



drift

"Well, no. That's not a workable alternative. And it's also off the topic at hand."

"But I've seen it work before, Commander. I did the experiment and showed that rate of silicate degeneration. Why is it wrong?"

"I never said it was wrong, and it must have been a nice project--a school project, right? Unfortunately, it has nothing to do with this formulation, and we don't have time to go into it today. The corruption rate during neutron degeneracy in a Ramalok singularity is what we're trying to compute. Any theories you'd like to argue with me outside of that, you can save for later. But for now, let's stick with quantum mechanics. One thing at a time."

The cadet's face turned to stone upon that final word and remained in that cast for the remainder of the session. The shadows on her face fell hard in the hall's ceiling light, emphasizing her frown and her dark gaze. She didn't take any more notes.

She did listen to the lecture, however, watched the viewscreen carefully for the last thirty-seven minutes.

It was a long half hour regardless.

"I hope to see some of you at the presentation tonight," the instructor concluded, clicking off the screen. "There'll be dinner, and a number of speakers from the Daystrom forum might help you get some ideas for your interim projects; my own small offering might even give you the answers to your final exams." A little wave of laughter rose and ebbed through the hall, whereupon the commander offered the class a responding grin. "If you have the time, drop in for a while. Until then, dismissed."

The cadet stood before the word lost its echo, grabbing her PADDs and shooting one more stare towards the lectern before turning on a heel to leave.

The commander watched the young woman go--watched the door, in fact, until the hall was as silent as it had been two hours before. With a couple minutes to spare before needing to head out for the transport, and a couple clicks below to the monitor in the stand, the cadet's file appeared.

She was struggling with at least half her courses, though she'd gotten through secondary school with honors. Twice on probation, one formal disciplinary warning, two letters requesting remission.

It was only her third freshman quarter.

Psychological profile: Grade theta; 4.5 tolerance; kappa level stress endurance/outcome ratio. All

other information classified to personal file. Recommendation: Layover for further evaluation.

Funny thing was, the young woman seemed normal enough--normal as a cadet could be for the most part, anyway. They all had quirks they tried to hide. Outside, where she lurked before lecture or labs--always a little early--she sat and read her PADDs with either an unconcerned air or with intense interest. After class, she sometimes walked with other people. Other times, she could be seen walking briskly and alone, usually towards the labs or the research facilities.

She appeared dedicated, but she was failing, becoming unstable, unruly--frustrated. In all their subtlety, the evaluations said as much. But it was starting to show in her courses, too, and would only show more with time, it seemed.

Unfortunately, it fit the pattern.

$$f = f_0 [1 \pm v/w]$$

There was something about the stars when I watched them, usually when I walked out at night.

Cool and black, I shivered against the damp grass to stare up at the vastness.

$$m - M = 5 \log^{10} (r/10)$$

Well, maybe it wasn't the only thing I thought about. But it did come to mind.

Maybe I just liked it to come to mind, considering, and learned how to make it stick--learned how to divert the other thoughts...for the most part.

"You will accomplish nothing if you only drift from dream to dream and do nothing," she'd said.

"I'm not *drifting*. I'm building and learning things, all the time. I love it, what I'm doing--and I'm *good* at it."

"Things which will not matter in a month for the next thing you move on to."

"It matters to *me*."

"You only want to believe it does."

"This is what I want to do! Why can't you just be glad that I *have* something I want to succeed in?"

"It is no dishonor to love your work, B'Elanna. But it is all you strive for, which is not enough. You believe you can build your heart from things that will never live, when true honor involves seeing all that is within you. You cannot avoid your soul with 'things.'"

Rolling my eyes only made my head hurt more. But my back stayed straight, my eyes stuck to hers.

"This is what I want to do," I repeated.

She stared at me another moment, her face set into a firm frown. Then she turned back to the work she'd been doing before our fight started. "Then do," she muttered. "I will not argue you when you make yourself deaf to everything I say. We will waste no more words on this."

"Do." So flat, how she'd said it.

Of course, I'd purposefully made her say it like that.

Like any honorable Klingon, she turned her back to me.

I'd wanted that, too.

A few weeks later, I drifted myself right out of the house and to Starfleet Academy.

It's funny. I don't really remember growing up too much. Well, I *remember* it, but not like a series of events. Just as images jumbled to the point where I remember what year it was only by what I was wearing. I can put it together, but the older I got, the more everything blended. Or maybe I wasn't paying attention to those details.

I've always remembered knowing I was different--not one nor the other, onto myself, not a part of the whole, nor even the part. In math, they'd call it a fraction. I called it too much.

But mainly, alone. In a way, I preferred it like that. Nobody could understand what it was like, so I didn't want to bother explaining it. I had enough work to do controlling it all--which I never really did. Not that many people asked. They just stared and tried not to. But then, if they were used to me, they treated me somewhat the same as anyone else and usually didn't bother me. I didn't bother them, either.

By the time I was in high school, I'd reached that happy medium with most of the people I knew on Kessik. The good relations between the Federation and the Klingon Empire didn't hurt, either, if only because I'd always hated politics.

I remember being around people, sitting around in groups. But I didn't stay long in the court, on the steps outside the gym or in the lunch hall. After a while, I got up and went away. I didn't think about why except that I just got the urge to move. I had other things to do, and I wasn't participating much, anyway, so I wasn't missed.

I remember doing a lot of different things, but I don't have any feelings about them now. I just did them, I guess, then moved onto something else. My mother hated that, but it was the way I was and I knew that was the least of my problems.

It's not so bad to drift sometimes... Well at least I hadn't been thinking too much about anything but the one thing I got satisfaction from, the one thing I knew I could do better than anyone around me. I wanted to do something with it, not so much as a career as just doing what made sense and that I knew I could do well.

Of course, I didn't tell the recruiter that.

I loved mechanics. It's like the math that goes into it: Clean cut, do-able--fixable. There is always an answer lurking there, somewhere, even if the answer is inconclusive. You have a problem before you and you sit down, figure it out, do the work, maybe thrash it out a little, but eventually make it work, or make it work again, or create something new out of nothing, make something better, clearer, cleaner than what was there before.

I could solve those things.

I could excel at those things.

"Starfleet likes those who strive to do their best," I'd heard somewhere along the line, before I'd had any plans for anything. Before, when I spent most of my time doing my projects after school. Or maybe I heard it in the capital somewhere. I can't really remember. It was a couple years before I

actually thought about it.

Anyway, it somehow got lodged in my subconscious. I hadn't had any real ambitions in half my classes. They were fine and I got through them. In my other classes, I was impossible: badgering my science and math teachers for more and tougher projects or insisting their topics could be a lot less boring and a lot more progressive... God, how I remember their smirks! Once I figured out that I had a good scientific mind--namely in chemistry and physics--I wanted to know everything.

One of my freshman instructors was impressed enough--or sick enough of me--to suggest I try the "science camp" my school was trying out that summer. The winning prize for the five-week seminar was called the Heisenberg Award. Not really original, or all that important in the end, but I'd always liked a little competition.

I was sold after building my first protoplasmic reaction chamber. I came in third place.

The moment I touched the ribbon, I wanted to be first.

So then I was the one snatching up all the good lab time, stuck up in the records department cramming for the courses I hated or wheedling the latest and greatest from Daystrom. If I'd had any kind of ambition--stupid as it was to me at the time--it'd have been to work there, to build the newest great thing that would be the standard for all systems after, to teach everyone what I knew.

I wanted to succeed at something. I wanted to solve problems and make things better. I wanted to build things that would be important.

I wanted everyone to know it.

Excelling in my sciences was one definite way to go about it, once I knew I was good and thankfully liked it.

"Starfleet looks for those who work to excel."

I did. I wanted to. I *knew* I could...I wanted so much to.

Machines were things that were made, could be made, could be improved upon. It was creation by our own hands. Watching something I made come to life, making it do something more than it could before, seeing it all happen, was strangely beautiful to me.

Maybe I got that romantic streak from my father's side. I wasn't sorry for it. Thinking like that felt good.

My mother used to tell me I'd learn nothing from machines--nothing that was really important--and to spend all my time with them would wither my soul eventually. She went on to tell me about some fat, dead Klingon who overcame some ridiculously overblown personal challenge--or how one of his sons did, releasing his father from whatever terrible dishonor he'd incurred by flunking out of gut extraction somewhere.

I usually read when she started up with it. Homework, I told her.

"You cannot build a life on something that will never be the perfect model," she'd said. "You will never be finished, never find any real honor in projects. They are too transitory. They will never bring you real happiness."

"Klingons aren't into looking for happiness, remember? It's about honor and sacrifice and hacking off people's limbs, if I remember correctly."

She exhaled. "I was not speaking of the homeworld. And do not--"

"*Your* homeworld, which doesn't have anything to do with what I'm doing. --*Excuse* me. I have to finish this. It'll make me *happy* not to have to make excuses to Mr. Levinas tomorrow."

"I will *not* have you dishonor our heritage and walk out of this room!"

"Too late," I muttered and stomped out. I tightened to hear her call after me, but I didn't stop.

I spent that afternoon in the lab rebuilding my phase compressor, making it better, making it work.

I didn't get home until well after dinner, replicated myself a cheese sandwich and crammed for my history tests. The next morning, I left early, skipping breakfast. I was late.

I didn't do too well on that test.

But my model worked. I got full marks.

Mother was still angry when she finally saw me again.

I shrugged and took my PADDs to my room before she could get too much into it--again.

How could she understand my happiness, when it was her fault I didn't have any with her or much else she'd ever been involved with?

I remember their fighting. I remember once hearing Dad afterwards, alone in the next room, coughing to try and catch his breath, trying not to break down even if he had already.

I tried not to cry, too, and it sounded about the same, only stuffed into my pillow so that no one would come. I didn't want to make it worse.

I remember the blank look of disgust on my mother's face before she knew I'd come in the room. Usually her hearing was even better than mine, but I'd gotten a good look at her face before she realized I was there.

She said nothing--that day. Later, she said he'd abandoned us. I didn't believe her. I'd heard the crying. I remembered the fighting...and shrunk anew to remember *all* the fights...our fight. I knew what'd really happened to make him go. He *escaped* us. Her. Me.

It was totally understandable, but it didn't make sense, too. Up to the night before he left, Dad smiled at me before setting me off to bed, tucked me in and caressed my hair. I could see how unhappy he was, and I knew why. But he smiled anyway, kissed my nose, told me it was all right, even if it wasn't.

Mother was disgusted with him.

Then Dad left us. And why shouldn't he have? Mother detested him and I'd mistakenly opened the door for him.

He never came back, not even for me, even if he'd smiled and told me he loved me, no matter what.

What could I have known, though, at that age?

All I was certain of was that it wasn't his fault.

As time passed, I wondered if my father would have understood me better than Mother did. I was *his* little girl, though he tried to be patient about the Klingon traditions for my sake, to give me the opportunity to learn it, I guess. Or at least he'd tried at first. It got more and more difficult for him to accept it when it looked like I was becoming more like what he couldn't deal with. But I think I was a lot like him, and continued to be. Not that it mattered with him not there, but it sometimes popped into my mind when I pulled out a picture of him and me, the only portrait I managed to hide after my mother sent his things away and refused to speak about him.

But if I was so much like him, why did he choose to stop trying? Why didn't he give me another chance? Maybe because I wasn't *enough* like him.

I used to ask about him all the time, but was never answered.

I stopped asking, but I never forgot the questions.

I stopped after Mother tried to take my home from me, too.

She took me away to some ridiculous Klingon school one summer, forced me in even as I cried and screamed to go back to Kessik. Proud as she tried to be, she left me there with all those dirty, loudmouthed kids, who were allowed to laugh at me, point and call me an ugly, sniveling coward.

They never did that at home. They might not have thought much of Klingons, but they were never that rude, never humiliated me like that, taunted me, spit on the ground by me and called me p'tahk. Some honor, some dignity--some stupid idea that I would ever want to be anything like those smelly, disgusting people I had the misfortune of being related to.

I refused to eat. A couple times I pretended to, but spit it out onto the floor and dared them to punish me. Other than that, I refused to talk. I refused to move, even when Mother or someone else lifted me. After a while, they ignored me, but I was never tempted to buckle back and follow. God knows I didn't want to be any nearer to them than I had to be. For two months, I cried--and *because* I knew it would embarrass her. I cried and huddled in a ball until she finally took me back to Kessik.

If I had wanted anything to do with her heritage before, I didn't after that.

She had no idea how much she had hurt me. I don't know if she ever will. But at least she took me home.

She prayed for me regardless. Loudly. Constantly.

It made me sick. It made me angry in a way that every muscle in my body became tense and I had to get out, get away, do something besides hear the endless howling for a soul she was already convinced would go to hell. I spent more and more time outside the house.

It was having the same effect on me as it had my father, I quickly realized.

Problem was, I couldn't leave.

I sometimes wondered how much better my life would have been if he'd taken me with him. I wished he had so much some days that I eventually stuffed the idea as far away as I could. Even so, I

sometimes couldn't help but imagine him rushing up on the path outside the forest edge, grabbing my hand and whisking me away, then hugging me close and gratefully whispering my name as the stars streamed around us, all the way to Earth.

c = 299 792 458 m/s

"Mi pequeña abeja! Where have you flitted off to?" my grandmother would call when the sun got too low in the sky and she worried that I'd get lost. She always fussed after me.

My parents left me with Abuela every summer, the last time about a half year before my father left. The first thing she did was take me to town and show me off to everyone there. She held my hand the whole way, even through the shops, where she got me everything her discerning eye could see on her granddaughter. "Pretty things for my pretty B'Elanna."

I never looked so girlish than when I was with her, never wore so many frills and bows that I didn't dare wear at home. I never had so few cares--or ate as much ice cream. She loved to watch me eat it. With her chin rested on the heel of her hand, she petted my head and told me to enjoy every bite, because I should love it.

She included me in her morning ritual, too. I used to watch from the door as she pinned up her curly hair. It had a little gray but was definitely black, and shone like wine in the sun. Her face was like a heart the shade of deep porcelain, and my father once teased me that I had her pout. She always smelled of gardenia oil. Her bedroom was so heavy with the aroma I could taste it, and she carried the scent everywhere with her.

When she was done with herself, she'd sit me at the vanity and marvel over how pretty I was while she brushed my hair in long, slow strokes. She even complimented my ridges. She thought they were graceful, traced them with her soft, dry fingers and said that I was so perfect, that she was so proud of me. She curled the ends of my hair under and tied it back with a bow, then threw her arms around me. Her arms were soft and warm. She had strong, small hands.

I will never forget the gleam in her big black-brown eyes when she leaned down to kiss my cheeks. She called me her pretty little girl every time she did, as if she wanted to make me sure of the fact.

I was too young to doubt it...and maybe I did feel it when I was with her.

What would my life have been like if I'd lived with my father instead? If we'd gone to Earth, I would've undoubtedly spent a lot more time with my grandmother, who would have spoiled me every chance she got, hugged me close and made me believe I was beautiful...

It hurt, that kind of useless imagining, even dreaming I might leave Kessik and go to my grandmother's. She would have had me, welcomed me, told me I was her pretty little bee.

I wondered why I never did run away to her at least.

I couldn't.

Thinking about it made a pain swell in my chest, stung the backs of my eyes, thickened my throat when it circled viciously around without resolution, though I didn't cry. There was no use in crying about it. Not anymore.

Nobody called me pretty after Dad left.

Either way, I knew my father would have been proud of me, would have hugged me from behind and put his chin on my shoulder as I showed him everything I was doing... Or at least I could see him doing that, and his beautiful smile. He really was handsome, so warm and real to me, like my grandmother...

He would have understood why I loved what I did.

How could I explain to Mother--to anyone like her--the thrill of finding that solution? That feeling, when after hours of work, to see the light come on and the systems whir to life, or the correct reaction form and create the effect I'd planned, or see the computer drill down my algorithms and flash back my solutions as correct?

I'd done that, made that, created that.

I wanted to do as much of that as my teachers would let me.

"Not so hard," I remember hearing Ms. Pahal say from behind me once. But I only growled and kept straining to detach the latches, my knuckles white, my fingers like pylons.

I couldn't help it. The piece of crap part on that stupid extra points experiment wouldn't come loose--as if it was purposefully holding tight, taunting me--and the more I tried, the less it budged and the angrier I got--and I got angry at getting angry, then frustrated all the more.

She didn't do anything at first, patient as she'd ever been, especially with me. But after I huffed a breath and gave it a break, she placed a soft hand on my shoulder. "Easy, B'Elanna," she said, quietly assured in a way that made me a little jealous on a good day. "Just relax and try the recompositor again. Then *ease* it apart. Duranium becomes more rigid with stress, not like the tritanium you're used to working with."

Why hadn't I thought of that?

No, I *didn't* think. Just reacted--and let it get to me. Not that that should have been a surprise, that hateful side, always asking too much of a simple thing--of everything, really, and whenever I wanted more than I probably deserved.

"Thanks." I accepted the instrument when she handed it to me.

"Trust me," she said, "the more you do it, the more you remember the best way about it. But even I want to throw this kind of thing through the port every now and again, and I've been at it thirty-eight years.... There, that's good. Now, try it again."

I put the recompositor aside and--willing myself to--gently pulled the casing bolts apart, then popped out the core unit I'd needed to adjust in the first place. My shoulders fell, then I nodded. "That did it."

"You did fine--and you'll do great on your reactor," she told me and pulled up a stool beside mine.

When she asked, I swallowed my pride, still strained, and told her about my configurations, why I was reprogramming the processing cell, how the entire unit was going to work. It got easier the more I explained. It cleared my mind, put me back on track--just as she probably knew it would. Ms. Pahal had that way about her with everyone--another thing I envied.

Still, by the time she had to leave, I was glad she asked.

I was still embarrassed.

"The Academy is molding a new generation, who will lead the future with new discoveries, new technology, new avenues to exploration."

Whenever they grew past the ends of my fingers, I trimmed my nails, filed them into ovals and buffed them to a fine shine. Whenever it grew to my shoulders, I cut my hair. I always made sure my clothes were neat and comfortable. I had a nice body that wore those clothes well and never caught viruses. I was small built and could do precise things with steady hands and sharp eyes, but I also had a lot of natural strength, which I didn't neglect. I had good skin and stayed clean, even when I was working on something.

I could control that much about myself. I wanted that to show.

"We work in a diversely populated environment, where different cultures and talents can work together to achieve their goals."

I'd managed to have a couple boyfriends. We hung out, played dom-jot or chess in the capital center, studied together, decided to go on a couple dates. The summer before my junior year, I got curious enough to have sex with the second one. It was all right, I guess, got "the job" done. I just remember lying there afterwards wondering what I should be feeling, because I didn't feel anything, not even pain. That's not what I expected--and I'm sure it wasn't what he thought it'd be, considering.

He was a nice guy, but I broke it off a month later. Not that it mattered after the initial thrill, such as it was, was gone. He had a new girlfriend soon after, and he wasn't bugging me anymore. I barely ever saw him again. Not that I bothered to look. A couple times, we said, "Hi," but only in passing.

I didn't go to games or sports, though I did play a couple, mainly one-on-one games like single parises or hoverball. I was quick, had a good eye, enjoyed the direct competition. I wasn't on a team, though. I used the outdoor track to run but avoided the coaches after a couple had invited me to join the track team. I was tempted, but I was already "interning" in the lab, and didn't want anything to interfere with that.

I loved to run hard, feel the impacts on my feet and knees, feel my blood pounding, my skin heat against the cold morning air. When I started, I sometimes couldn't make myself stop, but just pushed harder and harder. Sometimes I took my shoes off so I could feel the surface grinding into my feet as I propelled myself. Sometimes I felt like I could leave the ground, I ran so hard, so fast...free.

It felt so good, I could have cried. Maybe I did, though I don't remember it. Eventually, I slowed and stopped, walked it off, let that numb sort of haze wash over me while my heart slowed. It was indescribable, that moment when everything stood still, and everything was so clear, and I could think of...nothing.

Still, I sometimes wondered why I did it. It didn't accomplish anything, running around in circles. But it did feel good and my body appreciated it, so I never stopped.

$\cos (l-33^\circ) = (\cos d * \cos (a - 282^\circ .25)) / (\cos b)$

"We are always looking for those who want to discover their potential, even see the potential they had but have not realized. Starfleet is about exploration and discovery."

I wanted to make those new discoveries, author those new technologies, achievements and models.

I skipped all my appointments with the counselor to put in extra credit rebuilding lab equipment and supervising the freshmen there.

I avoided my mother, stayed at the library until it closed, looking at new theories, studies, ideas.

Answerable, solvable, correctable. Clean--or at least able to be cleaned up or fixed or made clearer.

"In the Academy, we ask our cadets to overcome those challenges, guide them to ask only the best of themselves."

Nothing made me angrier than when someone else wasn't pulling their weight. How many times I got stuck with a slacker and had to share my grade with them when I did all the work. Well, not that it mattered, since I liked working alone anyway. They pissed me off, though, like any lazy, stupid parasite would. Why I never ratted on them, I'll never know. I wanted to more times that I could count, go right up to someone like Mr. Thielsen and list all the things they weren't doing, get them flunked out.

But I never did. I wondered why I never did.

At the time, I guess just hating them was enough.

I did pretty well in worlds-lit only because I didn't mind most of the reading and I was good at the logical process of essays. I almost didn't make it through Federation history. I flunked oral demonstration--and the slackers nailed me for that as soon as word got around that I'd have to make it up. "Who can actually flunk *speech* class?" a couple of them had snickered, just close enough that I could hear. I didn't say anything.

I wasn't going to let them get to me, not a bunch of losers who weren't even smart enough to draw out a nuclear reaction without breaking into hysterics at the lunch bar--or worse, asking their boyfriend or girlfriend for help.

"Speech" class. It wasn't hard. I just didn't do anything there. What did it matter, anyway? Standing up in front of a bunch of people and droning on about nothing that really mattered. It was just an arts division they made you take for lack of anything better to do with you for an hour.

I was good in *real* art, though--design, actually. I was very good at structural design. It made that requirement plus some. They still made me choose speech as the other half of my "creative studies."

Anything was better than dramatics.

I remembered hearing someone mention something called "cottonmouth."

I still can feel it when I think about it, that particular dry thickness clogging down my throat when it was my turn, and the feeling of my chest jumping, my hands shaking--sweating, even. And that dry, sticky tongue...It was so stupid, but I couldn't make it go away. I couldn't stop shaking, or wet my throat, or even look up. When I spoke, I croaked.

Me, of all people. I couldn't talk. I'd always liked that I was outspoken--at least with my teachers...my science teachers.

Why couldn't I talk about that, instead? I would have been boring, but it was something I at least got into.

I did my equations while sitting through that class. I barely looked at my assignments. I think I opened the book once. So I flunked. Big deal.

When my mother got the transmission of my grades, she didn't say a word. She only stared at me-- *that* stare, as if to say, "You brought this upon yourself, shared your dishonor with me for your cowardice." She gave me that look throughout dinner and said nothing about that part of it.

"You have found success in your science courses." She said it while staring at me, then went back to her eating. Her mouth remained straight the whole time. "But there is more honor in facing your greater challenges."

I knew what my mother meant--and she knew I knew it. I could practically *hear* it droning out of her eyes. She didn't have to say it. Too lazy to try to overcome her fears. Too involved with "things" to deal with people. Too much a coward to show her heart, and instead eats her dishonor.

What does standing in front of a bunch of dimwits and talking about "the best day of my life" or "the hardest thing I ever did" or "my earliest memory" have to do with my heart? Besides, I didn't think it was anyone's business.

For that matter, Klingons weren't known for speaking. They were known for doing.

I always hated that *look*. It made me feel minuscule.

I made it up over the summer. There were only three people in the class and we all knew each other. I got mid-marks and got the hell out.

"Our goal is to make our students into the best that they can be, in whatever field they choose. Our goal is to share our dream of discovery with them."

I liked to wander around on my way home, or sometimes on weekends when I couldn't keep busy enough. Just get out and walk, usually quickly. Like with running, I'd always loved the feeling of good, brisk stride, how it made my body feel, so straight and sure. Somehow, I'd never become lost, though the forest was pretty thick. I could walk for kilometers and still find my way back.

I got lost in the nature itself, though, all the woody smells and soft, crinkling sounds of leaves overhead, or even the silence when the breeze and I both stopped, and the feeling of the Upper Reberas river on my hot feet. I loved the feel of the cool water rushing through my toes on the wet, mossy stones, and when everything died down and I could hear nothing but that trickle...

I was still thinking about what I had to do, had to finish, wanted to start once I got that one project--which I was already getting a little sick of--done. But sometimes, as I left the stream and started heading back, I dreamed a little about what I'd do with it all someday.

I somehow always saw myself making something great, making something needed. Doing something good. I was always on some deadline, but always got it done. I always finished in the nick of time, that lifesaving whatever, like the Daystrom journals sometimes showcased. When I imagined it, I felt the thrill of that success, how it must have been for the people who'd actually done it. It made me want to get back to that old project and cap it off, move on to the next, which I knew would earn that honors credit. I'd set off again with it hot on my mind, already built, shown and graded in my head.

But when I closed my eyes, I could only see myself running up a hill--and tripping over rocks.

Mother should have been proud of at least that much. I kept my eyes wide open more often than not.

But she couldn't say anything but, "It is not enough. You will never find contentment on that path. There is no honor in a machine. It should be in your heart."

A Klingon heart, to be sure. I wondered why she kept trying to convince me I had one.

"When you are graduated, B'Elanna, I will take us back to the homeworld. It has been too long since you were there, and our family wants to see you. I think you should be near them, too."

Her family. That planet. I could feel myself huddling into a little ball already, squeezing tight, my shoulders crunched up to my ears.

The first day of my senior year, a freshman brand new to Kessik was passing through the lab to pick up her passes. She smiled when she asked for them. I grinned back and handed her the chips.

She asked me if I was Klingon.

"Half," I said and went back to my PADD sorting.

A few other girls scooted her away. "Don't ask her about it! She hates that."

The girl took a breath. I could almost see her staring back at me with those big green eyes, biting her little lip. "I hope she's not angry at me...What's her other half?"

I rolled my eyes. Idiot.

I never knew her name. She hadn't bothered to ask me mine.

"Through the Academy's many disciplines, the mind, the body and the intellect are given the best training they can receive..."

Sounded good enough to me, I'd suddenly thought when I had cause to remember it.

For two years, I'd thought that having to pass the counseling department at any given part of the day was a curse. I usually stepped up my pace and passed quickly by, totally serious, eyes straight forward. I didn't want that woman coming after me.

But that one morning, something caught my eye: A Starfleet officer talking to one of the people I'd avoided for three full years.

"Oh, we've got a good class this year," I heard him say as he ran a quick hand through his dark hair. If I didn't know better, he'd have been trying to charm Ms.Caffey. Not that she ever looked like she minded. "Lots of bright kids. --Aren't they always, though? But there was one I met last week who'll probably be teaching us how to do it in a few years. She's really going places already, and only in her third semester..."

Barely thinking, I checked my sack and sifted around for my essay. It was due that day.

"We're planning an open conference. Some of the most forward theorists in the sector will be here, and we've extended an invitation to some of the cadets to join in for some seminar points..."

One glance and four long steps through a crowd of a bunch of people I didn't know--underclassmen--and I grabbed my classmate Haley's arm.

"Turn this in to Ms.Gletnas for me," I whispered and shoved the PADD into her pocket.

Haley scowled. "Don't tell me--"

"Tell her I'm caught up with Mrs.Caffey. --Don't worry. Gletnas has been pushing me to get this post-graduation stuff done for a year."

Haley opened her mouth again--

"Thanks," I said and strode back to the door. I was straight and sure of how to get in a second later, licking my bottom lip and timing my move just as the officer was turning towards a calendar board.

With another glance to my bag and two steps, I stopped with a jolt right before him. "Oh! Sorry."

His smile was genuine as he made sure I didn't drop anything.

His big brown eyes flicked to my forehead before anything else.

"That's quite all right," he said.

"You're in a rush," Counselor Caffey commented, her querying smile and sparkling eyes just as annoying as they had ever been. I never had regretted avoiding her.

"I have class in a couple minutes," I explained. "But I wanted to schedule an appointment."

I tried not to flinch at her happy little clap. "Well good! --Excuse me, Commander Otierras. --Well, I'm glad to see you've finally come in, Miss Torres. I heard about your winning the Heisenberg Award again. Congratulations."

"Thanks," I said without a blink. I knew I'd done well--and that the pretty, blonde counselor in all her glory wouldn't have comprehended what I'd done to get the award in the first place. But I did appreciate the plug.

"So maybe it's given you a reason to come in? It is past your first senior quarter."

I shrugged. "I didn't know exactly where I wanted to start. I always knew I wanted a career in engineering, but I wasn't sure of where to study. But I do know that's what I want to do."

I knew what yellow on a Starfleet uniform was...Well, one of two things.

Thankfully, the coin flipped my way.

Caffey's eyes glanced up and past me briefly.

My ear picked up the shift of fabric behind me. I pretended not to notice.

"Have you considered a career in Starfleet?" asked the commander, right on cue.

I looked back at him. "I'm too late for the entrance exams. I want to start something once I've graduated." I grinned. "I might not be Starfleet material that way. I don't like to wait."

"We can get around that if you're sincere enough," he said, friendly and honest.

I didn't care a bit about the fact that I was wheedling my way into it. Normally I didn't bother with

those kinds of maneuvers, didn't lower myself to it--one thing my mother taught me that I did respect. But this was different. I wanted this. Being there, having gotten myself in there, I wasn't about to turn back.

"I don't usually do things unless I mean it," I said, almost casual, almost serious. "But I really need to decide on a place to study."

"How about if I send you some information?" he offered. "Let you get a better idea about Starfleet. If you're up for it, you can contact me and I'll arrange something for you."

He glanced at my forehead again. It annoyed me, but again, I didn't care. The real reason for my getting in would be that exam I hadn't even known had passed me by until it had. If the want for a Klingon was enough to pull some strings for the entrance, I didn't care. It's not like they wouldn't have thought about it anyway.

Starfleet would give me every opportunity to do what I loved. It was diverse enough that no one would notice anything but what I could do. It would give me access to the latest technology. I could excel, I could build things, perfect things, learn all that there was and make things better someday.

I wouldn't have to go to Qo'noS. I wouldn't have to be held back anymore. I'd have my own life.

I would never have to sit through another one of my mother's stories.

I let a few seconds go by before shrugging a little, nodding. "Okay...Thank you."

Sitting through Caffey's session later that day, I barely heard a word after she suggested Ibanor-6's excellent curriculum. It wasn't nearly as good as Starfleet would be. Starfleet was a center, not a satellite. I didn't want to deal with seconds. I wanted the gist.

I snuck into the den at home and closed the door only a night later, nearly fell on the comm monitor to open the channel.

"Commander Otierras? --Sorry it's so late."

"Don't you have school tomorrow?"

I could feel my smile in my eyes as I leaned close to the viewscreen. "I'm about to go to sleep--really. But I read the information you sent me."

"Already?"

"I read quickly." I caught his stare, took a breath to will down my excitement. I was doing it. "I'd like to know about the tests."

Commander Otierras had a handsome smile.

Per his advice, I stepped up on all my "non-concentration" courses. I bore through history and creative composition, I chose debate for my final elective and managed not to get into any *real* fights. I squeezed through cultural psychology.

I'd even studied Federation politics for this one.

I can still feel the smile that crossed my face when I first opened the entrance exam file and scrolled

down from the header to jump into the first problem. It was too easy. I could have figured out that equation when I was eight.

I'd always loved chemistry, almost as much as I loved pure mechanics, physics and AI.

Glancing back at a couple others taking the test, I could practically smell their pause. They didn't know it as well as I did. They wouldn't get the whole thing done in time. But I would.

I did.

I aced it.

I graduated with honors.

My mind was set on it. I wasn't turning back. I was going to do it. I was leaving. Finally.

I told my mother I wouldn't go to Qo'noS with her. I was too busy studying--and packing. I had to be ready for my first semester.

Predictably, she wasn't much help.

"You will never be complete in this, B'Elanna! You will only find your weaknesses, which Kahless knows is a difficult path to *choose* when you wish to make everything else too simple."

"God, don't go on about Kahless! I'd rather hear the Vulcan precepts of foot fungus than hear about that old, dead slob one more time!"

My mother's face flexed from scalp to neck for that one. "You have become more like your father than I would have ever had," she managed to say without raising her voice. I could tell it was an effort.

"Good!" I shot out in a laugh, already designing to finish that old argument once and for all. "I'm *glad* I'm more like him! Because maybe I *want* to be a pithy human! Did you ever think about that? Did you ever think that I didn't give a damn about Qo'noS or anything on it?"

"This is not about the homeworld!"

"That's right. It's about *me*--and *my* choices. And I've made them! My choices for my life! You keep saying I'm drifting because I don't *do* anything. Now that I've made my decision, why can't you just accept it?"

"Accept *what*, B'Elanna?" she demanded, her face suffused and fists clenched at her sides. I could see them jumping to rise. "How can I accept a child who refuses to see what being Klingon truly is? Who would rather close her heart into a shell and choose not to see clearly?"

I'd expected that. Actually, I'd known that one all along.

"No, I don't expect you to," I responded. "You're just Klingon. It's all you ever cared about. You'd rather I ate worms and sat around in some filthy hall wasting my time with a bunch of people who don't know anything about me. They don't know what's important to me--and you *refuse* to see it. You never will with all your idiotic stories and useless honor! Maybe if you hadn't been so Klingon I *would* have honored you."

That stung. For that little twitch in her eye, I could tell it'd stung her. I didn't so much as blink. I

even hoped she might reel out and hit me.

"You're the one who wouldn't let me know him," I continued, my eyes drawing into slits. "You wouldn't even let me talk about him. Everything was so hard for him, I don't *blame* him for going. He left us here, but you made it look like it was *his* fault alone for wanting to. Then you tried to make me forget him. The warrior's way, right? Turn your back on what you think is disgraced even if it makes your child's life hell, because you have to worry about your stupid, meaningless honor. --You practically *threw* my father away, didn't even *try* to help me feel better, and now you want me to get in touch with *your* family? I don't want to have anything to do with *any* of them!"

I'd wanted it to hurt her. In my small, cruel heart, I'd pulled up everything I could to sever whatever notions she'd had that I would be what she wanted me to be. I wanted to smash it into her stubborn head that I wasn't going to be the Klingon child she'd wanted--ever.

That was a thought.

"If you'd wanted a Klingon child, you shouldn't have married a *human*. So don't blame me because *you* screwed it up."

It seemed to work, even if she didn't give me the satisfaction of reacting as much as I thought she would.

Instead, she said nothing for almost a minute, almost looked tired for all the fury I'd put in her. But even that drained out for an old, blank stare, which in any other case would have been indifference. Her fists remained tight, though, while a steady breath straightened her.

"You will accomplish nothing if you only drift from dream to dream and do nothing," she told me evenly.

At least she'd accepted the last part by saying nothing more about it. But she hadn't swallowed it all.

"I'm not *drifting*. I'm building and learning things. I love it, what I'm doing--and I'm *good* at it."

"Things which will not matter in a month for the next thing you move on to."

"It matters to *me*."

"You only want to believe it does."

"This is what I want to do! Why can't you just be glad that I *have* something I want to succeed in?"

"It is no dishonor to love your work, B'Elanna. But it is all you strive for, which is not enough. You believe you can build your heart from things that will never live, when true honor involves seeing all that is within and around you. You cannot avoid your soul with 'things.'"

I rolled my eyes, but kept my back straight. I didn't even say what first came to mind: *Like you haven't avoided a few things, yourself*. I caught her eyes again, damned if she'd doubt I meant it before leaving that room.

"This is what I want to do."

I'd pronounced every word perfectly, didn't break our stare. I closed my mouth afterwards, didn't move a muscle.

She stared at me another moment, suddenly reappraising me with a blankness I don't think I'd ever been subject to. In its own way, it was eerie, the emotionless shield that came over her, the way her eyes moved over me as if I were one of her experiments. But I waited through the examination. I wasn't backing down.

She turned away. "Then do," she said flatly. "I will not argue you when you make yourself deaf to everything I say. We will waste no more words on this."

The conversation ended there.

It was the best "okay" I was going to get and I knew it. She'd turned her back to me, just like she had my father. My eyes closed for a moment, and I took a slow breath. In a way, I was glad to have finally gotten it through to her, and that it was over. Finally over.

That same part of me didn't care if she was disappointed in the child she just couldn't convince. The other part...

It was still a stupid part of me, really. A tiny part knew someday she would see, she would see me someday and know...She'd know me better someday.

That smaller voice inside me wanted her to understand...someday.

A few weeks later, I left. Mother took me, signed for me at the city transport. My bags in both my hands, I turned on the pad and waited for the transporter to take me away from that place.

I knew precisely how the device I was standing on worked, inside-out. If asked, I could have quoted the matter-energy conversion ratios--even fixed the pads had they been broken. Feeling myself dematerialize above them was nothing less than relieving.

But Mother's words began to twist back into my mind as soon as I slowed down enough to remember the last look she gave me, as she stood just outside the transport pad, her long hair and skirt catching the wind, her gray-green eyes wide open in the summer sun and pinned to mine...

For all my life, I'll never forget the look in her eyes when she said, "Goodbye, B'Elanna."

She said it in standard English.

It was my last memory of Kessik.

But I was free, I was doing it, what I wanted, what I dreamed.

I was empty. She knew it.

I'd fill the space soon enough. I'd have people around me I wanted to be with and courses and topics to challenge me. I'd be in on all the new technology, learn everything there was to challenge me. I'd make it all work.

It was never enough. It would never be enough. I'd never be happy.

I hated her for putting those words in my head.

I'd never be whole--as if I ever had been.

I hated her for being right about that much. Not about everything, but she had me there.

And I hadn't even begun to know what trouble was.

I had only just begun to know what loss was.

I didn't know anything about struggling, or survival.

Despise was a cheap word, then. So was anger.

I had no comprehension of the depth of my insecurities, or my pain, or the dark depression that had always lurked, waiting for an outlet, waiting to make me see everything, like it or not.

When it did come, I was totally unprepared.

But I didn't know my inner strength, either, nor the real meaning of resiliency, or understanding, nor of my ability to grow from it all, though it still amazes me sometimes that I ever had.

But that's another topic.

$l \text{ arc} = (360^\circ - l) * (\pi/180^\circ)$
 $X \text{ relative} = \sin(\text{arc}) * d \text{ plane}$
 $Y \text{ relative} = -\cos(l \text{ plane}) * d \text{ plane}$
 $b \text{ arc} = b * (\pi/180^\circ)$
 $Z \text{ relative} = \sin(b \text{ arc}) * d \text{ plane}$

So simple. Solvable. Workable series of problems with an answer, somewhere. You only had to compute it.

I had no idea what I was getting into, even if all the answers had already been given to me.

It's just that I refused to sit down and draw out *those* equations. I wouldn't see them. I wasn't ready to see them. I was too angry to see them, too young and hard on myself in every avenue *but* that. It hurt too much to look, so I didn't.

Mother had a lot more patience than I ever gave her credit for.

Worse is that I know now that I couldn't have seen myself for what I was even if I'd tried. Not then--though a little part of me wonders what could have been if I had.

I've always been a little romantic that way.

I don't think I would have gone to Qo'noS for the summer in either case, though. My shoulders still tense up when I think about going there.

The dinner was letting out, though quite a few groups remained behind. Most of their fellow professors had said their goodnights, but they had not followed, choosing to enjoy a while longer the fresh air and patterned sky, and the sounds of the bay trickling over the rocks nearby. An occasional gull cry broke the steady buzz before them.

In the pavilion, the remaining cadets had gathered into comfortable niches, chatting away as if they didn't have a thing to do the next day. One within a younger group sat with her drink in her hands, listening, straight faced and nodding on occasion. A couple times, she flashed a quick grin. Her eyes darted over to the chronometer three times in two minutes.

The presentations had gone well, the commander thought, her own included. A lot a good questions following each talk had come from a number of cadets in her freshman class, she'd noticed with some pride. In response, she'd taken the opportunity while at the lectern to tease them about their upcoming finals. They'd enjoyed that.

$$G = (6.672\ 59 \pm 0.000\ 85) \times 10^{-11} \text{ m}^3/\text{kg} \cdot \text{sec}^2$$

A soft orb now lay heavy on her lap, sound asleep on the bench they occupied and oblivious to the other little orb bobbing just behind. Beside her was a long, warm form, hugging her close in the cool night air, so real and sure. It was a welcome respite after all the business of the night, which had followed a busy day. It was good to talk a while, too, quiet and comfortable under the stars to let dinner digest, let their girl settle down.

It was time to go.

Long day tomorrow for them all. Her daughter had her nine-year checkup with the doctor at eight hundred hours; her own four-month checkup was one hour later. After that was done, she needed to make some arrangements for the next guest speaker and to finish grading the overload of quarter finals that'd come on too quickly. Her husband would be out until Friday with the test runs, which even he wasn't anxious to sit through, hour after hour--though he was the first to admit that the blunders often amused him. That weekend, the grandparents would be visiting, which in any case scenario meant no rest for the weary.

The cadet stood, said some quick goodbyes and swerved around the metal chairs without touching them.

Both commanders' eyes followed the move. They had been watching the young woman for a while, having started their conversation there talking about her.

"Why don't you tell her that?" he finally suggested.

She peered back at him. "Think she'd listen?"

"You never know. Couldn't hurt."

What either of them would have given for a little genuine mentoring back in their Academy days, even if they'd been convinced nobody would understand. Maybe nobody did. But nobody tried to see otherwise, either, as some old Starfleet credo said cadets had to pull their own bootstraps. That much was true, but a steady hand could go a long way, too.

She never wanted to be young again. She knew that much.

"Take Miral for me, Tom," she said quietly as she mentally plotted the rendezvous.

"You bet," he said and relinquished his wife.

Easing the weight off her lap and into his arms, she paused to smile at their daughter's soft mew, how her sleepy hand crept around her father's shoulder to hold on when he cradled her. A tall, sharp-witted girl, it was easy to forget sometimes that she was still a child. She'd had a long night.

She gave his jaw a little stroke as she stood. "I'll only be a minute."

With a skip and a few smooth strides, she re-entered the pavilion, then walked steadily through. She nodded to a few greetings from her students, but otherwise didn't slow. Right on time, the young woman saw her--visibly regretted it, but decided on second thought to stop and wait. Her face was perfect neutrality as she took a breath, opened her mouth.

"Hello, Commander Torres." The words were as stony as her face had been earlier that day.

The older woman grinned. The cadet's response was exactly what she had expected. She moved closer to the cadet, realizing only upon arrival that they were about the same height.

"Cadet Metri, good evening," she said. "I won't keep you, since I see you're on your way out." The younger woman nodded stiffly. "But I was still thinking about your silicate problem, and wondered if you'd like to show me what you'd done sometime."

Metri turned her stare askance. "You want to see it?"

"I'll let you in on a poorly kept secret here: I'm an engineer before anything else, even before an officer. I enjoy solving problems and hearing about new ones--masochistic as that sometimes sounds." Having earned a slight snicker for that, the older woman nodded. "Meet me for lab a little early tomorrow and we'll thrash it out a little."

Metri snorted. "You'll probably thrash it, all right...Commander. Sorry."

She shrugged at the casual comment. She actually preferred it from her students, as she never much liked them being on parade for her, even if it was their place to be. Then again, she never had been complete Starfleet material. "It won't be any worse than anything anyone's done to me--not nearly. Especially here."

That did manage to raise a brow. "Really? You?"

The commander smiled again and gave the cadet a soft pat on the arm. "Trust me," she said with an assured nod, "nothing's ever as clean cut as you'll want it to be. I know how much better it is when we nail it right away, but it usually takes a little longer to get these things right. You'd do good to bring it into the lab, where it belongs. And I do want to see. I don't joke about things like that."

A full five seconds passed, then, "Well...I guess I could make it in at about ten hundred thirty, if that's all right."

"Good," she acknowledged, not too friendly, but not tough, either. "I'll see you then."

Metri didn't trust her, the commander could tell. She didn't believe her sincerity and still looked nervous as she escaped to the walkway.

But she had at least agreed to come in early. It'd do.

Those things took time, just like the theories did. She knew all too well, being that same half-Klingon misfit who'd drifted long after she'd been in that young lady's shoes, and still was learning a thing or two every now and again.

Never hurt to have the memory of someone who'd tried. Whether or not Metri made it through Starfleet, and whatever was the root of that young woman's difficulties, she'd at least know someone at the Academy who understood, or tried to understand, or had at least approached her.

Better than nothing.

"Ready?"

Her husband had come in behind her, quietly lest he wake their child. The girl's body was limp, her boots swinging slightly with her father's momentum, her round face and dark lashes smooshed against his lapel. Her mouth was set in a decisive pout; her fingers were bunched up under his collar, only instinctively holding on.

Totally oblivious to all the workings around her, just as she should be at that age.

B'Elanna looked up at him and nodded, reached up to rub a little circle on their girl's back.

"Definitely."

(fin)

$f = f_0 [1 \pm v/w]$	A Doppler shift calculation, where "f" is the resulting frequency, f_0 the original frequency. The plus sign yields a frequency decrease in case the source is moving away, the minus sign an increase if the source is approaching." (Ex Astris Scientia)
$m - M = 5 \log^{10} (r/10)$	Formula which links Apparent Magnitude (m), Absolute Magnitude (M), and Distance (r).
$c = 299\,792\,458 \text{ m/s}$	Speed of light.
$\cos(l-33^\circ) = (\cos d * \cos(a - 282^\circ.25)) / (\cos b)$	Calculated Galactic Latitude.*
$\text{larc} = (360^\circ - l) * (\pi/180^\circ)$ $X_{\text{relative}} = \sin(\text{larc}) * \text{dplane}$ $Y_{\text{relative}} = -\cos(l_{\text{plane}}) * \text{dplane}$ $\text{barc} = b * (\pi/180^\circ)$ $Z_{\text{relative}} = \sin(\text{barc}) * \text{dplane}$	To determine the x, y and z distances of a star from Earth, for galactic mapping using Earth as a central point.*
$G = (6.672\,59 \pm 0.000\,85) \times 10^{-11} \text{ m}^3/\text{kg} \cdot \text{sec}^2$	Constant of Gravitation.