-old's face, which gave both warmth and darkness, she glanced up at Tom, and blinked.

"Ore settlements..." he breathed to himself.

His eyes had turned away, and it seemed like the gears were turning full speed behind his suddenly bright blue eyes. Had it not been for Isabel, she would have asked--her mouth had unconsciously opened to do so before she sucked back her words. She didn't bother mouthing them, either. He'd already backed out of the bedroom entrance and turned to go to the bridge, followed closely by their confused cousin.

"It couldn't be that easy," she heard him remark in the corridor.

Just asleep or not, B'Elanna moved to her feet and set her daughter easily down to sleep. Isabel stirred a little, but B'Elanna managed to get her settled and covered soon enough that she wasn't much disturbed. Immediately after, she left the cabin, closing the door behind her. Tom was talking excitedly, more excitedly than she heard in a long while.

*What's gotten in his head *this* time?* she wondered. She'd always trusted that instinct of his, no matter how strangely it came to him. But it made him no less confusing when his muse fired up as it just had.

Kathryn queried him, as did Harry. But K'Karn was answering, still unsure of Tom's point, "Of course we are in need of it. The war destroyed many of our ships."

"Wasn't there something in the most recent Federation-Klingon treaty that said--God! If I could remember it! I just read it last month! It was something about an exchange of resources."

When B'Elanna came forward, she found him pacing around the bridge, rotating his hands in little circles as if to will his memory to the surface. Then he looked at their cousin again.

"It's a law, right? The resources--the Federation is required to share their mineral stores, and vice-versa, right?"

"In relief of the war," K'Karn said, "our peoples agreed that we would share all our resources in order to help our allies recover. It was written as an addendum to the new treaty."

Tom laughed aloud and looked at B'Elanna, who stood in the door. Without warning, he took three strides across the small bridge and snatched her up into his arms.

"Tom!" she cried, laughing through her shock. "What?!"

"What? *What?*" He lowered her enough so that he could kiss her and playfully rub his nose on hers as he muttered, "How about going around one more time with me, Miss Torres? Think you could hack just one more time?"

"What in the hell are you talking about?" she laughed, still a little offhand for his sudden turn of mood.

"Avalar," he said. "I promised you Avalar, and damnit, we're going to get it."

She stared at him. "How?" But all she got for an answer was his mouth on hers again, pressing deeply until she mewled under him, clutched his nape. Then she got another bright-eyed stare.

"My God, I love you," he smiled.

She sighed impatiently. "Tom--tell me! How?"

He pulled her close again, turned his head to whisper in her ear, "Had we ever told Mother what we'd planned to do with Avalar's Seti-moon? She *is* a geologist after all--and Klingon."

The pieces fell together. She laughed aloud and impulsively hugged him. "My God, you're a rogue, Tom Paris!"

"Miral!" Tom called out as he burst into the front door of his father's house.

He found her without her needing to call back, and flew into the room and into the chair next to her. Totally ignoring his sister sitting across, he grabbed his mother-in-law's hands, and clutched them tightly when she resisted.

"Tell me this," he gasped, nearly out of breath for running from the transport. "You're a geologist, and you pretty much know all the mineral stores around Federation space."

"Of course I do," she told him, looking at the man as if he were mad. She had never seen her son-in-law so excited. "So?"

He brightened yet further. "So, you know the Klingon Empire's been short on polyduranide since the war, right?"

"We have been shamefully at a loss of it," she confirmed confusedly. "Why?"

"What if I told you Avalar's second moon is practically *composed* of polyduranide--raw, blue polyduranide, enough to build a whole fleet of cruisers? What do you think the High Council would say about *that*?"

Miral's eyes shot open, then narrowed to peer at K'Karn, whose a brow and the corner of his mouth raised. B'Elanna could hardly hold back her laughter as she nodded to her mother. Miral looked at Tom again, and turned her hands to finally take his. She stared hard into his eyes. *He is alive, truly alive and vital again. They both are...*

"You are not in jest," she said, making sure, and saw his slow, knowing, nod.

At that, Tom stood. "Don't you think it's strange that the Federation wouldn't tell the Klingon Empire that it had reclaimed one of their old colonies, whose second moon is a storehouse of exactly what the Empire needs? Who cares why, really--but it might do the Federation some justice to look into some of its untapped resources."

"Maybe," B'Elanna said, moving to Tom's side, "they might have a vested interest in something like...let's say, a science station--to regulate the mining procedure?"

"On Avarar, maybe?" Tom suggested. "There's a burnt out city there, ready to be rebuilt. The Klingon Empire would be very grateful to rebuild its fleet, don't you think, K'Karn?"

The diplomat grinned, showing his small, pointed teeth. "They would."

The Klingon woman's eyes slowly lit up, but across from them, Moira paled at the plan they were building. Instantly, she knew what would happen if they executed it. "Tom, you can't seriously be considering..." Moira stopped at the look on her brother's face. "But Dad?"

Tom faded a bit. "It's not his department," he told her. "It has nothing to do with him. He won't get in any trouble. Though, I don't expect him to be happy. I'll have to deal with that later. --Well, Mother?"

Miral eyed her nephew. "Have you contacted the High Council?"

"No," K'Karn admitted. "Your children did."

Having finally seen the plans for Voyager's crew, and having seen the note of Kathryn Janeway's glad acceptance of her new mission, Owen was quite pleased with himself. He had taken care of Tom and B'Elanna, he had taken care of Kathryn. He'd miss them all, but he'd done what he could.

He intended to celebrate--take Alynna out to lunch and relax for a time, or perhaps take her home for the meal. With Tom's challenges over and the family relocated to Oslon, he fully expected Alynna to arrange another assignment for herself soon. Owen knew Tom had decided he and B'Elanna and the children would stay in that day for a change, since it was raining and a bit cool. They could have a nice lunch together.

It might be nice for all of us to get together a few more times before they go, he surmised and slipped on his tunic as he stood from his desk.

So pleasant were his plans, he could not have expected, as he descended into the inner atrium of Starfleet Headquarters, that his plans would be drastically altered.

He'd heard the debate all the way down the corridor, and almost ignored it but for the inflections he picked up. Speeding himself to the entrance hall, found that he was not the only witness to the ruckus in the main lobby, where several of his colleagues and a group of Klingons had gathered. Staring at the scene, his eyes squinted to catch a familiar... *Miral?!*

"Representative K'Karn, this can all be handled in a more confined manner."

It was Admiral Jaret, who didn't seem to be enjoying his job as attaché that day. As was proper when dealing with Klingons, his face and frown were set rock hard, and he stood only centimeters from the Klingon envoy's face. But even Owen could see a certain nervousness behind it.

The Klingon male, well decorated and vaguely familiar to Owen, looked as though he might spit on the officers around him. "Your pithy excuses! We now see what the treaty has meant to you! You store away your resources to acquire--what?"

"This will be not be discussed here, Kroh," Jaret replied firmly with a practiced glare. He seemed to mean it that time.

"This will be discussed *NOW!*" Kroh bellowed. "You have disregarded a treaty made with *your* desire for an alliance with us! You have dishonored yourselves and the Klingon Empire--the very warriors who died to preserve your precious space--by ignoring your duty to the law *you* devised to placate and deceive us!"

Owen felt his blood both rise and drain. Yet talking a breath against it, moved into the lobby to find B'Elanna's mother. "What is going on here?" he asked Miral.

Then the Klingon woman's stare turned slowly and found the admiral. Her eyes were kind to him, however, if not a little amused. "I can assure you that the High Council was very...interested in hearing of Avarar's second moon," she stated cleverly, and smiled when she saw her son's father's jaw tighten, "our people being very much in need of polyduranide, and Starfleet's...forgetting it was there."

K'Karn, the calmest of the Klingon men, stifled his urge to grin at his aunt. "An understandable mistake, likely made in much ignorance," he acquiesced, for all those listening and every micron the diplomat. He'd worked with humans a long time, after all--and did not mistake his people's reaction for an instant. "Errors such as these in such a large society are always a possibility, as the Terrans would readily tell us. It is yet a mistake that will be easily be rectified, with a little...organization."

Owen was still staring at them. *Tom... This *had* to be his doing!* was all he could think at first. *After everything I did for him, after finally seeing him well and off to Oslon... He's never going to give up...just like he promised. He will never give up...*

Owen let his breath out, pulled another, still trying to believe it.

Miral was glorious in victory--and showed it. "As it is not Klingon territory, certainly Starfleet might be interested in having a presence there--with all the technical and safety needs of a mining facility on the Seti-Moon." She grinned archly. "I believe that would be an excellent start to this...organization process. Would this not be wise, Admiral Paris?"

Hearing his name, his breath stopped. He looked at her again. Her dark eyes sparkled more brightly than he'd even known them to, her smile was one of unabashed satisfaction. *It's for them she's doing this*, he knew. *For her daughter, her son-in-law, her grandchildren....*

"Yes," he finally replied. "That might be the course of least...consequence."

Every officer turned a stare at him. But Owen Paris said nothing more. With a single nod to Admiral Jaret, he moved away.

He found them inside, just a happy family in the front room enjoying their time together. How often had he come home to that scene--how much had he become accustomed to it, when once, nearly a half a year before, it had discomfited him.

The children were set about in their separate business. Alaine was tapping on one of her schoolbooks, laying on her stomach with her feet in the air and she puzzled through a problem, brow drawn down in thought. Beside her, Kiarn was reading through a picture PADD with equal concentration. Andre, oddly sedate, sat toying with geometric puzzles. Isabel was on her feet, holding onto a chair as she bobbed up and down and looked around. The parents watched them all, curled up on the couch. They looked perfectly content.

Once again, they looked normal. Too normal. It bothered him again. But that time he knew why it did.

"I'd like to talk to you, Tom, B'Elanna," Owen said.

Alaine and Kiarn looked up at that, but their parents, glancing over to their grandfather, got up without complaint and followed the older man into the hallway--again, as if nothing were wrong.

"Guess you found out?" Tom said, leading his father a little further down, just in case they wouldn't want the kids to hear.

"Found out?" Owen stared at him. "How could I avoid Admiral Jaret nearly being killed in Headquarters' front lobby for 'forgetting' a few clauses in the Federation-Klingon Treaty?" He laughed with the irony. "Then this was your work?"

"Our work," B'Elanna told him. "This means a lot--and to a lot more people than Tom and I. Please, think about it before you come down on Tom."

"You're really that determined to get back to that place that you'd cause an intergalactic incident over it," he said.

"Yeah, Dad, we are," Tom said, eyeing the man before him. "Are you all that shocked? I told you before that if I had the chance, I'd take it. I remembered the polyduranide on the Seti-moon. --And actually, I can't believe I'd forgotten it. I remembered everything about Avalar but that. But once I remembered, you're damn right I used it... I hope you didn't personally get into any trouble over it."

"No, I only came across the melee you invited," Owen replied. "You involved the Klingon High Council in a matter of Starfleet security so you could get your colony back. Do you realize how serious an incident you might have caused--might still have, if K'Karn and Admiral Jaret don't work quickly?"

"We weren't the ones who broke the treaty," B'Elanna pointed out.

"And I wasn't the one who gave you access to the Federation encryption protocol," Owen replied, implying purposefully that he knew who had. Not that that was too shocking to realize, either. "Which breaches in security gave you the information you needed to point that out--to the Klingon government, no doubt. Or was that your mother's doing, B'Elanna?"

"No, Dad," Tom said soberly. "I was the one who contacted them...from the Marseilles."

The admiral would have thrown up his hands if he were any more shocked by their incredible tenacity. "Good God, Tom!" he exclaimed and followed it with a bitter laugh. "You would jeopardize your freedom, your status, the good home and jobs you've lined up on Oslon, for a *planet*? After all the strings I pulled to have your ship returned to you, you still aren't satisfied. I can't understand you!"

"It's about more than Avalar," Tom told him.

"Yes, your grudge against Starfleet."

"No, that's *not* it," Tom told him. "If we let them make decisions for us, we'll never have a life of our own. Because of our affiliations, we'll never be trusted. We'll never be able to play by the rules like any other citizen because they'll always have our records to justify themselves. And if we give in, where's it going to stop? Dad, B'Elanna and I *have* to take everything we can at this point, for the children and us--not to mention all the other people who have been begging for resettlement since having their homes denied to them. Yeah, B'Elanna and I want this a lot, but we're not the only ones who've been put off by Starfleet for no sensible reason."

"So you nearly overturned an entire treaty," Owen stated. "Broke into confidential files and used that knowledge to attempt to manipulate Starfleet into reopening your planet." He shook his head again. "I don't know what to do anymore."

"Are you going to turn us in, then?" Tom asked. "I'll go if--"

"Damn it, I'm not going to turn you in!" Owen cut in. "But you might have done this a little more...discreetly."

"Maybe," Tom said, apologetic in his grin. "But this had a better chance at working. Look, all we ever really wanted was to get back what we lost. That's it. That's not a crime in itself."

The older man sighed, willfully calming himself. "Tom, it's not that you want to do things--it's *how* you do them. The last thing I want is for you to end up in prison for this."

"It's worth the risk," the younger man replied. "Besides, as useful as they were otherwise, I didn't have to look through any files to know there was polyduranide at Avarar. We'd collected some ourselves when we were there. Any of our old neighbors would vouch for that. Chakotay would, too. The file I sent to the Klingon High Council was only a buried record from about twenty years ago--but not confidential. True, I wouldn't have found it by conventional means, but it wasn't confidential."

"And if Starfleet plays along," B'Elanna said, "everybody will benefit in the end."

"Plays your game, you mean," Owen returned.

"Actually, what we did was throw the ball into another court," Tom told him. "We don't have to do anything but wait to see what comes of it."

He considered that. "You played a very Maquis game," Owen concluded. "Antagonizing one people to get the attention of another."

"And defend what we love in the meantime," B'Elanna added. "Dad, we had to do this. We needed to do what we could."

"It was worth the risk," Tom repeated. "It's probably selfish and a little crazy to you. But we need this." He sighed, though his eyes remained intense and locked on his father's concerned gaze. "I know how hard this is for you, but...we need to do something to try and finish it. If we hadn't, we'd have known that we hadn't tried. That's harder to live with than losing in the end. Peozet and Caldwell and all those other bureaucrats would've eaten it up and tucked us away in a file, like all the rest of our friends."

"As for Avarar, if it was still dangerous there, we'd have understood the caution and would have been patient. But nothing's happening there that'll justify Starfleet's policy right now. The policy is

wrong--and we finally found a way to change it."

"They wouldn't have made it without good reason," Owen said.

"That's from your perspective. To us, it's ridiculous. Why would the Maquis regroup when there's nothing to threaten them?"

"If the Cardassians grow strong again and reclaim the area--"

"Starfleet will have more things to worry about than its colonists," Tom finished.

Slowly sighing out his breath, Owen eyed them both in turns--his Maquis daughter in-law, his Maquis son. *Or if not Maquis, they certainly want it enough..., maybe even need to go, like B'Elanna said...*

He glanced to her solid stare, to Tom's unchanged one, both as intense as one he remembered well, in that very hall...

They do need it, to go, he knew. They wouldn't have gone to this extreme if not, and I'd be a fool to think they would change. Just as Kathryn said, they're set in their ways. Even she wouldn't try to make them play her game, rather, find a medium that would work for them all...

"You did say you'd use any opportunity that came to you," Owen stated, neutrally with an effort.

"And that *is* what I did." Tom took a deep breath. "Even if we still end up on Oslon, Dad, we never will let go of Avarar."

"If Avarar had been taken over by the Cardassians," B'Elanna added, "we'd have gone to Oslon knowing there was nothing we could do--even if we'd never stop loving our world. Even if this doesn't work out, we'll still go and we won't be miserable. We have positions lined up, a place to go. Tom and I know that. We adjusted on Voyager, we can adjust to Oslon, too."

"But you'll give up a perfectly good colony and positions for what?" Owen asked. "For this obsession you have with that place, that time? The Maquis is gone. You can't cling to that and think that you'll have your home the same way you did, either, even if you get it. You're not always going to win acting like Maquis--because they didn't win, either."

"I know. And you're right in that maybe we're being a little too impulsive this time." Tom paused, shook his head. "Honestly, I can't tell you why it's such a big deal to us. Maybe because we were forced to give our home up so suddenly. Everything we worked for was gone, just like that. And just when we'd decided that we were happy and satisfied on Voyager, we found out that all our friends had been killed--or imprisoned--and our home really *was* lost. We couldn't stop thinking about it, though, even when we got here and knew it was off limits. But now there's a chance. We couldn't let that chance go... Dad, we lived so long hoping to go home someday, and home was Avarar. We couldn't forget. We can't give it up."

The older man sighed. "You never did let go easily, and I suppose I can understand why this isn't any different... Runs in the family."

Tom peered down to his father, understanding, though he said nothing at first. He could only imagine how his father must have reacted when he discovered their whole plot and how embarrassing that must have been. Even so... "I'm not sorry for it. I know you don't like this, Dad, but I just can't be sorry."

"No, you aren't, are you?" Owen said blankly, then filled his lungs to resolve his next step. It was an oddly simple resolution to make, considering the lack of emotion that met his decision. It just seemed...right--and necessary, he believed in afterthought, considering the can of worms those two had already ripped open. "Well, then, if you will excuse me, I have some people to talk to--again."

There, Tom's hand found his father's arm and he stared hard at him. "Oh no--not again. I might go behind your back on this one, but you don't have to carry it."

"The hell I won't," Owen returned shortly. "Tom, you should know by now that what happens to you affects me. We can fight about a lot of things--but let's not bother with something we both want. I don't want you ending up in prison for this or causing any more trouble over that damned planet of yours, and you want to leave. So I'm going to do what I can. All right?"

B'Elanna shook her head, staring up at him. "Dad, Tom's right," she said. "K'Karn and my mother have it pretty well planned out."

"With you two's help, no doubt--God help Starfleet." Patting Tom's hand away, he added, "Besides, if someone else botches this up, I'll never know the end of it. You'll never be out of trouble, and would probably take down the whole of the Federation if you put your mind to it."

Tom's face creased into a small, guilty grin, which faded as he regarded the man before him. "Thank you, Dad. --Really, I mean that."

The admiral's returning turn of mouth was a tired one. "I know, Tom. I know." Turning to go to his den, he glanced back. "You might expect Alynna later. I'll be contacting her--again."

"Good," Tom said, lightening his tone with some effort. "I'll make a souffl?."

Against his will, the admiral snorted and shook his head. But he did not look back again as he continued down the hallway. "Don't push it, son. --B'Elanna, I'd appreciate some of that coffee of yours."

Watching his father go, Tom put his arm around B'Elanna's waist as she answered, "Yes, sir," and leaned her head against his shoulder.

"Well, look at that!" Kathryn laughed, hiking up Andre on her hip a little more, if not with a little effort, as they watched baby Isabel push herself to stand again. "You're going to help your little sister learn all she needs to know while we're gone, Andre?"

"You betcha!" Andre grinned. "You gonna be gone long, Aun Kat?"

"About six months," she told him.

"How long's that?"

Kathryn hugged him. "Long enough until I come to visit. But I'll be recording letters, I promise."

"Lot an' lots?"

Her eyes glistened with her smile, looking again at the curly haired boy as she tapped his nose with her finger. "You can count on it."

Tom grinned on the two as he accepted a drink from Jenna, who had gaily been pouring as fast as Neelix had been bringing the freshly replicated bottles out. Below, he saw B'Elanna, kneeling, waiting for Isabel to go from Alaine to her, laughing up to Harry when she caught the baby and he applauded. Isabel clapped her hands, too, bright with her incredible feat.

"Ah, just rub some lemon on it," Jenna said to a crewman, catching Tom's attention.

The Doctor rolled his eyes. "Nurse Harlowe, must I remind you this is the twenty-fourth century, not the Middle Ages. There are far better treatments for--"

"Bullshit!" she barked, grinning at her giggling preteen children and winking at her eldest son before looking at the crewman again. "You can rub Doc's mouth on it, too--same effect, I'd think, though he doesn't smell as good."

"I'm a hologram, not an air freshener," he snipped.

"I'm certain if I got my hands on your emitter, I could leave you minty fresh."

"My emitter is thankfully not your domain."

"Where taste and sense never seemed to find you," she grinned evilly and looked him over, up and down. "Though, if I'd ever have been *that* desperate, I might just've hunted you down and blown your circuits myself, Doctor Love. Too bad I'm not just now. I'm a wicked woman after all."

This, too, caused her children to laugh aloud, and her Tommy to kiss her on the head, then Lizzie to hug her tightly. "We'd not have you any other way, Momma," she said proudly.

"Damn right," Tommy rejoined, giving the Doctor a grin. "Come on, Doc, admit it--you like her like that, too. You'll be bored to tears without her."

"Humph!" the Doctor said then caught the same two Harlowe children looking wisely at him. He rolled his eyes, relented--a little. "It *will* be quieter."

"I'll miss you too, Doc," Jenna said warmly, and reached out to pinch his cheek.

The man's returning smile was genuinely affectionate.

God, I never thought how much I'd miss this, Tom thought as he looked around at all his friends in the mess hall, celebrating Voyager's new mission, its finally completed refit and conversion. Their old friends milled around, many of the Starfleet crew and some former Maquis who had been able to keep their ranks, that time officially. There were new crewmembers, too--more than half of Voyager's compliment hadn't been in the Delta Quadrant with them. Only a few of them had come to that party, as that gathering was more a goodbye.

Some had moved on, some had chosen to remain. In both cases, it was simply good to Tom that they had been allowed it, and that Kathryn had likewise been allowed to retain the Voyager. More, some crafty and welcome maneuvering had given Kathryn that 'test run,' an assurance that she had acclimated again to Federation policy and procedure. A nice, relatively stress free welcome back to Starfleet and the work that made her a captain in the first place seemed more than appropriate.

Tom had to grin at that. *She'll probably surprise them all, anyway.*

Chakotay appeared at his side, patted his arm. "You'd better write and tell us how things are going

on this end," the commander warned, "else we're going to have to come after you."

"We will," Tom assured. "Don't go off anywhere where we can't reach you, okay?"

Chakotay laughed. "We'll try to stay in this galaxy if we can help it."

B'Elanna came up to Tom's side, taking him around the waist, smiling sweetly. "You'd better. And make sure Joe takes care of my engine."

"Your engine? I think Joe might disagree with that one now."

"He hasn't to *my* face...yet." She faced her former captain, meeting his eyes. "You'll be fine," she told him. "We'll miss you."

Chakotay nodded. "It'll be strange going off without you two. But I guess we were going to do that before. We just delayed the inevitable a while."

"A while," Tom chuckled. "But look, if Voyager needs anything, don't hesitate to call us. --I mean it Chakotay. We said years ago we'd always be there for you, and B'Elanna and I still agree on that. The Marseilles is still a fast ship."

"It'll be even faster once I rebuild the converter manifold," B'Elanna added.

Chakotay stared at the two, almost at a loss of words at first. *They will *never* change*, he thought wistfully, laughing quietly to himself. Finally, though, he sighed in that smile, placing each of his hands on both their shoulders.

"Go get your home back," he told them, "and don't stop until you have it all on record and official. It's about time you got it--and you've definitely bent enough rules and made enough enemies to make them *want* to get rid of you." He watched them nod, smirking at his wry truth, before he added, "And make sure you've got some of that broccoli when we come to visit."

"You've got a deal," Tom smiled and embraced his old friend.

They wandered the corridors not long after, at the children's request to say goodbye to the ship. B'Elanna had to agree she needed it, too, so Tom took her hand and led her out, promising behind them they'd be back soon.

They went to the bridge, met a couple new crewpeople there, and said their farewells to Tuvok, who wished them and each child a prosperous life and journey. They wished him the same.

The family soon after went down to engineering, where Joe had already holed himself at a console, and was already arguing with the designer of some new component he apparently didn't like much.

B'Elanna giggled. "Well, maybe I won't miss that," she said, and left her family for a moment to take one more trip around that room, around the warp core, stepping slowly, thoughtfully around that cool blue light. Tom watched her, her small frame in a long tunic but a silhouette, then bathed in that glow as she moved. Her eyes roamed, her mouth curling into a small grin before she nodded to herself.

Coming around again, she met the chief once more and cheerfully threatened Joe not to mess up all her hard work one last time. He took it with a big grin and gave her a warm hug goodbye.

They dropped by sickbay, upgraded with the latest technology and busy with the new staff, who would assist the Doctor in Jenna's absence. Though she had taken herself back to school to finish her nursing degree, she was still deciding where she wanted to go. Being with her children was her prime consideration now, and though Voyager had been equipped to house some families, she didn't want to take them from their school and friends for that long yet. Still, that had been a more difficult decision than she had thought it'd be.

Of course, Jenna had already advised them how to handle the Doctor, too. She couldn't leave that post with that untended. Moreover, meeting those new crewpeople, the Doc would likely miss his cantankerous old nurse.

Maybe on their next mission, they surmised, if the children were up to it, Jenna would pack up her family and join them.

After leaving sickbay, Tom and B'Elanna took the children to where they'd initially wanted to go, their old quarters. First, they found the one they'd vacated not seven months before. It had been returned to its original appearance--not surprising, but odd nonetheless. The children, too, had half expected to find their own furniture there.

They then found themselves wandering in towards the D-ring. With Isabel perched on his hip, Tom reached out and opened the door, called for the lights. It looked the same.

"It's still ugly," B'Elanna smirked and stepped inside.

"Definitely not our style," Tom agreed and followed her in, still not really knowing why they'd come. There wasn't much to see. Even the children had peeked in and wandered back out for lack of interest. When Tom set Isabel down, she turned and started crawling in no particular direction.

Tom and B'Elanna just stared around blankly. Gray walls, blue cushions, replicator, small wall desk, abstract artwork. Neat, plain. No window.

"I didn't expect to find you here."

They turned to find Kathryn in the door. "Visiting our first quarters," Tom told her.

Kathryn was a bit surprised. She hadn't remembered. "I put you in here? My God, no wonder you were scrambling for a new arrangement... How long ago was that?" She almost moved inside the room, but quickly rethought it. "I'm not...disturbing you, am I?"

Tom grinned. "Yes. But that's okay."

B'Elanna pinched his rib, shaking her head. "We were just saying goodbye. It's... Well, we'll miss it--Voyager, all of you."

Kathryn nodded then walked inside. "We'll miss you, too," she said quietly. "But you've got your own life, again, now. And we won't be strangers."

"I really hope we won't," B'Elanna told her sincerely. "I fully expect you to visit us, whether it's Oslon or Avalor. No matter where we are, you did promise."

"I did--and I will, B'Elanna," Kathryn said. She drew a long breath, damning herself for the sentimentality that was yet again welling up in her, but knowing what she had to say. She hated goodbyes, even if only temporary.

Finally, "We're setting to leave in about thirty minutes," she told them thickly. "All not assigned aboard...need to disembark."

B'Elanna saw the glimpses of water in her friend's eyes, and smiled warmly. "Good luck, Kathryn. You'll do great." Moving to her, she embraced the other woman firmly, kissing her cheek and hugging her again. "If you ever need to talk, don't hesitate to contact me, okay?"

Kathryn nodded on B'Elanna's shoulder. "This place won't be the same without you. You've been some of the best friends I could have had," she said through her tears, "when I had nothing else." Backing up a little, bucking herself up with a full breath, she regarded them in turns. "I don't know what I would have done without your support and company."

"You've been pretty important to us, too," Tom said. "And you still are." Leaning down, he kissed the captain's cheek, hugged her warmly. "Please take care of yourself, Kathryn."

"I will." She swallowed her breath, quickly wiped the water from her eyes, laughing at her display. "Sorry."

A little misty herself, B'Elanna laughed, too, and handed her a handkerchief. "It's okay."

For another moment, despite the little time they had left, the three were left to glance around the small quarters once more, sometimes to each other. There was little else that could be said, they knew.

"*Bridge to Captain Paris.*"

Though relieved from their embarrassed emotions by the comm's interruption, Tom furrowed his brow. The caller's voice sounded so...official--probably because he didn't know whom he was calling. "Paris here."

"*Captain, you have a communication coming in on a priority channel from Starfleet Command.*"

Tom and B'Elanna stared at each other before going to a nearby monitor. Following them, Kathryn grinned to see Alynna Nechayev's face reflecting back at them.

"Alynna," Tom acknowledged, "what's up?"

"Sorry to disturb, you, *Captain*," she grinned, "but I was wondering if you were interested in a career in the Federation trade circuit."

"Huh?"

"A new position's opened up," she informed them. "A civilian position, really, heading up and managing the new routes centering around a little colony called Avarar. You'll need your own ship, but I think you can handle that. Interested?"

Had he not been breaking out into a grin, he might have killed her. He glanced at B'Elanna, who choked a laugh.

"Y-you can't be joking," she sputtered. "Really? You got it?"

Alynna didn't hide the fact that she was enjoying every second of their astounded expressions. "Oh, I intend to keep you busy, too, Mrs. Paris. Starfleet still has a stake in your assorted dealings. But first

things first: If you accept, you'll be needed on Avalar immediately to oversee the construction--"

Tom had already pulled B'Elanna around and kissed her fully, laughing aloud when she hugged him, picking her up to squeeze her tight.

Kathryn leaned down to the monitor to address the admiral. "They accepted it?"

"Else risk a war with the Klingon Empire?" Alynna returned. "They're still trying to smooth the chancellor's feathers after he was presented with that intriguing little report sent from somewhere nearby here a few days ago."

"It was only a geological survey file," B'Elanna said, and giggled at the doleful stare her former captain turned back to her. "Well, it was." She looked back down to the admiral. "Alynna, I hope--"

But she just waved them all off. "Drop by my office when you're done there. We'll iron everything out then. Go say your goodbyes while you have the time." With that, she disconnected, but not before they saw her snicker and shake her head.

"You always were good at getting noticed," Kathryn commented and gestured to the door. "Want to tell the others before you go?"

"Damn right I do," Tom said as B'Elanna swooped up Isabel from the carpet. Snaking his arm around his wife, they left the room without looking back.

The trip back up to the mess hall was a fast one, wherein Tom flew to Jenna and hugged her tight. With five words, Jenna yelled out and threw her arms around her friend, calling out the news to everyone as soon as he released her. Chakotay and the Doctor were already congratulating B'Elanna.

"One more drink!" Jenna called out to their friends, all in the middle of congratulating the Parises. "One more call for Tom and B'Elanna, eh?" She grabbed a bottle and poured quickly. "Kathryn, come now!"

"Here, here!" the captain said and held up a glass. Yet when she looked at the two...

B'Elanna had set Isabel down to accept a drink, then getting fresh glasses for her older children, so practical and pretty in her long, sanguine wrap tunic and long sable boots. Her nut-brown locks were styled as usual, falling in thick curls over a shoulder, almost midway down her back nowadays. She hugged each of her children and told them about the toast. Alaine and Kiarn were suddenly lit up with the fresh excitement. They wanted to leave for Avalar right then and there. B'Elanna laughed and told them, "Soon, sweethearts. Very soon, now."

Tom in that damned coaly coat. Kathryn wondered if he'd ever get a new one, and somehow imagined he never would. His hair, though recently cut, was a little mussed, but the rest of him was his usual neat self. His eyes were bright as he smiled upon his wife and children, laughed with them, nodded to their anxiousness. Wrapping his arm around his wife when she stood again, he looked with her to Kathryn, who rose her glass into the air towards them.

But suddenly, the words failed her again. *I knew this day would come*, she thought. *I knew they would leave us, when they could, always hoped they'd finally get what they wanted...*

Taking a full, happy breath, she simply shrugged and said, "To home--to *all* our homes, and being happy in them. Congratulations."

Their friends echoed it then drank to it. Immediately afterwards, they whistled and hooted when the Maquis pilot pulled the engineer to him for a kiss, and bemoaned wryly what would likely follow the celebration they'd have for *that* success. B'Elanna broke out laughing and bent her head into her husband's chest. "God, Tom, we're not that obvious, are we?"

"I always thought we could be much worse," Tom grinned, flicking a spray of wine with a finger at his joking friends.

Suddenly, beside them, Jenna nearly spit what she drank--and sucking it back in, choked on it. "Je-*a*-sus!" she hacked, nodding to Chakotay, who patted her back. "Thanks. --But, God! Have you told them?"

Tom and B'Elanna stared at her. "Told them what?" B'Elanna asked.

"What?!" Jenna snorted. "Are you mad?! Do they *know*?"

"Does *who* know?"

"Isabel!!"

"Azro! Wake up!"

A light activated in the small, stucco window of the Greek home--as did several others in the neighborhood.

B'Elanna snorted when a dog started barking nearby; then she pulled another breath for a good yell. "Isabel, come to the window!"

Her friend's tired face did appear, and she looked between exhaustion and unwilling surprise when she saw them, standing on the street, laughing up at her. "What in the world are you doing here?"

B'Elanna hugged Tom around the waist. "We're going home," she answered. "Want to come along?"

Isabel sighed. "Why? Something going on?"

Tom snickered, shaking his head before looking up to her again. "*Avalar*, Isabel. We're going *home*. We've got room on the Marseilles, and we're leaving."

The woman froze--Tom and B'Elanna laughed at her yet again. "It's true," B'Elanna confirmed. "We got it. *Avalar's* been reopened."

Isabel's mouth dropped open slightly, and they nodded. "Reopened?"

"We've been granted resettlement rights," Tom told her.

"When?"

"Whenever," B'Elanna shrugged, still beaming up to her friend.

"Now?!" Isabel was fully awake, sure she wasn't dreaming and finally catching onto their excitement. "We can just....go home? *Now*?"

"Damn straight," Tom nodded.

"Oh my *God!*"

Jumping back from the window, Isabel hit her head with an "*umph!*" but totally ignored it. Screaming out to her husband but a moment later, they watched, room by room, all the lights in the house activate. Isabel's voice sang out to everyone there, and her echoes could be heard as the lights appeared at the second floor, then the first.

Down on the street, Tom and B'Elanna, grinning at the sudden fuss inside the house and their friend's excited screaming, waited patiently for Isabel to come and open the door for them

The summer had come easily on the sea, bluing the water and stirring the beach not too much. The birds had little to do there with a rather calm spring leaving little for them to chase after. Most had gone back to the bay for that. The air, warm but pleasantly misty, filled his lungs as he watched B'Elanna and the children build sandcastles on the shore, or take a dip in the ebbing tide.

He felt a hand on his shoulder and reached up to pat it, grinning slightly. "All done, son?"

"Yeah," Tom said, taking a seat beside his father. His eyes, too, turned out to the scene below, and he breathed deeply the salty breeze. "Just beamed the last of it to the Marseilles. We'll take off from Sonoma tomorrow, late morning."

"Make sure you drop by my office before you go."

"We will."

He drew another deep breath, content with the easy silence between them. He'd grown to like that sort of company from his son of late. Before, it had bothered him. But that was then, when he knew, deep inside, that Tom's silence was purposeful.

He knew without asking that Tom was content.

Tom squinted out to the bright shore, grinning as he watched his wife pick a squirming Isabel up and dunk her in a little wave, much to the baby's delight. B'Elanna swiftly did it again, swooping her through the next rushing curl. Isabel's chubby little legs kicked the water vigorously, and she laughed loudly. Truly a water baby.

"You really have a beautiful wife," Owen commented, watching, too, the lithe yet petite mother of four play with her children, brightly smiling as she carried her youngest back to the others, her dark braid hung carelessly over her shoulder, plunking down to her knees to give one her bucket, then continue helping the others. "I can see why you married her."

"Yeah," Tom said, his grin remaining, though warmer still. "She's given me so much. I never figured out how I got as lucky as I did."

"Don't try," Owen told him. "Just enjoy it, and tell her when you can how much it means. If there's anything I can advise you to do that you might listen to, it'd be that. I should have. I'm glad you didn't follow me on that one, at least."

Tom said nothing, but nodded slightly.

"Alaine--your mother..." He stopped on that uneasy thought to find another more forthcoming. "What made you think to name your daughter after her?" He looked over to his son. "I'd have thought it'd be difficult for you."

Tom shrugged, returned his father's glance. "Actually, that was B'Elanna's doing."

"Really. Well, I think she made a good choice."

Tom smiled. "Me too."

Owen let the pause stand again. Below on the sand, Kiarn laid out a new plan, and got agreement from his sister and mother. Together, they smeared what they had made so far and started another one as the boy organized their pails.

"Have you and B'Elanna gotten in touch with... What was his name--the other engineer from Avalar?"

"L'Vos?" Tom asked, saw a nod. He chuckled. "I think he'll get there before we do, if he has to flap his arms and fly himself there. Everyone we've gotten in touch with is pretty excited about going home."

"You did a good thing." In the corner of his eye, he noticed Tom looking at him again. But he didn't return the gaze. "I should have trusted you more, that it'd be okay, you wouldn't do any harm...for the most part. I wanted to, Tom, but I wasn't sure about you."

"We hadn't seen each other in a long time. I understand... I could have trusted you, too. I could have talked to you up front, maybe not been so damned single minded. I didn't think you'd listen, and then I took it out on you when I knew you couldn't do anything. --I know. I can say that *now*, but I do regret doing that to you."

"You'd been hurt," Owen said, "and you were angry. I didn't expect you to trust me, in spite of how far you've come. In any case, I'm glad you got what you wanted. I certainly wouldn't have done it the same way, but I'm glad you did what you felt you needed to, and that it turned out well."

"It wouldn't have gone as well without your help, Dad. I know how hard that was on you, having to be the go-between."

He shrugged. "I've had tougher negotiations. True, this was personal. But aside from that, it was only getting two factions to agree on the obvious solution they were too excited to think about at first." He paused as another wave came in, further away from the family playing in the sand than the last one. Low tide. "You and I," he said, almost absently, "we both do the right things, I think. We just have different ways of thinking...different lives and priorities."

Tom accepted that with another nod, looked out upon the beach again. "That's a good way of putting it."

Owen blinked his thanks then queried, "So what's first at Avalar, besides the obvious?"

He took in the air again, grinning wistfully at its particular scent. The surf had always been pleasant to him. "Rebuilding the capital, according to Alynna's plans. B'Elanna and I have already worked up some specs for the new systems going in. L'Vos should be looking them over right now, along with what's left of the buildings. He's more a structural engineer, so he's in his element. Commander Hegellen's going to be working with us."

"Will she be going there, too?"

"Yeah. She'll be in command of the Starfleet contingent, overseeing the mining facility. B'Elanna met her yesterday, says she'll probably love Avarar, the way she talks. I still have to meet with the doctor being assigned there. I forget his name... The capital's probably grown over by now. We'll have a lot of clearing to do. "

Owen smiled. "You'll love every moment of it, I'm certain."

Tom laughed. "Yeah, there's nothing like working on something you love. B'Elanna and I can't wait to get there for that alone."

The older man peered over at his son. "Even if you'll essentially be working for Starfleet as civilians again?"

"It wasn't that bad the first time," he said. "Actually, in a way, I kind of missed it."

For a reason he didn't need to wonder about, Owen was glad to hear that.

"Daddy!!" cried Alaine as she waved her arms. "Come on!"

"In a minute, sweetheart!" Tom called back. Getting up, he looked down to his father. "Come with me?"

Owen graciously shook his head. "Oh, no. You know how I don't like walking on the sand."

"Come on, Dad," Tom urged. "It's our last day here. Come play with the kids and B'Elanna and I. I'll go up and get you a chair so you won't get sandy. I'll *carry* you if I have to."

Owen stared at his son, his squinted eyes on the bright day, his wind-tousled hair, and that careless smile that had once been such an annoyance to him--and he wondered why it ever had been. He could see so easily a younger man...a boy, really--begging him to join him--and not the other way around.

He held his son's gaze on that thought for a very long moment, wistfully remembering, yet knowing his son was simply asking him to be with him and his family, there and then. The rest of it was long ago.

Finally, he blinked his assent. "Very well. I suppose, since it's your last day and all."

Tom smiled brightly. "Good. Now you make your way down and I'll get you a chair--and a hat so you don't burn your head. I'm sure you didn't put skin protector on it, as usual."

Owen pushed himself to stand, chuckling. "God, how you sound like your mother sometimes. Fine--go. I'll meet you down there."

Tom stepped up as his father began to descend. Turning at the top step, he watched the older man carefully navigate the steps, then slide off his shoes at the bottom. He waved shortly to his thrilled grandchildren, nodded to B'Elanna's welcome and invitation to help their design. Tom's smile widened, and he drew a breath to calm the thump in his heart.

Of all things, too many good things coming true... But then he thought, *No, not too many. Just enough.*

On that, he turned and went to get his father's hat. Hopping up the side doorsteps, he went straight inside, up the hall and to the front closet. He searched for nearly a minute, pushing other articles around until he felt a familiar shape and pulled it forward. It was all the way in the back. His father never did wear the thing, he smirked to himself, ending up with doctors and dermal regenerators almost as often as he took his walks. Even Tom had treated him a few times.

But he had found it, and the lawn chair underneath the raincoats. The needed items in hand, he moved to rejoin his family on the beach. Passing again through the hall, he stopped in the middle way, looked around. In the months he and his family had been there, Tom had come to pass it without noticing. But that day, he let his eyes roam over the undecorated wall, noting its unblemished paint. He turned his eyes down before moving on, wondering anew about the night that had bared it, and if she'd have been pleased with the result...

Hell, she would have loved all of this... Don't you Mom? I'll bet you're having a field day.

With one last glance back as he turned again, his eyes narrowed cleverly. Chuckling to himself, Tom returned to the garden.

They stood together on the threshold as Voyager's holodeck doors groaned open. But they couldn't enter. They only stood and stared, tears welling in both their eyes to look into the first draft of their recreated memory.

Their infant, Alaine, hung lazily in her arm when Tom touched it. Glancing up, B'Elanna drew a breath, nodded quickly, took a step in.

They looked around. The doors closed behind them.

"Oh my God, Tom," B'Elanna breathed, a smile flickering upon her mouth. "It's not perfect, but it..." She shook her head, exhaling.

"It's definitely home," Tom finished quietly.

B'Elanna nodded, looking down to their daughter. "Your homeworld," she said quietly, then looked out at the gorge she'd dreamed of every night since they wound up on Voyager.

She had woken up thinking she was back in the place she'd fallen so in love with so many times, and ached for it every time she left their quarters, which they'd decorated as best as they could manage. But it wasn't the same. Every time she walked down those barren corridors to her work or, more recently, to sickbay for checkups or to the mess hall, she compared it to the place she and Tom had claimed as home. There was no real comparison, really.

Even if they'd eventually left it because of the war, they would always have dreamed of returning. She knew that, more than ever, then. She still didn't know exactly why or how it started, though that didn't matter. They just wanted it, and refused to lie about it.

Seeing it there, on a holodeck, artificially generated, only made that absence more palpable at first. But there wasn't much hope for the real thing, much as the captain and others wanted to be optimistic. So, she and Tom had decided to just take what they had and make what good they could

of it, perhaps entertain their dreams from time to time, as they were doing just then.

Tom's hand went around her waist, guiding her, and she smiled, allowing him, giving him a nod. She, too, was curious to see how the house had turned out on their first try. Of course, it was all fixable, and they walked in knowing they'd programmed it all in their quarters with nothing but memory and the picture they'd left copies of for their parents.

She wondered if they'd gotten those letters by then....

There was that one--*They must have pulled it right out of my drawer!*--from Avalor, and many of Moira and Adam. Several of Kathleen...family friends, Alynna, Kathryn, too, and her mother... All the grandchildren...

Owen had come home, rather sad, but committed to the company his daughters would be keeping him while he adjusted to a far quieter house than the past seven months had blessed him with. He came home committed to a quiet evening finishing his work, and an early night. It wasn't a lie that he was tired. Seeing his son and family off had been eventful, and, true, a little draining.

But he would be visiting them soon, as soon as their promised guesthouse was built--a guesthouse for a former guesthouse, which would be enlarged, according to their plans. They would be building a second floor above the existing bedroom, more than enough room for the children, who were accustomed to smaller accommodations. Then, they would build a second cottage on the next flat below the back of the house. It would overlook the Osol's lake, they told him. Tom promised he'd build large steps up to the main house.

The absence would not be too long. It was the daily quiet he would again have to get used to.

He should not have expected his son, of all people, to leave without having the last word.

Yet for once...well, maybe he wasn't sorry for all the other times Tom had spoken last in the end. Owen knew well he wouldn't have done so much, would not have finally made a friend of his son and gained his large family, if Tom hadn't taken such cares.

Still, that latest last word was by far the most pleasing. He could say that with some certainty.

Ironically enough, he'd almost not noticed when he came in the front door and passed through the hall as he always did. But he stopped when he *did* see the spark of light in the corner of his eye, and stood for a minute, stunned, wondering dumbly at first how they got up there. Without thinking, he sank onto the blue velvet bench opposite and looked up at the picture wall.

All those memories, recent and long past, covered the hallway wall once again.

His eyes focused on each: Tom and B'Elanna's portrait from Avalor, another with Kathryn, who was laughing as Andre held his plush toy by the tail with a playful growl; Adam holding Brian up above his head as Moira watched with arms ready to catch; B'Elanna on the back lawn, kneeling face to face with baby Isabel, and Miral standing by, looking seaward; Brian and his other grandfather, dressed up for Halloween; young Alaine spreading out her favorite coloring pencils and Kiarn pulling a blob of clay; of Kathleen when she was a teenager, off for her first date; Moira and Adam at their wedding...of Tom,

so long ago, just a small boy in his mother's arms...

...In his Alaine's arms, both laughed as the tide came in around their ankles and she squeezed her boy tightly..."Owen, are you ever going to take that picture?" she'd giggled, pulling her hair behind her ear while playfully trying to hold Tom still just long enough...

Unexpectedly, Owen laughed, taking them all in one by one, remembering, or at least seeing, knowing perhaps the stories behind those portraits or learning them just then. He took them all in, unmindful of the water that had secretly escaped the corner of his eye.

Rather, he was too thankful to notice it

"God, it's perfect! Just like I remembered it. Well, maybe not everything, but the view's just the same."

Chakotay smiled over at the young ensign. "Tom and B'Elanna put a lot of work into this program. They must have tweaked it a hundred times. They never thought it was right enough."

Tommy Harlowe moved with Chakotay down the rock-lined trail, amazed at all the detail. He'd never seen a program so perfectly complete. Of course, he'd not been back to his second cousin's house since he was thirteen, but he certainly remembered the world.

"It was definitely worth the trouble."

The commander nodded. "It was good for them, being able to visit it. They used to bring their kids here--and I can't tell you how many birthdays or parties we had in their yard, how much happened on this deck."

Tommy grinned. "Nice to know you can visit them there now for real, isn't it?"

"It's a relief, really. They waited a long time--too long. They'd chosen to live there, in spite of all the obstacles; it was rough on them to have that taken away just when they had started to settle down. Sometimes, I'm convinced this program kept them sane, when everything else seemed to be going wrong, or when we felt more lost than ever."

"The captain visits here too, I noticed."

Chakotay stared at him. "Have you been accessing the holodeck logs, Ensign?"

"Nah. Doc told me." Tommy stopped as they came around a bend through the rocks to look out over the plain. "I can see why she does, though."

"Yes. A lot of the original crew has a lot of good memories of this place."

"She misses them," the ensign pointed out.

Chakotay drew a deep breath. "We all do. But we'll see them soon enough."

"Yeah. Wonder how many kids they'll have topped Momma with by then."

Chakotay laughed. "Only time will tell."

"Not if Momma has anything to do with it," Tommy grinned, turning a knowing look back to his commanding officer, who flushed as he shook his head. "She'll never lay off you now, you know."

Laughing, Chakotay held out his arm to let the younger man lead the way. "Come on. I'll show you the house."

"Aye, sir," Tommy chuckled and started down the gorge again

55699: About one week later

The air was still as sweet. By the look of the land and the dryness of the breeze, the wisps of clouds in the deep azure sky, it was nearly spring.

It was unreal to finally be looking at it.

They had landed right where they always had, and soon after opened the hatch to let the children, then their friends, jump down first. Yet placing their feet on the stone beneath the ship, they found themselves frozen there, noticing the weather.

Home....

"C'mon! We know the best way down, don't we Alaine?"

Kiarn's voice echoed around the rocks, already alive with the warm breeze that circled within it.

"It's just around here," Alaine told Helen and Niscol, who both couldn't stop looking around at what their parents had told them about so often. They stared as though realizing all the stories were really true.

But the Paris' older girl wasn't as new to the sight, except for some trees she spotted in the distance when she first jumped down from the side hatch. Putting her small hands on her little hips, she tipped her head. "There's lots more below, you know."

Isabel chuckled and shooed her two ahead with the other three. She could tell the remaining two adults wanted another minute, a bit more time to themselves. So, she started off after the children, following more slowly with her arm twined with Azro's, taking in the sight again herself, remarking how much better it looked than when they had left it. It looked almost normal.

Soon, perhaps, Isabel thought, they would be again, too-- *she* would be again. For the mean time, though, relief would do just fine.

B'Elanna turned from the view to find Tom's eyes in her own, assessing her. He was a little nervous. So was she. Yet matching grins crawled to their lips as he gently took her hand and led her out into the warm orange sun of their homeworld. Feeling that particular light bathe their faces again, they both slowed, took it in.

It felt so real...and B'Elanna laughed a little. *That's because it *is* real*, she chided herself, then took another deep breath of the air. It was still so fragrant, that air, warm and dry, yet even richer than she remembered. It smelled of heavy moss and rich earth waiting for another rain.

"I'd like to get the new replicator in before dinner," she said quietly as they headed down onto to the main trail. It was all she could manage, really, when she felt the urge to say something.

He nodded, understanding more than her topic in her words. He didn't raise what he thought at first, though, but teased the baby in his arm with a plush doll before letting her go at it herself--teeth first. That accomplished, he reclaimed B'Elanna's hand.

"Okay," he said. "Soon as we get the power going. They should have started up the old grid over at Palto by now."

"True. We'll have to check that out..." She rethought that. "Well, that can wait until tomorrow, if there's no problems with the house."

His lips curled upwards. "Glad to know we agree."

They walked slowly into the first rock gorge, which was dotted with grasses and small succulents in the crevices. It grew still with an ebb in the breeze. Its hollow silence, however, soon echoed with the sounds of the children's laughter, not too far ahead when the shade enveloped them again.

"I hope the house doesn't need too much work right away," she said.

"I think it'll just be dusty," he told her.

The breeze stirred, spinning through, and B'Elanna tossed a loose lock away from her face as they continued, back into the sun and into the clearing that led to the next small rise. Glancing up, she caught her husband's grin, and returned it.

With Isabel secure on his opposite hip, Tom put his arm around B'Elanna's waist, nuzzling his cheek into her hair until she looked up again. Then he turned to her.

He kissed her, lightly, playfully, slid his hand a bit down behind her, caressing her surely, exploring. She shot him a stare of desirous warning, making him laugh and kiss her again, opening her willing lips with his own as their bodies met and warmed with that closeness.

Yet before they could go any further--which would have been far too tempting if Isabel wasn't with them--B'Elanna reached back and wrapped her fingers in his again, pulling it around her small body as she smiled up at him. Sweetly.

"Come on, before we take *another* diversion," she whispered, holding his gaze without blinking.

He drew a long breath, letting it out with a low, pleasant growl. *Damn, how does she *do* that to me?* he thought, and pressed to her languidly one more time, rubbing his nose against hers before reluctantly parting. "Okay."

On that, she added softly, peering up to him, "But after the kids are down, I'd love to check on the lake. We'll bring the monitor."

His little grin spread. "It'd be my pleasure, Miss Torres."

They came to the hill, over the rise, which had been by then covered with a flush of wildflowers--and not just red, but blue and orange, and violet in a sea of color and aromas radiating from the mountain soil. The moss had stubbornly covered the other niches in a soft chartreuse blanket, contrasting with the warm sandstone, halfway up to the peaks beyond them.

By then, they could see the top of the tree Tom had planted some eight years ago. It had definitely grown. They could hear the children already playing below, already thrilled with all the new discoveries in a yard they knew well already.

Coming around the last turn, from which they would descend into their yard, Tom fingers again met and entwined in B'Elanna's.

There, they stopped.

It was still there. Somehow, it was a surprise to finally see it, still there.

Their little adobe house was still neatly nestled on the flat of the first rise of the Aborot Range. The yard was flushed with green moss, their garden was wildly outgrown and the wildflowers they'd transplanted past the tree had taken over that corner of the yard, continuing down the slope beyond it. The house needed a whitewashing.

But it was all there, and in good condition, it seemed. Much like they'd left it, and more. So much more.

"Mommy, Daddy, look!" Alaine called out, pointing up to the tree-lined river, which stretched out into a teal-colored lake beyond the gorge. "You said the lake would be huge! And it is!"

B'Elanna and Tom looked. That was the Osol's lake, Lake Koellin, shimmering and blue and again home to the gulls that had vacated with the fires, years ago. To the west, the water stretched as far as the misty horizon.

Yet there, before them, the waters made a natural boundary to the upper plain, earthy silver with dry grass stirring like waves in the wind. The birds had returned, the waters and vegetation had returned. They all had returned.

Far beyond that, the remains of the old capital stood, mere black specks and tiny steeples on the southern horizon, soon to be rebuilt again as well.

Their eyes met again, lingering even as they began again into their yard. Shifting his baby daughter a little on his hip, Tom stroked his wife's small hand with his thumb, hugged it gently in his fingers. "Welcome home," he whispered.

B'Elanna drew his hand up to her lips, kissed it softly, then held it to her heart for a moment before lowering it again between them, her own bright stare unbroken from his tender gaze. She felt her heart beat for all she found in him, and her lips turned up at the response it invariably produced. It always happened when he looked at her like that, with that particular expression which had captured her heart and soul those years ago.

It always would, she knew.

"It's nice to be back, isn't it?" she said softly and, turning on the narrow path as he did, let him help her down the rest of the way.

fin.

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See [T.S. Eliot's "East Coker,"](#) the initial inspiration for this story.
