



Irremission

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Stardate 51499

Even the misty sunset could not brighten his features. He knew of a time when it could, when he walked beside that beautiful, loving creature. She would skip about the skirt of a wave, laughing, hair blowing in the breeze, begging him to run with her. He never did, said he'd watch from there. He wondered why he couldn't bring himself to. But he did covet her fancy, appreciate how the setting sun lit her features in such a way, even restrained himself from telling her her dress was getting ruined from the water and sand. She darted about in such a way that reminded him why he fell in love with her, why he married her.

But she was gone, much too soon. In the home he'd made for her, she managed to find a way to leave him behind, to leave him to grow old without her; to always wonder what might have been, to regret never having followed her into the water. He hated her freedom. He hated that he could never have been more like her. Her liberty had been her gift--and his curse. It was always her way to be running ahead, leaving him to watch and to wait...powerless. Old. Alone.

As the sun nestled itself into the sea, as its colors flowed in behind it, he watched, very still. His eyes showed no emotion, his thin mouth was straight. He took an even breath, slowly filling his lungs with the moist air, then let it out with no greater effort.

What should I say?

The tide was coming in, and he remembered watching them run along the shore together, dancing without pattern or purpose. Why that had so disturbed him was still a mystery, though he could recall some of the words, something about discipline and society and future purposefulness. It was for love, for the future, for their son. He'd truly thought his actions would reflect his intentions.

So he stated his position, made his suggestions and watched her pretty features pale. Her arguments were valid, her anger and tears real, but he was persuasive, knew what he was doing would be good for their boy in the long run. In the end, she relented. He regretted that too. Too much.

But revenge was gotten on her side, for the child he had molded broke free despite all his best intentions. He never saw, or wanted to see, how much their son belonged to his mother. He was ignorant of her deeper influence. As though her soul had broken free of death, Alaine Paris reclaimed what was hers all along, restoring her broken child's spirit. It would not be restrained again.

And just like his mother, the son had gotten the last word--now twice.

51474 (nine days ago)

"Thank you Alaine."

Alaine watched, her wide blue eyes full of pride. Her mother had accepted the blanket she'd brought with warm thanks and a kiss on the cheek. Alaine liked to help her parents with the baby whenever she thought they needed it.

"Mommy, Kin goin' bed soon?"

"Soon, sweetheart," she confirmed, draping the blanket over the infant and her arm as she guided the newborn to her breast.

"And so will you," Tom said quietly as he came into the living room with a book in hand. He grinned and motioned to the couch, to which Alaine hurried, anxious for her story. After helping B'Elanna sit beside their daughter, Tom seated himself on her other side and opened the first page.

"Once upon a time," he read, and Alaine snuggled up beside him, "there was a prince who was not happy, and so he sought the advice of a sage. The wise old man answered that happiness was a difficult thing to find in the world...."

B'Elanna watched her husband read the ancient tale. Though she had heard it many times by then, it had come to be one of her favorites, too--perhaps sometimes because she knew it was short. She liked it even more when she got him to break down and read it in the original. He had such an expressive voice and in French even more so, at least to her ear. But it was as easy to get Tom to speak French as it was to get her to speak Klingon, so B'Elanna knew to appreciate the rare times he did fall out of his native tongue.

Still, she liked the story in any fashion, liked how Alaine's eyes followed the pictures so intently as he elaborated on the tale, turned the page slowly as Alaine's face lit with expectation, how she asked questions and how Tom answered with heartfelt animation. She could see him reading the story to Kiarn someday. *By then, Tom will probably have perfected it*, she smiled to herself, nestling herself close to Alaine while caressing her nursing son.

It was not too late when they finally got their children to their respective beds, so the parents returned to the couch to relax together. Still mindful of the routine, they were well aware that they would have only a few hours to rest before Kiarn awoke. Making the most of their time, Tom pulled B'Elanna into his arms, reclining into the pillows. She put her head on his chest and closed her eyes and smiled when he tenderly kissed her forehead. She leaned up to have another, sighing contentedly as he pressed his lips to hers, then again as both drew deep breaths.

He grinned and caressed her cheek with a finger. "If we weren't ready to collapse, I'd ravish you, Miss Torres."

"I dare you to beat me to it," she returned, sharing his tired laugh. It had been nearly a month since they had made love, and as it had been around the time of Alaine's birth, they had begun to count the hours until they could be rested and unoccupied enough to resume their usual activities. That would happen soon enough, but both knew it wasn't going to happen on that night. So, B'Elanna languidly finished his third kiss and resumed her former position, snuggling her cheek in the nook of his shoulder. Her eyes closed again. "Do you think we'll be able to make it for breakfast tomorrow?" she

whispered.

"If you're up to it," Tom replied. "Kiarn should be all right. I don't think breakfast would be too tiring for any of us. Was Alaine asking?"

"Actually, it was Neelix's idea," B'Elanna said. "He says everyone's anxious to see Kiarn, but they won't dare visit." Nuzzling herself further into his embrace, sleep was coming very close. She took a deep breath and let it go. "If we get some sleep, we'll go, then."

"Okay." Tom continued to hold her, feeling one muscle after another slacken beneath his arms, her slight weight become heavier. He, too, began to relax against the soft pillows, felt his eyes get heavy. Certainly, he had not been the one to give birth, but being a light sleeper, he had been up as often as B'Elanna had, helping her with what he could and doing his best to give Alaine attention when B'Elanna couldn't. Thankfully, he was a little more used to being up at night, so his mood hadn't suffered for it yet. In truth, the activity helped him settle back down.

"Tom?" she whispered, barely awake.

"Yes, B'Elanna?"

A pause, then. Her fingers traced little circles on his shirt. "Do you think they were happy to get our letters--that hearing we're alive is a good thing?"

Tom nestled his cheek against her hair. "I don't know. I hope so."

She paused, feeling her husband's stillness despite his slightly increased heartbeat. "Do you think we...Do you think they've forgiven us?"

"It's been a long time. I want to believe they have."

"Me too," B'Elanna sighed.

"It's not knowing that makes it as hard as it is."

She nodded with her eyes alone. "I think so, too."

The thought was disturbing her, he knew. It disturbed him too. He could feel her shoulders tense slightly, feel her unconsciously clasp his shirt. Tom's mouth curled into a little grin as he peeked down at her. Then, he whispered, "Il y avait une fois un prince qui n'était pas heureux."

On his chest, he felt her smile. He took a silent breath, closed his eyes. "Il alla consulter un vieux derviche. Le sage vieillard lui répondit que le bonheur était chose difficile trouver en ce monde..."

He stroked her dark hair, tracing the curls over her shoulder. The words came easily to his unpracticed tongue, the story flowing out from one line to the next as if by nature. "...Peine inutile. Il n'en est pas plus heureux..."

He glanced down to her as he continued. B'Elanna's eyes were almost closed; her smile was relaxed. Tom leaned his head against hers. "'Voilà pourtant un homme qui possède le bonheur,' se dit-il. '-Es-tu heureux?' -- 'Oui,' a dit l'autre. -- 'Tu ne désirez rien?' -- 'Non.'"

Tom smiled to himself, gazing down to their entwined arms. "'Tu ne changerais pas ton sort pour celui d'un roi?'" he breathed, watching her small fingers clutch slightly at his sleeve. "'Jamais de la

vie..."

She had stilled completely then; her small breaths warmed his collar. Grinning to himself, he pulled his head up slightly to look at her face. Softly, he kissed her forehead.

She was asleep. Soon after, he was too.

49134 (2.4 years ago)

"Sorry to disturb you, Admiral."

"Yes, Lieutenant, what is it?" Willing down the corners of his mouth, he was amused to know that even after so many years, he could make them shake a little. It was but an odd little pleasure he never took too seriously.

The young lieutenant--*How was this child promoted so quickly?*--stepped fully into the office, a PADD in his hand. "This came in for you an hour ago, Admiral. It was hand delivered from a Bajoran trade ship and inspected. Admiral Nechayev cleared it and asked me to bring it to you, sir."

"Admiral Nechayev did, did she?" Admiral Paris gestured to an empty space on his desk and gave the young man a nod. "Very well, you may leave it here."

Once the lieutenant completed his duty, the older man dismissed him. With but a glance at the typically Bajoran datapad, he continued his work, wanting to finish his report before distracting himself with what was probably another request for a visit from the Bajoran Government. His dealings with the Cardassians made him a desirable guest. But Owen Paris did not much care for ruminating. He had enough work to do. He had enough to think about.

"Nechayev to Paris," came a woman's voice over the comm.

He did not look up. "Yes, Alynna, I received the PADD."

"You're busy, I suppose." Her tone was flat.

"Yes."

"Owen, you're not too busy to look at this one. I think you need to read it."

"Were it a priority, you would have called me before." A pause. The admiral grinned. "I'm not going, if that's what you're asking."

"Going? You haven't even looked at it, have you? No, it's not a priority, not officially. It's of a personal nature....If you need to talk later, I'm willing. Nechayev out."

She couldn't talk, wherever she was, he correctly guessed. Nechayev had a plainness about her manner that he both recognized and appreciated. She was never cryptic unless she needed to be. But something had bothered her enough to check in on him.

Admiral Paris shook his head and put a pause on his report. He then reached across the desk for the PADD, accessing its data with a thump of his thumb as he brought it closer. Then he saw the portrait; at first he almost didn't recognize... Without thinking, he glanced through the hand-written

words just below it--

Stardate 48286

Dear Dad,

How do I begin? I've been sitting here for twenty minutes, trying to find the right words. But I've learned that sometimes you just have to start without thinking too much about how it'll be taken. So I'll start with what I'm thinking and take it from there.

I've learned a lot of things, Dad, since the last time we met. But considering where I am now and what I'm doing, I think it's right to let you know what's happened to me. You deserve the chance to understand.

I want you to know that I'm not the same scared, angry and--yes--drunk kid that left Earth two years ago. A lot of things have changed.

The admiral froze. His eyes found the portrait again.

He remembered Alaine...her smile, her eyes, staring up to him...

The hand that held the PADD began to tremble. Slowly, deliberately, he put the PADD aside, picked up the status report. But the words he'd read already echoed in his mind, in his son's voice; the portrait had already burnt itself into his memory. The report in his hand slowly found his desk again.

Unwillingly, he remembered it all.

Now there was more.

He stood from his desk and moved to the window. Peering down at the people walking on their way, he fought to control his shaking hands, clasping them tightly behind his back, fighting to push those words, that image, away. His efforts were futile.

"Damnit, Tom," he whispered, his eyes unconsciously drifting upwards, "why?"

Remembrance

48491 (7.4 months ago)

"You didn't see him at Avalor," he said softly, running his thick, worn fingers around the middle of the nearly drained coffee cup. He was hunched over, just a little, as if a bit too much weight had been resting on him for a little too long. He was tired--as were they all--and the personal responsibility he felt to settle his comrades in their new home remained one person away from being over.

Again, "You didn't see him at Avalor."

Despite the quiet assuredness in his voice, the varied memories inspired by that place cast an ironic grin upon his lips. "I admit when I met him, I didn't think much of him; he didn't think much of himself." He paused, catching his new captain's steely stare. "I didn't know him then, none of us really did, except Jenna. Captain, there was more to him than any of us expected. We were too busy to see past appearances at first, past our own struggles. None of us understood...."

His words drifted off, caught up in the recent past. Words seemed redundant then and would have been had his audience been aware of what the memory actually involved. As if realizing this, his eyes drifted back to the captain's. "Give him a chance. Don't waste time despising him for his past--"

"Like you did?" the captain countered, her quick wit ready to feel out the weaknesses of the opposing argument, certain there was a weakness there, aside from the fact that she still had the final say on the issue.

The challenge was accepted with a sober nod. "Like I did," he admitted. "Which isn't to say he hadn't made mistakes, punished himself for them more than he ever deserved, more than any officer or Maquis could--and took it out on everyone, especially himself." An inward flick of his lips followed that confession. "He'd be the first to own that."

"I don't think I'm ready to entrust my ship to Mister Paris' skills just yet, Commander."

Feigning ignorance, the demoted captain caressed the cup again. "The standard sentence for treason is generally six to eighteen months. How long does an admiral's son

get? Life?"

"That was uncalled for, Chakot--"

"That's how long we'll be here," he interjected. "You need a pilot, and he's the best we've got. Are you going to let him waste his education and ability in hydroponics or refitting the navigation array for the rest of our journey? You accepted B'Elanna in spite of your engineer's broken nose and her own past and already she's earned the respect of her staff--and your respect, because you gave her the chance to prove herself. Why not Paris?" He finally bore his eyes directly into hers, unblinking. "I know you served with his father, and I understand how service under a great commander breeds unflinching loyalty. But Tom Paris is not his father's son."

She almost grinned at that painful irony. "That much is evident."

"But I also know how difficult it is to be a son who can't, for whatever reason, live up to his father's expectations. Of course, my father wasn't an admiral who publicly broadcast his ambitions." Thinking for a moment, he continued, "Think of it like this: If the Maquis had not been officially outlawed; if, just say, the Federation supported the Maquis in the most covert way it could and you ended up out here with us when you were only trying to replenish our supplies, would you have reacted to the admiral's estranged son any differently?"

"I don't understand where you're going with this."

"I'm only trying to see where your prejudice lies, Captain."

"He's turned his back on Starfleet protocols once."

"And admitted his errors."

"How can I trust it won't happen again?"

"How can you trust *any* of us?" he returned and set his cup on the table. "All I'm asking is that you give him as fair a chance as everyone else, that you don't judge him too quickly. You've said that you never met him before we got here, but knew his record. Official records paint only in black and white." He grinned, more readily that time despite his frustration. "And Tom's the grayest person I've had the honor of knowing." The smile fell when he heard no response to that. "Maybe I'm asking too much of you, but I know it's not an impossible task. If you could get to know B'Elanna, you have a fair chance of getting to know Tom."

"Only a fair chance?"

"I never said he was the easiest person to know, and not for a lack of friendliness. Congeniality is natural to him. Getting beyond that is the challenge--and the reward. Give yourself the opportunity to get to know him. If anything, then for your life, you owe him at least that much."

For the first time since their conversation began, the captain's eyes softened--a bit. "Dismissed," she said quietly, then added in afterthought, "please." A nod was the only reply.

The hum of ship's systems reasserted itself in the room when the new first officer rose to stand. He almost spoke again, but closed his mouth before she turned his way. Turning in two steps, he hardly made sound crossing the room, so little so that the hiss of the door was a shock to the silence.

Captain Janeway shot her gaze to the hole in the door as it shut upon itself. "For my life," she whispered, and bore the returning silence for less than a minute. "Computer, where is Mister Paris?"

"Thomas Paris is in sickbay," came the reply.

Getting to her feet, taking a breath then exhaling it completely, Janeway exited her ready room and found Commander Chakotay at his station. She stopped at his knee and paused only enough to look at him through the corner of her eye. "I've never been one to leave a debt unpaid," she said and continued on to the turbolift. She closed her eyes for a moment once the doors closed.

But opening her eyes, telling the computer her destination, she felt her better senses begin to reel. *I have to be out my mind for considering this!* she thought, shaking her head. *How can I trust a man who turned his back on Starfleet, on his father, who had only just lost his wife? A man that jokes about his exploits. Maybe he found some sort of life in the Maquis, but there's no excuse for...*

The turbolift doors opened and the Ensign Kim entered. The young man turned his eyes down, perhaps too politely. "Captain." The doors shut.

"Where are you headed, Ensign?"

"Oh," he said, looking up as if to make eye contact with the computer instead, "Sickbay. Thank you, Captain." The eyes went down again as soon as the turbolift resumed its course.

"Not feeling well?"

"No, Captain. I wanted to look in on Lieutenant Paris."

"Lieutenant Paris?"

"I guess she's still being affected by what happened to us on Ocampo. Tom--Mister Paris, I mean--was worried that it might happen."

"He does seem to be protective of her."

"Yes, Captain."

Still trying not to be too obtrusive, she studied Ensign Kim. The young man put up a standard, but unconvincing front. *Though not bad for a beginner*, she smiled to herself. "You've gotten to know them since they came aboard."

Kim nodded. "Yes, Captain. They've become friends."

"Yes." When the doors opened again and they exited, she maneuvered herself so that she would walk beside him, even as she fought the temptation to question him. Kim often

had breakfast with the Parises and worked with B'Elanna quite a bit in engineering as they continued their repairs on Voyager. When the couple chose to eat in public, he usually sat with them while B'Elanna, as always, picked at her food and her infamous husband mercilessly teased Neelix about health hazards. Tom Paris, she had to admit, helped them get that food, but that attitude... She wondered what kind of influence they would have on the ensign.

Spotting the doors to sickbay, she reminded herself, *It's going to take time before we get comfortable with each other. But maybe Chakotay's right. I should at least try to look at this more neutrally, even if Mr. Paris is little help. We're going to be here a while after all....*

She drew a deep breath as the doors swished open, more secure in knowing she had at least one decent reason for going through with Chakotay's request. She knew already that the man would give her no peace if she didn't at least try, and in their situation, they needed as much peace as they could afford, as long as it didn't compromise her basic demands. With that in mind, she straightened and propelled herself forward.

She and Kim stopped as soon as they entered.

"Damnit, why won't you tell me what's going on?!"

"I haven't completed my scan, Lieutenant. Please try to relax."

"*You* relax."

Her chief engineer, already a model of forthrightness and iron-clad nerve, was trying not to cry. The former Maquis pilot was caressing the crown of her hair, which had come loose from her on-duty knot and was bunched up around her shoulders. He kissed her cheek tenderly, whispered something. Her small, strong hand clutched his arm as she nodded. He pulled up to steadily gaze into her wet eyes. "The Doctor's doing everything he can," he said, "and so will I. You have to believe that, B'Elanna. You have to believe it'll be okay."

"What the Lieutenant has to do is rest," said the Doctor crisply.

"No! I want Tom with me," B'Elanna said firmly, then shot her gaze to Tom. "You won't go."

"No way I'm leaving," he said, a piece of his cocky grin displayed for her benefit alone, "not with this Casanova and all his tools." Pleased that his sarcasm could still produce a little smile, he turned his attention back to the EMH. "Why don't you work on that treatment, Doc? I'll do my part and stay out of your way."

"She needs rest."

"She also needs me right now, so I'm not moving."

"Mister Paris--"

"This is ridiculous! You're wasting all this time over my staying with my wife. Don't you think there are more important things you should be doing?"

"You are distracting my patient."

B'Elanna snarled a breath and almost rose, but Tom caressed her shoulder back to the biobed. "And you're allowing yourself to be distracted from your immediate duty. Which do you think is worse?" His smirk in place, he held his footing and his stare. The Doctor blinked, then turned to his console with a huff of impatience. Tom turned back to his main concern and leaned over her with as tender a voice as before. "Arrogance doesn't guarantee stupidity," he told her. "If there's a way, he'll find it."

"Maybe this is my fault," she whispered. "Maybe we should have gone away like we'd planned. Even Chakotay said we might, though he needed us, that it'd be easier."

"Shhh, be quiet. We came to a compromise, remember? I don't regret that. We couldn't have foreseen what that thing would do to you, much less winding up out here in the first place."

"Oh God, Tom, I didn't know how much I wanted it until now! I did before, but now..."

As the pilot leaned over his wife again, embracing her, Captain Janeway leaned towards Harry. "Do you know what they're talking about, Ensign?"

Kim nodded, swallowed hard. "Kes told me she might lose it."

"Lose what?"

He turned to her, suddenly ignorant of the respectful distance he'd held. "You didn't know?" he queried. She turned her head once in the negative. "The Doctor didn't call you?"

The captain shook her head again. "I came on another matter."

Harry accepted that with a nod. "I guess we've all been busy....I was almost sure they'd said they were mates." Getting only a furrowed brow in response, Kim gave her a longer look. "Captain, you have to know B'Elanna's expecting, right?"

Janeway blinked.

"She seemed okay on her shift," Harry explained, "even when I talked to her at lunch. But after dinner, Kes said, she became disoriented. Tom had to carry her here, and then told Kes to tell me," he paused, looking over to the biobed, "they were sorry but couldn't come by."

She knew she was gaping. She couldn't help it. She knew she should have known, even if nobody had informed her directly. "When did all of this happen?"

"Kes told me only about ten minutes ago."

Janeway then felt a flush warm her cheeks, and she too looked again at the man and woman in the surgical bay, watched him calm her with quiet, private words, barely audible. She had noticed in passing that Lieutenant Paris had gained some weight since Janeway had first met her, but she'd never said anything, never asked, maybe even trained herself off the curiosity because of the woman's proximity to the Maquis pilot Janeway preferred to avoid. She'd heard Torres laugh once, though, joking about her

"noble mate," but she certainly didn't know to take it literally. For it all, the captain didn't know whether to feel stupid, angry or careless--and she didn't like any of the choices.

With a sudden need to do something, she stepped forward and met the EMH. "Doctor, what is her condition?"

"Lieutenant Paris is in no danger," he said without looking up. "My concern is for the fetus. It is more developed than a fully human fetus would be at this stage, but its heart rate is erratic. I'm afraid it might go into shock again. It might abort if we don't act now. So, if you don't mind, I have work to do. Unless you can do a better job of convincing Mister Paris I'll do everything I can for his wife and child. She does need to sleep."

The captain caught the eyes of the man in question and felt her insides jump at the intensity that greeted her. His features were set in expectation of a fight--though never so...afraid. A glance at her chief engineer--*Why couldn't I have imagined before that she might cry?*--proved she was outwardly calmer, though her hand firmly clutched her husband's.

"Doctor, I think B'Elanna won't rest *unless* Mister Paris remains, at least for now." Ignoring the Doctor's reply, Janeway moved beside the couple, placing a reassuring hand on B'Elanna's shoulder. "And he's right, too. The doctor will get to the bottom of this."

"Thank you, Captain," she said, slightly taken at the captain's sudden concern--appropriate as it may have been. "I hope you're both right." Turning her eyes away, and seeing the other visitor, she put on a brave grin and propped herself up a little more on the small pillow. Though she definitely didn't feel like company, she couldn't not make an exception for him. "Harry, why are you standing over there? So you can *not* visit?"

When Harry, grinning a little for her jibe, shrugged and approached, Janeway took the Maquis pilot aside. "Why didn't you tell us you two were expecting a child?" she asked gently.

Her quiet tone caught Tom's attention. The captain had spent the better part of their new situation well away from him--and he from her. He shook his head. "I guess we didn't think to say anything. We thought you knew from your intelligence, or that Chakotay would have said something."

"But you haven't announced it?"

He shrugged. "It was common knowledge with the Maquis. I guess we're not all exactly on a first name basis here yet--and we've all been busy, getting used to this, getting the ship back on its feet."

"We have been busy," Janeway acknowledged. "Too busy and a little too new to our situation to get a closer look at...more important things. We still have a way to go."

His mouth turned only slightly upwards. "So, Captain, you think you understand now?"

"A little. More than I did before. But you still haven't answered my question. Why haven't you or B'Elanna said anything?"

"I thought I already told you why."

Janeway sighed, trying to avoid her common frustration with him. "In the future, Mr. Paris, I'd like to be informed of--"

"Tom?"

Returning to his wife's side without excuse, he reclaimed her hand and smiled down at her. "Yes, B'Elanna?"

"Harry doesn't know how to play pool," she told him and relished in the responding smile, in spite of her swollen eyes and underlying fears. Then again, she was also well aware of Tom's fears, and that they were far more carefully displayed than hers could ever be.

"Well," he chimed, "we'll just have to take care of that, won't we? And since we have a fully functional holodeck..." His growing grin sparked in his eyes as he let the thought filter through his mind. "I think I'm going to enjoy this."

"You would," B'Elanna returned, gladly distracted by the idea. She could imagine the rations pool already.

"Excuse me," interjected the doctor, who appeared at the bedside with a hypospray in hand, "but this patient needs rest. I have grudgingly allowed Mister Paris to remain, but the rest of you must go."

That time, the Doctor had no arguments, only delay. Then sickbay's new nurse strode in and popped behind a workstation to pluck up a work coat. She glanced at the people in the room. "If you can't do something here, do something else," the matronly woman announced as she wrapped her ruddy hair up in a sloppy knot and tied it. That done, the woman stepped to the Doctor's side and looked up at him with more seriousness than Janeway, Kim and the Doctor had ever seen with Jenna Harlowe.

"Tell me what to do," she said.

With a blink, the EMH told her what he needed. Nodding, she turned and gave B'Elanna's hand a pat before moving around to the bio-controls. "Don't you worry, sweet," she said. "Baby's going to be just fine. She's meant to be, no question."

The Doctor's mouth straightened. "Mrs. Harlowe, might I remind you--"

"You're wasting your time on me," she cut in as she began tapping in the test scans, looking up only once to address the other distractions there. "Captain Janeway, Ensign Kim?" They looked and she flashed a sweet smile. "Get out of my office and stop lollygagging around like a couple of slugs. Some people here have real jobs, you know."

Without warning, B'Elanna burst out in a laugh and turned her head away. Tom also bent his head down to hide his snickers.

Janeway, shocked, caught Nurse Harlowe's wink.

Choosing to let her have that one, the captain turned and left behind Kim, glancing back to see Paris mouth "thank you" to his old friend, his eyes reflecting his sincerity. As

the doors closed behind them, Janeway's smile faded as the pilot's statements began to play through her again. "Do I understand?" she wondered aloud.

"Captain?"

She looked at Ensign Kim--she hadn't meant to speak--and decided quickly to elaborate. "Do you remember when we found you on the Ocampan homeworld?" The young man nodded. "I don't know if you are aware of what occurred before we could beam down to the planet."

"Tom told me he was pretty hard on you, Captain."

That surprised her, but she didn't address it. "Well, do you recall the briefing just after Voyager's leaving Deep Space Nine? --I think it should be said, I...Nobody really knew what had happened to Mister Paris after he left Earth. I'm still unclear on the details. What was said in that room was to the best of our knowledge at the time." Suddenly she stopped. *What am I defending, here? He did commit those crimes, nearly killed...*

Kim nodded, "I know Captain."

She eyed him, curious despite herself and thanks to Kim's unaffected responses. She could tell he knew more about them than she would probably manage, even with Chakotay reporting to her and Tuvok's watchful eye. "When did you know differently?"

Then, Harry's face reflected a little fear somehow, and his eyes shuffled across the floor. "B'Elanna corrected me. *Really* corrected me. I mean, all I did was mention Tom's record and the next thing I remember..."

48324-48485 (seven weeks ago)

"You ever talk about Tom Paris like that again, Starfleet, and you'll be kissing the floor of this tunnel! Sick or not, I'll throw you over! Do you understand me?"

Kim drew back at her sudden ferocity, frightened even more than when they first met, when she lunged at the door, at the Ocampan doctor--and nearly at him, too. "I...I'm sorry. I didn't know he was your friend."

"And you think it's impossible?" she challenged sardonically. "For a cocky, rebellious misfit without a shred of respect for anything but saving his ass and cashing in latinum? Is that what they told you?" She grabbed his arm. "Is it?!"

"Not exactly," he cringed. "But...you can't blame them, can you?"

Her eyes glistened with rage as she twisted the muscle of his arm. "Oooh, I can blame them! I can blame them for quite a few things--including your ignorance!"

"How is Starfleet supposed to know any differently?"

"If they had taken care of him when they had the chance, he wouldn't have had to endure Starfleet pigs like you! Or maybe you think he deserved your ridiculous code of honor?"

Harry Kim nodded, but not to her question. "He must be a pretty good friend, huh?"

B'Elanna barely had the strength to stand, but she climbed up a step so that her eyes could be level with his. "He's my husband," she told him coldly, raising her chin just slightly. Her lips curled into a grin as his eyes widened, "--and-my-mate. And you have no idea who he is aside from *that*." With that, she whirled and continued up the stairs, somehow strengthened by the challenge met.

Unfortunately, her companion had not been. He clutched the rail again, swaying, fighting to keep to his feet. Hearing his clenched moan, B'Elanna sighed. "Come on, Starfleet, I can't blame you personally for believing everything they tell you." He only nodded in reply and she stopped, lowered herself to a step. "Okay, we'll rest a while."

Sitting, nearly draped upon the unforgiving steps, Harry stole a glance at the woman above him. "How long have you been married?"

"Seven months," she answered.

Kim leaned his head on the rail, pulling in a slow breath. "Nice ceremony?"

She nodded, her face brightening a little to recall it. "Chakotay was so sure we were being impulsive," she mused, "and maybe we were, but he performed the service, anyway. Tom and I just knew we didn't want to be without each other...." Her eyes drifted off with a memory that seemed to be working a queer smile across her face, which flickered and faded as her hand drifted to her abdomen. Then she swallowed, hard.

Suddenly to Harry she seemed far less Klingon than he'd initially taken her to be: No Klingon he had seen had ever looked so wistful. Looking at her then, he remembered how her hair had shone when they were in the Ocampan light, heavy dark curls touched with sun sitting neatly around her shoulders. He remembered how she'd fussed with it, trying unsuccessfully to braid it neatly. Then there were her eyes, almost black but bright, almost like a bird of prey's. Now they were intense for thinking about the man she obviously loved--her mate. The hand that had gripped his arm with intent to bruise now laid gently across her waist, her fingers tracing a circle on her belly, which hadn't yet begun to reveal her pregnancy. He wondered why he wouldn't think of her as the mothering type. She definitely knew how to protect her husband. Harry shuddered to think of how she would defend her child, if it survived this.

Looking at her as she was lost in thought, he thought she was actually pretty, even though unusual.

B'Elanna took a deep breath. "He's okay," she said quietly. "I know he is."

"I'm sure he is," Kim affirmed.

She turned to her companion, her solid eyes blank for her lack of willingness to give in to tears. "We have to survive this, Harry. I don't want to leave him. I have our child, too. I have to get out of here, for all of us."

"We'll survive. Just give me a couple more minutes and we'll start again. I promise."

"Don't make promises you can't keep," she told him. "When you're ready, we'll go."

With that, Harry leaned his head against the rail. B'Elanna waited...and closed her eyes....

How many minutes passed, she didn't know, as waves of disorientation that came with the stillness made her head sway. Within the hollow rush in her ears, somewhere, she heard an echo; she realized seconds later that it wasn't in her head. Rather, it was familiar...and almost too good to be true. She almost didn't believe it was... Then it came again, more clearly: "B'Elanna!"

Knowing it wasn't just a noisy dream that time, she started up, clutching at the wall to hopefully hear her name again. It came a few seconds later and with greater insistence. Pulling herself to stand, she finally responded, "Tom! Up here!"

The pilot's feet darted up every other step, leaving the others well behind. He punched his communicator. "Chakotay, I see them! We're in the third tunnel."

There were more steps than he had at first thought, steps he couldn't climb nearly fast enough. He tried to concentrate, lest he trip. He'd be no good to her injured. He began to count the inclines...His eyes darted up and noted the form in the shadows that could not be mistaken. She was waiting for him.

"Don't wait for us, get them to safety," came Captain Janeway's voice.

"You don't have to tell me twice. Paris out."

He'd barely finished signing off when he finally reached them. In a sweep, he flew into B'Elanna's arms, pressing her body against his, her head against his shoulder, kissing her, her cheek, her temple, her hair, as she clutched him tight, burying her head in the curve of his collar.

"I was scared to death," he breathed into her ear, fighting back the tears of relief he could not afford at the moment. "Thank God you're okay." He pulled back to look at her fully, and then he noticed the wounds the Ocampan "caretaker" had inflicted; his breath caught up with him a moment later. "We've got to get you to the surface. You need help."

She placed a hand to his cheek, holding on to him with the other. Then she darted a stare down the steps. "You should take Harry up, Tom. He's in worse shape than I am."

Only then did Tom remember that they'd been after two people, and he cast a glance down the steps he passed only a minute before.

Meanwhile, the younger man regarded the older one, his sick, brown eyes still alert enough to study the object of so much misconception. After the said man kissed B'Elanna again, he descended the few steps towards Kim. Paris did not once question his wife's suggestion, but surveyed his assigned burden with a careless grin and the posture of a pirate. Kim had not noticed in the official portrait such a patent gleam in the older man's countenance, nor his confident stance, and he didn't know if that should frighten him or not.

Tom knelt on the step as the Talaxian and his Ocampan girlfriend passed to help B'Elanna. "Well...*Harry*, is it? Have you been putting the moves on my wife, Ensign Kim?"

Without an answer, the pilot draped Kim's left arm over his right shoulder and hefted him up. "You don't even have the answers to your final exams out of your head and you're already acting like a lieutenant on a Risian shore leave! Of course, if you *haven't* been flirting with her, I'd think you were even sicker than you look."

A few steps above them, B'Elanna snorted. "Tom, behave yourself."

"Yes, dear." The pilot felt his weight shift and nimbly repositioned his bearings and Kim's arm. "Come on, *Harry*," he intoned, belying the weight of his effort, "don't give up yet. I'm not letting you go anywhere--though a little help would be nice." He smiled when the younger man's feet caught the floor. "That's better. Now, just hold on."

Kim wondered if this was the same man he'd been briefed on as he struggled to do his part. *They could have been wrong*, he thought, *they could have just misunderstood. He's a Maquis and a noted criminal, but he can't be as bad as they say, can he? He doesn't even know me and he's joking around and helping...*

Harry continued to wrangle with his curiosity as they ascended the steep and increasingly unsteady stairway. It proved to be a good distraction. Before he had begun to think how much time had passed, Kim felt a solid hand around his wrist and squinted against the yellow sun of the Ocampan surface.

Paris pulled him until he was completely out of the hole they'd drilled. Once he was certain Harry was secured, the pilot returned to his wife's side. Kim's head lolled, hardly aware of who was supporting him then; before he knew it, he heard Paris scream and he hit the ground. A blast rattled the alien earth.... Paris' voice sounded again. "Chakotay? Tuvok? Janeway?"--then a shuffling on the dirt.

"Where are you going?" cried B'Elanna.

"I'm going back. I can't leave them....I'll see you in a while. --That's a promise. You watch."

The surface rumbled again and he felt the remaining man's hand grab his shoulder. But Kim hardly understood what was going on by then, or where Paris had rushed off to. He only recognized a familiar tingle, the little whine of the matter convertor; moments later, he welcomed the transporter beam like a sign from God. He lost consciousness before he knew he was in the transporter room.

The EMH's self-impressed face was what next met him, and he blinked.

"Welcome back, Ensign. You'll be happy to know I have extracted the foreign DNA, and you'll recover quite nicely, thanks to me. Remain where you are. I haven't finished my complete evaluation."

Harry looked across to B'Elanna, who must have been awake for a while, as she was dressed in the typical browns of the Maquis. In her utter stillness, she seemed impatient to go, to move. Her booted feet hung off the side of the biobed, twitching every time she heard a sound, and she picked at the hem of her untucked shirt with an unnervingly quick rhythm. Kim wondered what she was waiting for, then remembered. "I'm sure Paris will be okay," he told her.

Her black eyes were as glass hard as when they first met and thoroughly unconvinced. "I'll believe that when I see it, Starfleet."

Harry sighed, feeling that he had been shut out again. Leaning his head back on the pillow, he couldn't think of anything to say but, "Just trying to help."

B'Elanna did not move. "It's not your fault. Tom has to live by his principles, do what he feels is best. But I don't have to like that all the time, do I?"

"I thought you were angry at me again."

"Get over yourself, Harry. You're not cause of anything here." She silenced again as soon as she'd spoken out, and Kim struggled for something else to say. He didn't mind her not saying anything, but he could somehow feel that she was ready to explode, her energy seemed so tightly contained in her vigil.

But she only found her footing when the door hissed open, and she didn't move forward when she saw her husband enter with yet another burden sacked over his shoulder. Upon releasing it to a biobed, B'Elanna saw a flush of red hair, which Tom pushed aside to check a pulse. He opened one of her eyes with a finger, calling out, "Where the hell's the doctor?"

"What seems to be the problem?" said the EMH, appearing at his side.

"It *seems* to be a broken leg and a concussion," Tom told him. "I couldn't keep her awake. Her eyes are dilated and her pulse is slow. But you're the one with the tricorder. You tell me." As the doctor turned to his work, Tom turned to B'Elanna and grinned. "I told you so."

Kim was sure the smile on her face warmed the room at least five degrees when she said, "Shut up," and embraced him as soon as he moved into her arms and kissed. Harry bent down his head, clearing his throat even as he allowed them a bit of privacy.

He heard them laugh and glanced to see that he was the source of their amusement.

The pilot continued to hold B'Elanna around the waist as he regarded his former burden. "You all right, Harry Kim?"

Harry smiled a little. "Thanks to you."

"Don't worry about it," Tom replied in acceptance and pressed his cheek to his wife's head. "Besides, I owe you my life, too," he added, indicating B'Elanna, "for her." With that, he took the two steps over to the younger man and extended his hand. "Tom Paris. Honored to meet you, Ensign Kim."

"Harry, my name's Harry." He shook the pilot's hand. "I wouldn't have made it either, if not for B'Elanna."

"You helped each other out of there," Paris said. "That's enough in my book."

"Chakotay to Paris," came a sudden sound from the latter's communicator.

"What's up, Chakotay?"

"How are B'Elanna and the others?"

Tom looked at the doctor, who nodded from his patient's side--but before the EMH spoke, Tom reported, "Everyone here's okay, but Janeway's still out."

"Looks like the Kazon are going to attack the array. I've made arrangements with Tuvok for us to take them on. I need you to get to the bridge. We're going to have to pull a few tricks out of our sleeves to get through this one."

"Won't be the first time," Paris replied. "I'm on my way."

"B'Elanna," Chakotay continued, "there's nothing we can do for this old bucket, but Voyager might need your expertise. I've already sent Jenna and some others over in the scout. They'll be docking any second now. The rest of us will be there soon, after we give this cruiser a little work."

"Understood." Once signed off, she shook her head. "He's crazy."

"You're just realizing that?" Tom grinned and looked at Harry. "Stay here and brief the captain when she wakes up."

"But..."

"Just do it--Chakotay and Tuvok can't both be nuts."

With that, they headed out, catching the doctor's attention as they swerved around a console. "I haven't released you yet," he complained.

"Tough luck," B'Elanna retorted and strode out the door on Tom's arm.

The doctor turned back to Kim. "Is everyone here so difficult?"

"I dunno, Doc, I'm new here."

The moment gone, Kim's smirk disappeared as he watched the doctor continue the captain's treatment. He hoped the captain would wake up soon, that she hadn't been hurt too badly. She'd been nice to him when he first arrived and welcomed him with more than the standard greeting. She seemed to understand his excitement, too, and made no particular scene about it.

Harry felt a blow to the ship and grabbed the edge of the biobed instinctively. He wished he were on the bridge helping--doing his job. *Why am I following Tom Paris' orders?* Then he answered himself with the reassurance that Tom was right, the captain would need to be informed. It might not be the best thing for her to wake up in a fight only to find Paris at her conn.

Another blow, and then a shift. Even in the safety of sickbay, Kim could feel the ship being put into action beyond her design. He was certain the Maquis pilot had found the controls--he was as sure of that as he was of the crawl in his stomach. Inertial dampers went only so far, he knew.

"What's happening?" came the captain's voice as an explosion rumbled around them and the red alert resounded. "Ensign Kim, what's going on?"

Kim looked at her. "We have to get to the bridge, Captain. I'll fill you in on the way." She was wincing, limping, but healthy enough to ignore the doctor on their way out, so Harry thought better of offering his help.

Only minutes later, Janeway and Harry were seeing what they'd felt--the effects of Paris' fingers flying over the controls amidst a flood in an open COMM and a deadly firefight. His half-Klingon wife stood at his right shoulder, bracing herself with each move. Choosing not to ask the obvious, the captain propelled herself to her place. "Status?" she barked to Tuvok.

"Shields down thirty percent, the main Kazon ship shows little damage."

Kim had only reestablished himself at his station when he saw Captain Janeway and Tuvok rush back out to return to the array. As he reported the last volley, he saw B'Elanna squeeze Tom's shoulder assuredly and nod as one of the smaller Kazon ships disintegrated in the viewscreen. *They've been through a lot of this kind of action*, he thought, and shook his head to regain his concentration--he reported again--though concentration was becoming increasingly difficult. He never thought that a Starship could be flown like a squadron fighter. The turns in his gut proved that the designers of the ship hadn't thought so, either.

Paris continued on undaunted, even after Captain Chakotay arrived, then until the captain returned. The ship somehow stayed together during that time.

"Ready a tricobalt torpedo," said the captain before she'd reached her chair.

Kim blindly obeyed, though every nerve in him rebelled what his captain soon broadcast to the Kazon--to destroy the array, their only way home. Kim screamed inside even as he punched up a new display.

Then again, he didn't *have* to argue the decision.

"Are you insane?" was Paris' reaction as he stood away from the conn and moved up on her.

"What are you doing?!" joined Torres.

Janeway regarded them in turns. "I know you have friends and family that you want to get back to. So do I. But I'm not about to trade the lives of the Ocampo for our convenience. We'll find another way home."

B'Elanna stared in disbelief after her, then nailed Chakotay with her glare. "Who is she to be making the decision for all of us?" she demanded.

"She's the captain," Chakotay said to them both, and he seemed glad that his word was enough that time. It wasn't the first time he'd had to remind the two of rank.

Moments later, it was over. With a whoosh from deep within the ship, a strike and a dazzling display, the array was gone. In Kim's mind, it had been far too quick. In the full minute that followed, he shared the disbelief, the silence and the realization. Nobody there could take their eyes away from the space that the array had filled.

One moment it was there, there was hope and suddenly they were...lost.

Also sharing the view, Paris bent his head for only a moment, drawing in a slow breath, letting it out. For several seconds, he stilled, a wash of emotion crossing over his fair features before he controlled himself again. He then wrapped his fingers softly around Torres' hand. They said nothing when they looked at each other, nor did they address anyone else when they turned together to leave.

"Where are you going?" Chakotay asked, taken from his own shock for a moment.

Torres' face was pale, and Paris' was utterly blank. Somehow, his tone held no rancor when he said, "Away from here." Without more than a glance at Janeway, he continued with his wife to the turbolift. The doors' closing was their final word.

The following weeks were like a blur for Kim. With the repairs and the reassignments, he hardly had time to think or mourn or even look beyond his most immediate duties. He did take a moment of pleasure in B'Elanna's being chosen for chief engineer. After their experience of getting caught--and out of--that event horizon, she more than earned the spot.

Paris, like Chakotay, had sold B'Elanna to her post, but worked instead on Carey's bruised pride and the other officers' prejudices. In spite of Paris' reputation, Carey and the others seemed to listen. Then, a couple nights after her promotion, there was that private dinner--"Just a little entertaining, like we did at home," B'Elanna called it--the Parises held in their quarters. Even Carey left it sincerely impressed. As a result, it seemed, B'Elanna was more readily accepted than the captain or Chakotay could have expected. Harry wondered if they knew about the dinner.

Paris, however, kept his distance from anything Starfleet. When Janeway offered him rank and an official position--a junior lieutenant in the navigation department--he politely, though curtly, turned her down. He offered instead to help the Doctor and Jenna in sickbay and in Kes' suggested hydroponics bay. The pilot excelled in both arenas. Already, they were beginning to grow the fastest varieties of hybridized food they had on hand, and Paris quickly reacquainted himself with Starfleet medical technology. He'd used anything he could with the Maquis. Yet it bothered Kim to see him at such...secondary work.

He let it disturb him, nag at his conscience, for as long as he could bear, then finally made the decision to go talk to the pilot. Only when he touched the door panel did he realize he didn't really know what he was asking. Before he could come up with a line of questioning, however, the doors slid open and he was faced with Tom Paris' curious grin.

"Harry Kim, is it? Couldn't wait for breakfast?"

"Just dropping by to say hello. I know it's late...Maybe I should have called first."

"No, it's all right. Besides, the COMM would have woken B'Elanna. Come on in." He led the way and replicated, without offering, some coffee. "You pay up next time," he said as he moved to a chair and gestured to the adjacent seat. "And you'd better--I'm not anxious to try Neelix's sludge any time soon."

Once Harry was settled and had taken a sip from the demitasse, Tom leaned into the cushions, his eyes pinned to him. Only then did Kim notice that the Parises had continued

to redecorate their quarters in a most unofficial fashion....

"What seems to be the problem, Harry?"

Harry snapped his attention back to his host. He had to give him that: One minute joking, the next straight, and pointed in the middle of it all. Paris wasn't dressed for bed, but wore his usual vest, loose shirt and dark trousers. His long gray coat hung over the back of a nearby chair. His feet were bare. Judging from that and the PADDs on the table, Harry concluded that the man had been studying. "What are you reading?"

"Ah, well, some texts the doctor *suggested*. Field medic, he says, is a trifle, as was the bit of pre-med I had in the academy. He's probably right. And these are for the hydroponics project, which is turning out to be a lot different than raising roses or Avalaran broccoli. It's dry reading, but we'll use it." Paris grinned. "So, are you going to tell me? Or do I have to interrogate you?"

Harry took a breath. "This isn't your life," he told him. "You're a pilot, the best I've ever seen. You should be flying, not farming."

Tom smiled more warmly and sipped at the steaming cup before responding. "The captain, I know, was being completely fair by offering me a commission, and I was complimented, I really was. But to be honest, I don't want to be an officer again. I don't need it like I used to. Worse, what Janeway suggested wasn't flying, it was maintenance, and frankly, that's boring. Not that I crave action like I did before I'd actually experienced it. I've seen enough to fill most appetites. In any case, if the captain wants to offer me something more to my specialty, that's her decision. I'll keep up what I'm doing until then."

"Can't you talk to her? Maybe she'll change her mind."

He shook his head. "In spite of everything you've heard about me, I do have some dignity--and the captain has hers. Moreover, I'm not miserable. I know what I'm doing is important and necessary. I know I'm needed and doing my best, and that's enough for now."

"For now? What about later?"

Tom's eyes seemed to deepen, though his mouth held its ground. "I'm not a fortune teller, Harry. I've learned not to put too much stock in anything but the present. If an opportunity comes somewhere along the line, I'll probably take it. For now, though, I'll take care of what I have." He glanced back, through the open bedroom doors, where a slightly restless form lay. "If we've got to stay here, I'd might as well do what I can to keep us fed and healthy...build another nest."

"How's B'Elanna doing, anyway? I haven't had the chance to really talk to her about things. Not like she says much, though."

Tom turned back to his guest. "She's being strong, as usual. We miss our friends, of course, and our house, our homeworld. But engineering keeps her busy enough during the day and we've talked it to death at night. I guess we're getting used to this as an adjustment we'd planned to make but didn't turn out like we'd planned. It's not as though we had families to go home to, though."

"But your father--"

"Wouldn't speak to me the last time we saw each other. Can't say that I blame him. I'm not exactly his pride and joy anymore. He might have someday forgiven me for the lie. But with Mom gone and my more recent history, I don't think he'll have me back. As for B'Elanna, she and her mother haven't spoken in years, and they didn't exactly part on good terms, either."

"Don't you think they'd be worried? They're going to know our ships disappeared. They might even assume we're dead."

Tom sipped the coffee again, watched the steam rise off the dark liquid. His clever blue eyes seemed far away in that pause, a little sad despite his otherwise pleasant face. "We settled our accounts the best we could before we left Avalar, just in case," he said quietly. "We left our house and our loose ends in good hands, walked away as cleanly as we could." A grin ghosted across his lips, then faded. "No, Harry, B'Elanna and I are the only family we've got right now. We've accepted that."

"And your baby," Harry added and was cheered by Paris' brightening. "I guess you're excited."

"We were pretty hesitant at first," Tom admitted. "We wondered how we could bring a child into the life we were living--and *where* we were living. But we really did want to start a family once it was there. I guess we're not questioning ourselves about it now, or feeling guilty for an uncertain future. Funny how misfortunes like Voyager's can make things a little better in other ways." Tom's eyes shone with pride as he looked back to Harry again. "Yeah, I'm excited. Scared to death, but excited."

"You'll do great," Harry encouraged. "You're responsible and you know how to take care of people--and you love B'Elanna a lot, I can tell."

Tom nodded. "As the Klingons say, I'd be incomplete without her." A pause. "I'm happy right where I am. Maybe in time I'll be flying again, and honestly, I wouldn't mind. For now, I'm doing what I think is best. We need food and I intend to see we have it...."

A stir from the bed in the opposite room and a whisper of his name sent Tom without ceremony or excuse across and through the open door to his wife, while Harry, not shamelessly, watched Paris sit carefully at the bedside, smooth her hair and give her a kiss. "Harry and I are talking. Are we being too loud?"

"No," B'Elanna said sleepily. "I just wondered where you were." Eyes closing, she turned onto her side and placed her hand on his untouched pillow. "Come to bed soon, Tom," she whispered. "Just because you're not on a duty roster doesn't mean you don't need sleep, too."

"You're right, and I will. Soon, I promise." With that, he bent to kiss her again.

The small smile on Paris' face as he returned to his chair reaffirmed the point he'd driven before their interruption, but Harry wasn't done. "If I'm being too intrusive, please say so, but, I have to ask...." He paused, sighing to himself.

Paris smiled, understanding his friend's discomfort more than Kim knew. "It's okay,

Harry. I won't phaser you for being curious. The most I'll do is refuse to answer."

Harry nodded. "Okay," he said, meeting Tom eyes again. "Why are you avoiding the captain?"

To Harry's surprise, Tom only shrugged at the question, then replied, "Rank has privileges, Harry, especially with someone like me."

"Someone like you?"

"You know she served with my father." Harry nodded again. "He was her mentor, her first captain. And whether she admits it or not, I know she looks up to him as everything Starfleet is and should be. My father had a way of doing that with his students and his officers. He commanded respect. --Ah, I know what you're thinking, Harry. Trust me, being his subordinate and being his son are entirely different. Subordinates can request a transfer or quit. No matter where I am or what I do, I'll always be the criminal son of Admiral Paris. And in shaming him--many times over--I've violated her principles, the things she believes in and looks to as her own moral register. In a nutshell, Harry, I don't expect her to trust me. Maybe in time it'll change, but not over a cup of coffee. She's the captain, she needs time and she needs to get over my record and her first impressions. I can't do that for her, even it's my fault that she sees me as trouble."

"How do you mean?"

Tom put his coffee aside as he scrutinized the young man across from him. "Nobody told you about how our factions got together to come after you and B'Elanna?"

"Captain Janeway invited Chakotay and what representatives he chose to come aboard after the Caretaker released both crews," Kim stated, as if reading a report.

"Did you know I was one of those representatives?" Harry nodded. Tom didn't break his stare. "I insisted on coming," he told the ensign. "But after we arrived, and Tuvok showed his true colors, I had two issues eating away at me. When Neelix came on board, it got personal."

"How so?"

Paris turned his head at first as he thought of where to begin. It had been a pretty intense couple of days, that precursor to their winding up stranded on a Starfleet ship on the other side of the galaxy. But as he began to decide, the memory ironically made him chuckle. "We were all but ordered to go back to the Liberty, when..."

48324 (seven weeks ago)

"Look, Tom, all I'm saying is that maybe you two shouldn't meet. I get the feeling on Voyager that she didn't want to deal with you, and that might cause a conflict we don't need."

"She'll keep her cool," Tom assured him. "My father trained her well enough to do that. --And if she wants to let off a little steam, let her, Chakotay. She can't humiliate me any more than I've humiliated myself. I know what's happened since, so it doesn't

bother me. Frankly, I don't care about her, or Starfleet, or even being stuck out here anymore. I just want B'Elanna back. That's my only priority right now."

"I understand." Bracing his friend by the shoulders and looking solidly into his eyes, Chakotay continued, "We will get her back. The Talaxian's a fool, but we can trust him. I have a good feeling about that."

"And I've got the feeling that he's got more than water on his mind," Tom responded.

Chakotay gave a quick nod. "Maybe. But we'll worry about that later." Confident that he'd made the right decision, that Paris wasn't out of control, but scared just enough to be sharp, he gestured to the corridor. "Get some rest. I mean it. You'll be no good to B'Elanna exhausted."

Calling up that point worked; Tom patted Chakotay's shoulder in thanks before turning away to leave the bridge.

He tried not to hear the business of the ship as he crossed through its heart to the personal compartments, though that was hard to do. Repairs were a given on the endlessly battered vessel, especially then and with but half the personnel. Worse, the crewmember they needed most was the one he wanted most.

My God, if I lost her... blew into his mind, and he sped his pace to drill away the worst of it.

His hands buried themselves in the recesses of his coat pockets; he identified all the objects within with his fingertips, noting that he still had the holo-program chips B'Elanna told him to hang on to, a folder of various seeds from Avalar, as well as the vials of antibiotics he always had on hand.

He reminded himself to bring his med-kit when they left again, and he peeked around the corner when he heard a panel start to fry. Henley and Corbit were on it, but, as the ship's primary medic, Tom felt the need to ask anyway, "You guys okay?"

"We are for now," Corbit returned, not looking away from the minor meltdown. Shorts were common on the Liberty. Tom knew this particularly because B'Elanna did a good job of telling him about their frequency. For the mean time, though, no injuries meant no problem, so Tom left them to their work.

He was caught between restlessness and relief when he got to the "quarters" he and his wife shared. It was more like an anteroom to the corridor, thin and long with two spare chairs, a few bucket shelves for the few belongings they kept on board and a bunk just big enough for the both of them. As the chief pilot and engineer, not to mention husband and wife, Chakotay had given them the space. Not that they slept much while they were there. Being on the ship meant being busy, and neither of them bothered to make it their own save the room's only decoration--a picture of a beachfront city Tom had frequented on Earth. But he hadn't even put it there. That was B'Elanna's doing.

He heard a sound at the entrance and found himself only mildly surprised to see the Starfleet Captain peering around the column that partially enclosed the entrance. Somehow, he knew she would make some sort of contact. Their meeting on her bridge was a wordless one, though her eyes had certainly darkened with recognition; her utter

neutrality thereafter communicated enough to overload a ship's databanks. Whether her feelings there favored spite or curiosity, that was uncertain, but her visit seemed to favor the latter--for the present. Weighing that thought, Tom said nothing and waited for her to begin.

"I'm not disturbing you, I hope?"

"You are," he said, "but that's okay. Come in." Studying her perusal of the crescent room, he nodded to what he knew she was thinking. "It's not home," he said as he slid off his coat and draped it over the back of a bolted-down chair, "but we're never on board long enough to mind."

Her mouth twisted in acknowledgment of that truth, and, casually glancing towards him, responded, "Do you miss Earth?"

"I wasn't talking about Earth." He grinned slightly to see her mouth twitch at that, then continued, "For the last few months, home's been a little place on Avalor." Again, he'd surprised her, but shrugged it away as if it didn't matter. "Oh, sure, the Cardassians leveled the place the minute Starfleet stopped poking around; the sect broke camp, cut their losses for balmier climes. It happens. Anyway, once the smoke cleared, a few homeless stragglers like myself staked a claim to some carbonated territory--no charge as long as we did the renovations and our own gardening. Thankfully, I'd learned a little horticulture as a boy."

Janeway ground her teeth a little at the lightness of his tone. *Doesn't he remember how many lives were lost there, to the Federation's frustration and distress?* Thanks to her years of Starfleet training, she kept her expression impassive and made her move to steer the subject her way. "You do seem to be especially involved in this mission. You must be anxious to go back."

Not that Tom had forgotten the facade of a Starfleet shark. He reached into the vest pocket of his coat and tossed her the contents. "You'll probably agree it's a sentimental thing for a Maquis," he commented, "but I like it enough to keep on hand." He nodded to the small folder she'd caught. "Open it."

She drew up her brow--a gesture that said, 'Okay, I'll play your game for now'--and did as he suggested.

Within the small flat book was a sealed portrait of a couple. The man in the picture was the man in the room with her, and in seeing him there she was reminded once again that his rumpled blond hair had been let go a bit too much; his clothes, while not unconventional for a human male, were yet foreign to his breeding. The woman Paris held before him seemed only vaguely familiar, one among the few dozen Maquis she briefly reviewed before leaving Starfleet Headquarters.

The woman's brow caught Janeway's attention, though, and it came to her: The half-Klingon Academy dropout. She'd let her hair grow; her tunic suit was practical but attractive. She looked older, more assured. Different.

In spite of their official statuses, the characters in the picture played another mood. Her head reclined on the front of Paris' shoulder, slightly turned; their fingers were laced together, their hands resting on her abdomen, and what part of her insanely thick nut

brown hair that wasn't crushed against Tom's collar or bunched on her shoulders was caught in the breeze of that sunny day.

Perched against a mossy rock with the chartreuse-spotted scrubs of a mountain as their backdrop, the young pair seemed to fit somehow. In what way, Janeway couldn't pinpoint at first. The woman's expression was unlike anything Klingon, her smile being such a contented one in contrast to the sharpness of her dark eyes. The nature of Paris' grin was foreign to Janeway and--*What is it?*--his eyes radiated an intensity similar to the woman's. Yes, it was the look in their eyes that was so similar, striking, even, though Janeway couldn't guess what they might have been thinking.

Suddenly realizing that she'd stared at the portrait far longer than she'd intended, Janeway quickly returned her focus to the man across the room. "It's lovely," she commented, offering the folder back. When he made no move to claim it--he kept his eyes pinned to hers, that damnable grin cemented to his expression--she placed the folder on the nearby shelf. "Was it taken recently?"

He gave an apprising nod, continuing to interpret her minutely displayed reactions. "A few weeks ago, on Avarar. It'd just started to grow back."

"Have you known her long, the young lady?"

The same nod, though he allowed himself another unreadable smile. "I met her a few months after I joined Chakotay's crew..." He waited for the reminder of his alliance to sour the corner of her mouth again, "...and I married her six months after that."

This information did manage to break her facade. "She's your *wife*?" At the same time she wondered why that had surprised her so.

Tom held up a hand to display one half of the rings they'd shared. And he wondered how the otherwise astute captain hadn't noticed it before, the way she was eyeing it just then. Bringing his hand down, a gleam pervaded his stare. "Her name, by the way, is B'Elanna."

The game was up, and Janeway had to think to close her jaw. The pieces finally put together, she regained her former face and proclaimed the obvious: "Torres. The missing Maquis engineer."

To his credit, Tom's facade remained undamaged, even with the reminder of his wife's current status. He wasn't about to give anything but what he chose to that woman. "Thus, my involvement, Captain," he stated simply, his last word more a condescension than a recognition of rank.

That, too, played a subtle dance on her features and her tone. "Why the game, Mister Paris? Is that all people are to you?"

"I could ask you the same thing. My turn. Why did you come here?"

"I thought we could talk."

"Oh," he chimed, only a touch in the interrogative as he crossed his arms and leaned himself back against the bulkhead. In position for a chat, he took a breath. "About what?"

"Honestly, I don't know. I was curious as to how you were doing."

"And what I was doing."

"I've had enough reports about your adventures."

Tom laughed. "*Adventures?* Is that what the record says?" Before she could answer, he said, "It's been a busy year. But I've packed more real life into that year than in all the ones before it. If that's what you call adventure, fine. That's your word."

Janeway was more dismayed than when she first saw him. "You see the rebellion--the stealing, the fighting, the violence--you see that as real life?"

"I never said that," Tom replied, patronizing to the limits of her patience. Again, he called the bluff. "You look at me, Captain Janeway, and see Satan fallen from the comforts of heaven, only to glorify hell? Is that it? You're trying to qualify me according to Starfleet protocols and principles, and though that might be helpful in acquainting yourself with a stranger, there's no guarantee that your profile is accurate. My *real life* is a hell of a lot more than a few kilobytes filling up HQ's archive or a stern lesson to cadets."

The pilot pushed himself off the wall and took four long strides forward, coming close enough fast enough to make Janeway reflexively step back. "When or if you open your eyes beyond the discipline that's made you a good captain, then you'll see what's really important--and what's important, even to someone like you, is not my reputation, or my official record." He shrugged, backed off in a languid step. "Until then, I don't expect you to understand."

"What don't you expect me to understand?"

He found her eyes again and released his facade. The smile dissolved. "Everything for now."

He would say no more. Janeway correctly took it as her dismissal.

The captain almost thought she might be able to distract herself from Paris' words; for a few hours, business made her successful. The arrival of the Ocampan, however--thanks to Neelix's selective information and risky maneuvering--and the Ocampan's reaction to Paris piqued her attention again.

It was Kes, who, after being questioned and having offered her help despite her lover's objections, which earned the pilot's eternal gratitude. Upon hearing the plan, Tom bowed his head and took her hand gratefully to thank her--then glanced an amused grin to the Talaxian, who had become noticeably uncomfortable at his brotherly gesture.

"Don't worry Mr... --Neelix, is it? Don't worry, Neelix, I'm no threat to you. I'm an old married man and I plan to remain one. And it's more likely I will, thanks to this lady."

Kes sighed with understanding. "You must be very worried," she said. Then, more assuredly, "I know she's all right. It hasn't been too long, and my people will take care of her, I promise."

Tom nodded. "I hope so. No, I'm pretty sure, myself, hearing what you've said."

"How long have you been married?" she asked.

"Seven months."

"Seven months," Kes breathed. "Among my people, that's a long time."

"Mine too," Tom smiled, knowing she wouldn't get the joke. He glanced at Chakotay, who was grinning at the quip. "You want to bring Kervil?"

"I think we can handle our end of it, don't you?" Chakotay looked at the other captain, who seemed a more intent on the pilot than the plan. "If that's all right with you?" he asked, meaning the inclusion of a man she was clearly uncomfortable with.

"You are free to choose your own representatives, Captain," she said rigidly, "and you have. I won't argue with that."

"Somehow, I hear a 'but' in that," Tom commented, turning his head and a squinting stare her way.

She met it. "You're quite correct, Mister Paris."

"You're welcome to say it, you know," Tom told her. "But let me save your breath. I'm too personally involved to think objectively--a Starfleet kind of quandary, proven over again by our adventure on the surface à la Mister Neelix."

His reward for correctness was an icy stare. But she did confess it. "You're right. I can't trust what you'll do."

"What I'll do is get B'Elanna to safety, and your man, too, if I can. That's a guarantee."

"Maybe, but by what means?"

"Oh, go to hell!" he retorted, glaring hard at her. "If you think I'd endanger my wife or your ensign, then you really are as blinded by your reports as I thought."

Janeway shook her head. "And you're more like our analysis than you want to believe."

Tom let out a short, frustrated laugh. "My God, what have they been saying about me? For the first time, I really want to know."

Her eyes narrowed, her lips pursed into an ironic grin. Clearly, she wanted to tell him, if only to acknowledge the fact that her impressions of the pilot, no matter what changes his life had undergone, were yet in agreement with Starfleet's. "What I know is that..."

48314 (four days ago)

"...he, in short, talks a good game. As we have seen in these many reports, he likes games--and definitely cannot be trusted. Our most recent intelligence confirms that he has been directly responsible for more than fifty raids along both the Federation and Cardassian borders." Janeway paused there to check her resentment, drawing a smooth breath. "As Captain Chakotay's pilot and captain of this refitted Barolian scout ship, he

has also been involved in the destruction of over fifteen Cardassian vessels and the disabling of an unknown number of ships. He has been known to purposefully trip sensor grids so to hide and attack our own shuttles for their cargo, as Commander Cavit has recently discovered.

"In spite of his alcoholic tendencies and reckless behavior, do not doubt that he is very, very, clever. We'll be keeping an eye out for Paris and his scout, which has recently, according to our intelligence, been equipped with cloaking technology." She tried not to sound irresolute as she communicated that last part, though the idea made her shudder.

All but finished with her first briefing on Voyager, Janeway's eyes circled the room, refreshing the shameless pride she felt in her new crew. Cavit, her first officer, was personable enough, but had been around the block enough times that he knew what limits were, particularly of late. Then there was young Harry Kim. So good, so his records said, yet so much to learn, Janeway was anxious to see how he would develop as an officer. For a recent graduate, he did know his job. Time would relieve his nervousness. Stadi and Fitzgerald she knew less about, though she noted the latter's interest in her last report. Dr. Fitzgerald had been at Caldik Prime at the same time as Thomas Paris had. Perhaps she might talk to him about that.

Concluding the meeting, she opened the room for comments and questions. Fielding a few short clarifications, she was aware of but did not act upon Kim's troubled expression until after she dismissed her new staff. "You looked like you had a question," she observed, gesturing him back to the table.

Ensign Kim seemed to struggle at first, trying to put his many thoughts into a single query. "Well," he began, "maybe I'm just not able to see it, Captain, but..." He paused, but only shook his head in the end. "I can't understand how the son of an admiral could end up like what you said--an alcoholic and a mercenary. It just doesn't seem right, especially in the pictures. He...he didn't look like the sort of person who would do that kind of thing."

"I understand," Janeway said, meaning it. "I often wonder how such a bright kid could have let himself go. I suppose one can only say that it can happen and it did." She sighed silently at the memory of Admiral Paris' extraordinary pride--in everything his son had once achieved.

When she heard what that son had turned to, she, too, tried to excuse it. Then the notorious pilot, flying his equally notorious craft, raided the vessel she'd been traveling on during a survey of the DMZ border, about a week after the Federation officially outlawed the Maquis. The Starfleet vessel was left adrift, its supplies and medicine mischievously transported onto the outlaw pilot's ship.

That day, Thomas Eugene Paris not only proved the truth, but reinforced it, and Janeway thereafter could only despise the man who once had so much potential--and pity the father that wanted so much for him, who had loved his son so outwardly it made her miss her own father all the more.

But Harry Kim had not been on that ship. "Could they have been wrong about him somehow?" he asked. "Maybe they've found the wrong man?"

Janeway shook her head. "I'm afraid not, Ensign Kim. Lieutenant Tuvok might not

have had a lot of information about him, but he would not have confirmed Mr. Paris' actions unless he knew them to be accurate."

Kim sighed. "I guess I'm just having a hard time believing it. Maybe if I hadn't seen his picture. He looks like, well, like the sort of person you'd like to know, you know?"

Before Janeway could nod in agreement, Cavit chimed in. "Thomas Paris? Trust me, Ensign, you'd do best to stay clear of that criminal, no matter how nice he *appears*."

Kim reflexively straightened. "Yes, sir."

Cavit seemed to need little to remind him of his own experience. "For the purpose of time, we didn't go into the details of my *crossing paths* with Mister Paris a couple weeks ago." He turned his head back and forth, as if still not believing his experience. "The way that cocky jerk spun me like a top in his impulse wake before beaming off my cargo and sailing away was bad enough. He could've gotten me killed. But it was what he said..."

48259-48308 (2.6 weeks ago)

"Thanks so much for the plasma infusers and the injector coils! They'll make the perfect present for a special someone I know. Those ion particles are perfect, too, though the canisters really don't match. Don't worry, I'll find them a nice, new color-coordinated home."

The open COMM line did not ignore the wicked chuckle that followed the tirade. Cavit, in addition to the pressure of the G-forces he was enduring in the inverse spin, grew redder still with rage. "Paris, I'll...hunt you down...for this! I swear...I'll find...you!"

"I'm sorry you feel that way, Commander Cavit," droned the pilot. Cavit could almost hear the other man's insane grin. "Maybe next time I'll bring you a present you'll like."

"What I'd like...to see is you...in prison, you...bastard!"

"Now, you don't need to insult my mother because my present's not as nice as yours," was Paris' reply. "But I won't take it personally. --There, that's the last of it. Merry belated Christmas, Commander Cavit, and may your Yule log bring you glad tidings!"

"This isn't...over, *Paris!*"

"But I'm afraid it is. --Too bad, 'cause I know we were having so much fun. I will go away with good memories of our time together, though. And you know what sticks out best?"

..."Best of all, he actually overloaded his own shield array trying to transfer warp power to it. All I did was pop him in the inverter--and he still didn't know what he'd done. It was almost too easy."

Tom chuckled again as he fiddled with the cases he'd decided to take with him, enjoying the responsive laughter and various comments echoing through the small cargo bay. "In any case, Chakotay, now that I've deposited my little trove, I'll be heading home."

"Commander Cavit's unhurt, I hope?" Chakotay asked, spotting a singular sparkle in his friend's eye, one that manifested itself only when Tom had been particularly devilish.

Tom shrugged. "I left him spinning, but undamaged. He'll get back to DS9 without much trouble--just a little late. His pride, however, I can't say fared as well." He peered askance at Chakotay's unbroken stare. "Don't worry, Captain," he assured, "I'm not about to incur any more official excuses for their poking around. But I do like to remind them that we're not a bunch of pissed off farmers."

Chakotay laughed. Neither of them were farmers, and he knew full well that Tom had a direct aversion to killing. Sure, he'd make them angry, render them off balance, tease them while he nabbed their supplies, but Tom was happy to leave the gore to the more combative members of the Maquis, whom the Liberty had come to support more than lead in recent months, thanks to that same pilot and his tricky little ship. "Good, and good job. We've been needing these injector coils for some time."

Tom nodded. "It should make B'Elanna happy. She hates this ship enough without having the rig the core every time we go to warp."

The captain nodded, knowing without insult that B'Elanna truly did despise the Liberty's battered engines, and having to put them together again after every firefight. It was the only time anymore that he would see her totally off guard--and unguarded--as her curses would send the Klingon High Council to shame. As for the man beside him, that loss of control was much more rare, and he found himself, giving his pilot a long, careful stare for that latest coup. He had to watch Tom, as his reactions could be so minute, especially of late, after they made their decision to leave. At the same time, he was pulling supply raids as though he still had nothing to lose. Not that Chakotay ever did quite understand how Tom ticked, much as he had come to know the man. "Sometimes I wonder if you're still in this for her or for the cause itself," he mused, only half-serious.

"I'm here because I want to be, you know that," Tom replied, getting the lightly put bait but feeling a need to answer seriously, "and so is B'Elanna. That said, we'll be pretty much out after the next Badlands run. We do have our priorities and we've done everything we could to give you backup, so you should be all right. Even more, Chakotay, gone doesn't necessarily mean uninvolved. I hope you know that."

"I understand completely," Chakotay grinned and clapped Tom's shoulder. "And thanks, Tom."

As soon as he was done strapping together his cases, Tom looked over to the ship he and his wife had so lovingly put back together from near scrap--with scraps. "How's it going?" he called out.

"Almost done, Tom," Dalby called from the open hatch. "Five more minutes."

With a nod to himself, he got back to his feet and swung on his coat. Running a hand through the hair he knew needed a trim, he looked at Chakotay. "So when should we meet you?"

The captain gave that some thought. "Last time I saw B'Elanna, she looked as though she could use some rest."

"She left yesterday?"

"Last night, Andre took her--and she made it home fine," he added, knowing Tom would ask. "We'd put a lot of time into the phaser array when I thought she looked a little drawn, a little queasy. Nothing out of the ordinary, Tom, just the body's first adjustments--or so Jenna says." Chakotay decided on his initial idea. "I don't plan on shipping us out to the Badlands for another week or so. Why don't I contact you once we're set to leave?"

"Are you sure?"

"I think we can handle things here. Besides, Tom, it'll give B'Elanna all the time she needs to finish that new circuit core and for you two to have some rest before this mission. --Don't say anything. You deserve it. If it hadn't been for the two of you, we wouldn't be getting this break. Take the time while you have it." Chakotay put a hand on Tom's shoulder again and smiled. "Now, get the hell out of here, Paris."

"Yes, sir," Tom responded and turned on his heel.

Within minutes, the deck was cleared and Tom fired up the scout's engines, grinning, as he always did, to hear the pride of his innovations and his wife's genius meld into a steady rhythm as he tapped in his coordinates. The scout wasn't Starfleet issue, that was certain, but the hum of those engines had become as welcome to him as any ship's. And though she'd been a decent craft fifteen years ago, she could maneuver with the best of them. She just didn't look the part, was all.

"Paris to Liberty. I'm ready to get going--how's the weather out there?"

"Clear as Tarkelian glass," Chakotay answered. "Looks like the Cardassians are enjoying some fish juice this morning. Keep your eyes open anyway, Tom."

"Will do," came the pilot's crisp response. "See you soon, Captain, and don't forget to write. Marseilles out."

The "weather," in fact, and to Tom's mild surprise, was very clear. In spite of the fact that his coordinates had him skirting only a light year away from Federation space, he didn't catch anything on his sensors as he engaged the cloak except a few nearby Maquis ships further into the DMZ. Though a blessing in itself, it gave the preternaturally instinctive pilot a chill.

It's too quiet. They're up to something, or something's in the works. I've never seen this route so clear. He drilled his mind for explanations as he rechecked his sensor scans. *We had heard of a new Starfleet ship. It couldn't be finished already, could it?*

Making a mental note to talk to B'Elanna again about it, as she was the one who'd heard the news first, Tom leaned back in his seat. As he ran his hand over the edge of the panel he and B'Elanna finished together, he grinned to himself to recall what his life had become. He never expected that he might have found a life in the overwhelming struggle that he had involved himself in. Ironically, he found some peace in that war, when he had all but completely given up on the idea that he would ever be happy, truly happy, before that war began.

Amazing what an akoonah, some willpower, work and an incredible woman can do for a man, he grinned to himself as he adjusted his coordinates.

Past the Jinaran system was Avarar, certainly the last place Tom Paris ever expected to call home, considering that the nightmares inflicted upon him there still came back to haunt his conscience from time to time. But Alorek was dead, and the remaining Cardassian patrols in the area had finally put the planet to coals and left it that way.

Ten days later, he and B'Elanna had arrived to help the few survivors. Not a day later, they'd agreed to stay and rebuild enough to suit their needs, though not enough to attract any attention. The cell had moved on, taking its base of operations to an undisclosed location several light years away. It wasn't their cell, so they didn't know for certain where they'd gone, but at least they took the Cardassians with them.

Making a pact to use more discretion in their activities, Avarar became a quiet little haven to its mere fifty-one citizens. Tom faithfully followed through with that agreement when he "parked" the Marseilles in a crudely disemboweled cavern and cut all his ship's systems but the warp signature mask. Grabbing his gear and what cases he could easily carry, he jumped ship and headed out of the cavern, stopping only to swoop up a few wildflowers in his free hand.

They'd called it "nestmaking," he remembered with a smile, when they restored the little adobe A-frame near the foot of the mountain, which stood about fifty kilometers south of the city, now defunct, and only a kilometer east of the farmhouse he'd stayed in during his recovery. The old house belonged to the same property. In claiming it, he felt he was somehow paying Mila back for her sanctuary. Not far from the farm was where Tom met Alorek; there, his life had finally, irrevocably, changed.

Despite its simplicity, Tom's heart beat to see his home again, even if it hadn't been very long and he knew it. He'd not been away from B'Elanna for more than a couple days since they'd met. Despite their own positions and duties inside the Maquis, once they'd come together, neither of them enjoyed separations. Too many things could happen, they knew--and thought about especially of late, after they had learned about the baby.

Who would have guessed I'd so cherish this place, he thought, yet knew it was a part of why he had remained with the Maquis after his first visit to the planet--he had indeed come to truly understand the love of a home, in the best and worst possible ways.

He turned the knob on the old-fashioned door he'd designed and hung and felt a flush of joy at the sight of his wife, who was wearing the same red tunic suit she had worn at their wedding, sitting on the floor in the back of the main room--her "office," as she liked to call it. Neatly stacked components, arrays, ISO chips and matrices surrounded her. Streams of Grinaraan music floated through the room as she worked, intent on her latest piece of necessary brilliance--the new circuit core for the shield array she had all but installed on Chakotay's beleaguered ship. Distractedly, she flipped an errant lock from her face with a jerk of her head. Tom smiled warmly at the familiarity of that gesture.

As the music faded, he took a breath. "I'm home," he said. Waiting only long enough for her to turn and stand, Tom met her at the middle of the room with a deep kiss and long embrace, pressing himself warmly to her. With her in his arms, with her scent and taste reclaimed, he felt his longing quickly drain and a smile cross his mouth as he nuzzled a kiss on her neck.

"It's about time you got back," she breathed into his ear.

"Traffic was lousy," he returned and gave her neck a quick nibble. She gasped and spanked him. Chuckling, he peered over at the organized chaos she'd been working on. "Hmm, what's for dinner?"

"Oh, just a little something I've cooked up," she said, joining his mood, "some fried modulators with plasma gravy. Nothing special."

He gave a single nod, his eyes shining into hers. "Got you something."

B'Elanna had seen the flowers. He always brought them when he could. "They're beautiful, Tom, thank you." Taking them in her hands, she breathed in their scent. "Where did you find them?"

"You really haven't been out, have you? There's a patch of them near the cavern."

"Really? I didn't notice them when we left last week. But we're not used to this planet yet."

"I wish we could know everything that grows here," Tom said, rubbing a thumb across her belly. "I really do, B'Elanna. I like coming home to this place."

"I know. I do too."

He rubbed his nose against hers. "Got you something else."

"Really?"

"Among other things, I managed to pick this up at the last market."

B'Elanna looked down at the shining new instrument in his hand. "A duotronic probe!" she said as Tom gently turned it over to its new owner. She shook her head and smiled up at him. "Well, it's not as romantic as flowers, but I admit you think of everything, Tom Paris. How did you know?"

"I heard Bryce mention last week that you'd need a decent one when you installed the new shield array," he explained, "so I did a little looking around and found a shuttle with some shield equipment in cargo."

"You stole it for me?"

"Trust me, it was in the hands of the village idiot. I couldn't bear to think of the abuse this poor, innocent probe would have suffered in such unqualified hands." She gave him a long stare and he returned it with a laugh. "How else could I have gotten my hands on the latest model of Starfleet shield maintenance equipment? Walk into the Daystrom Institute and ask for it?"

"I wouldn't put it past you!" B'Elanna smiled and wrapped her arms around him. "I missed you."

"Me too," he whispered, breathing in her scent again as her warmth filled him. He closed his eyes, feeling all his muscles relax. *Yes, it is very good to be home.*

"Have you eaten?" she asked after a minute, finally relinquishing their embrace. He shook his head. "Well, I have some rice and caltola--I didn't eat very much."

"Sounds good. I'll warm it up, and maybe you'll get hungry, too."

"Actually, my appetite has been coming back."

"Thank God," Tom said as he entered the kitchen. He smiled at the view, which, like most of Avalor, had finally begun to recover its former beauty. *Putting the window there had been a good idea, after all*, he thought as he placed the before mentioned meal on a warmer. "I thought you might disappear from sight, you'd eaten so little. As it is, you'd have to run around in the shower to get wet." Hearing her giggle at that, he gave the rice and odd little greens a stir, glanced back at B'Elanna, who stood in the doorway, watching him. "I worry about you."

"I know."

"Do you mind?"

She took another step into the room. "Well, it was a change of pace," she grinned, then added, "Actually, I consider it a compliment--and proper for a mate. Not many people really thought to be so protective of me before you came along. I guess they thought I could take care of myself."

"And they were right. Doesn't mean you should always have to." Tom knelt to fiddle with the replicator beneath the worktop. "Xianos gravy," he commanded, giving the machine a little kick. "It's always good with caltola," he said and pulled the steaming bowl from the port.

"I knew I'd forgotten something!" she exclaimed, throwing up her hands with a short laugh. "I thought I'd remembered all the ingredients. I knew it was missing something even as I was eating it. Little wonder I let you cook."

Feeling her amusement as much as he'd heard it, Tom gazed up at her, as if making sure he'd memorized every line about her. When her eyes caught his appraisal, he watched her smile warm, her expression, so purely beautiful to him. *Home*. A beat thumped in his heart, and he drew a silent breath, his stare unabated.

"I'll write it down for you, if you want," he said softly. "Come sit with me? I can tell you're hungry."

"Maybe a little," she admitted and moved to get two plates for the table.

He took her to see the flower patch after dinner, holding her hand as they treaded the rocky terrain he planned to cut a path into when, of course, he could get his hands on the equipment to do so. He didn't know why he wanted to do it, though. He and B'Elanna, when her time came, planned to leave the Demilitarized Zone for the safety of their child.

It had been a difficult decision, for both were not a little guilty at leaving Chakotay and the others behind. Their captain agreed, albeit grudgingly, that it would be the best for all involved. In preparation, Tom and B'Elanna had spent a good deal of time training

and recruiting. They weren't about to leave Chakotay in a lurch.

The only problem in their plan was that they still had not found a place to go. There were not many places untouched by Tom's reputation, although Bokora practiced a pleasing non-interference with their immigrant population, according to their neighbor, a native of that world. Even their cousin K'Karn had agreed it would be a good haven for the two. The Bokorans were largely peaceful, highly intelligent, gracious people whose planet was just outside Federation space, about eight light years away from Starbase Two-Fourteen. The only problem was expense: The Bokora had a stable, yet confusing, capitalistic system; neither Tom or B'Elanna liked dealing in straight currency. With not long to go before they had initially planned to leave, however, the diversely populated Bokoran colony of Alsarad was beginning to convince them to stop minding.

Tom still wanted to clear those rocks away. Tom still wished Avalar was safe enough to...

"Torres to Paris," B'Elanna called teasingly and he snapped away from his thoughts. "What's going on in there?"

Tom shook his head. "Just thinking."

"About what?"

He sighed, put his arm around her. "I wish we didn't have to leave. I wish we could make some sort of provision to stay."

She nodded. "And if you thought for a moment you could be sure the Cardassians would keep their distance, we would. I know, I do too." She gazed up at him, seeing the struggle playing out in his face. "Why don't we take the chance, then? Neither of us really want to go. Why don't we make the provisions we need and just stay?"

"I don't want our child growing up in a firefight," Tom told her. "And thinking about... The nightmares are bad enough, B'Elanna. I couldn't stand the thought that what happened here before might happen again, to you or the baby. I couldn't..."

"I know," she said softly, pressing her fingers against his lips. She knew his reasons all too well. She'd seen first hand what those horrors had done to him, worked with him and the akoonah to help him sort out his still tangled emotions--not to mention sort out some of hers as well. Yet despite time and effort, Tom remained vulnerable to those memories. B'Elanna suspected he always would be. Knowing that, she could hardly blame him for his insistence. "I don't think I'd sleep well at night, either, if we were in the middle of it with our child in danger."

He only nodded.

Her stare was like an anchor as she placed her palm upon his cheek. "We'll find a home, someday. And it'll be right for us. With any luck, we'll be able to come back."

He grinned, knowing how much she treasured Avalar, too. It'd been her idea to stay, after all, not long after they had come to help the few survivors of the attack. She had laid the first root, said it would be good for them both to take that blighted world as their own, that it would help them heal. He had followed, despite his memories and because

he trusted her. B'Elanna was the more practical of them, he knew. He was proven correct in very little time. Staying there to witness that world's resurrection *had* helped to exorcise some of those demons--not all, but the worst of them. Rebuilding on Avalar had been their best revenge for its annihilation and they knew it.

"We have time to decide," she told him, "We don't have to leave immediately, even after the baby's born, as long as there's no action or base camps in this sector. And when we do have to leave, we will make a new home. No matter how much we love Avalar, this is just a place, right? We'll find another."

"B'Elanna," he whispered and took her hand to kiss the fingers that had stopped his mouth, "you know my home's with you, and you're right. We made this place together, and we'll make another. But this was our *first* place. I guess I've become too attached. I don't want to leave at all."

She smiled. "I'm glad I'm not alone."

He looked at her askance. "Isn't there something you can concoct that could move the planet somewhere else?"

"I'm afraid not," B'Elanna returned, leaning her head against his shoulder as they continued their stroll. "Can't you rig the Marseilles' tractor beam to pull it?"

"If only I could! I can see Schiller already, marching out of his house and pissed off for losing another year's worth of crops if I tried." Moments later, Tom's smile grew bittersweet. "I should have laid low. It's tricky enough being my father's son without the reputation I have."

"You didn't know then that we'd be making this kind of decision," B'Elanna told him. "And don't think you're the only recognizable face in the crowd, or the only culprit. I was with you on most of the raids that made that reputation, and I planned quite a few, if you recall."

"Oh yes, I won't forget them too soon." He chuckled. "An admiral's bad seed and a half-Klingon academy dropout, partners in crime. We really are a pair."

"We certainly are."

Ahead of them sat a break in the rocks where the sun still shone; bringing B'Elanna into the warm, orange light, Tom looked out onto the vast plain beyond them. His heart ached anew at the thought of leaving, and looking down at his wife, he knew hers did too. They had built their house there, made their child there, watched the planet bloom again from the ashes the Cardassians left behind.

A breeze passed though the gorge, throwing a few stray curls into her face, and she flipped them away without thinking. In that little moment, Tom promised himself he would never forget how she looked just then. Those little moments had become so important to him--those specks of time that reminded him how good his life was. He had come to require little but that. The big picture was a distortion, which distorted the rest.

His eyes still pinned to her, he spoke again. "Why don't we see how things play out

before we leave? Keep our eyes open for now? If the action swings back our way, then we'll set sail."

B'Elanna's mouth turned up again, her unwavering gaze grew wiser. "How did I know you'd come around?"

Knowing full well they could be contacted at any time to regroup with Chakotay's ship, Tom and B'Elanna took advantage of the time they had. They spent their morning and evenings at work on the new arrays, their afternoons on long walks and visits to their neighbors. They gathered seed if they happened by some and observed over the course of their stay Avalar's miraculous springtime. Some days they stayed at the house, considered adding a section, planned a walking path, swam in a nearby lake, planted those seeds or simply enjoyed the view from a bench they built from the ruins of another, under a billowy tree they had transplanted from the less damaged western continent.

For eight deliciously long days, they could pretend that there was no rebellion, no enemy to fight. For the time, they were but a young married couple from the colonies, expecting their first child and enjoying the life they'd made for themselves.

When their signal came, however, they got themselves dressed in their working clothes, loaded the ship, cleaned up the house. They let their neighbors know they'd be gone, asking Schiller, their nearest neighbor, to look in on the garden from time to time. They completed, they locked the house and left without much more ceremony and no complaints. They knew their jobs and had set out like that many times already since settling on Avalar.

Even aboard the Marseilles, the routine was the same. B'Elanna would keep her eyes on the sensors and the engines, Tom did the flying. When things seemed calm, she rerouted the sensors to the conn so she could wander forward and stand beside Tom with her hand on his shoulder, sometimes just to share the view, sometimes to be nosy about the path he chose.

If she was annoying enough, she knew, he would pull her down into the seat with him and quiet her with his own mouth. In time, she came to know exactly how far to go with him, and she did so according to her desire. They had to pass the time in expectation of a battle in some pleasant way. Pleasantness, after all, was rare enough on board a Maquis ship.

"Break hard port!" Chakotay ordered.

Tom did it without a second thought, banking the Liberty sharply off the Cardassians' line of fire. Unfortunately, they'd sent a decent ship after them that time. "They're still on top of us! How long to the Badlands?"

"Fifteen seconds," came the voice of Chakotay's new recruit, the Vulcan.

"Good, maybe then we can make some repairs. They'd be crazy to follow us in."

"Who ever said they were sane?" Tom said and glanced at B'Elanna, whose face was tight with the frustration of holding together the battered old ship. But he needed to

hear it. "B'Elanna?"

"I'm working on them!" she returned tersely, tapping furiously into the controls. "It's coming... Got it! Phaser banks on line!"

"Fire!" barked the captain. A grin creased his mouth when he heard the whizz of the weapons array. "That's better."

But the Vulcan was still preoccupied with the immediate problem. "If we continue at this output--"

"They're off us!" Tom pulled the visual around so they all could see the Cardassian ship sparkling in the tendrils of a plasma disruption. "Have a nice day," Tom intoned as he reset their course. He then checked their path, his fingers waltzing on the panel in front of him as though the attack had never occurred. His eyes remained sharp, however, and his scans as thorough as their uncertain systems would allow.

"We've only got impulse engines, Chakotay," B'Elanna said after a minute. "Quarter impulse at that."

The captain nodded. "We can make some repairs in the meantime. Good work."

Tom and B'Elanna's eyes met, finding each other equally bright with adrenaline, and relieved that no more was needed. They were still alive. They'd get through that last run, then go home....

A sensor chirped.

Then a flash.

"What the hell was that?" demanded Chakotay. As soon as they guessed what it wasn't--which took only a few seconds--Tom was diverting all the power he could to the helm.

But Tom knew, he knew full well, felt it. Whatever it was rising out of the bowels of the Badlands and heading straight towards them wasn't something they were going to get past. With a few more clicks, he shut down the engines and transferred all that power to the shields instead. Another, now desperate, glance to his wife reaffirmed it--for she knew too: They would never outrun...

"B'Elanna!" was the first thing from Tom's lips when his eyes opened.

"Tom!" Crawling through the debris and smoke, she found his flailing hand and yanked the panel off of him.

When she pulled him up, he grabbed her to him and let out his breath into her hair. "What the hell happened?"

"I was hoping you could... --You're hurt!" She dove under what was left of the instrument panel for Tom's med-kit. Throwing it open, she looked in vain for a dermal regenerator. In that disorder, she couldn't remember if one was in the case--and in the semi-darkness couldn't recognize which it was among those alien instruments. Then she

saw Chakotay.

Tom did too, and together they crawled across the ruined bridge to their unconscious friend. Tricorder in hand, Tom gave a nod to B'Elanna. "Top left," he said and she nodded back. The most common injury was concussion. She found and grabbed the neural monitor, activating it quickly. Tom glanced over to the Vulcan, who began to regain his senses despite the gush of green below his chin. "Tuvok, right? You okay, Tuvok?"

"I am not seriously injured."

"Good," Tom said with a quick nod as he continued working on his captain. "Go back and see to the crew. Tell them to begin a damage control sweep. Our main priorities will be the usual: life support, communications and sensors--in that order. And have Jenna start a triage. Tell her as soon as I'm done here I'll help her. I want a full report. The COMM's probably down--it always goes first. Use whoever you can to repair it and get back to B'Elanna and me."

Tuvok stared at him, unmoving.

But only for a moment. "You say you're not seriously hurt," B'Elanna snapped, "so do as he says!"

"It would not be wise for me to leave the bridge at this time," Tuvok said. "There are repairs here which--"

"And there're people below!" B'Elanna leaned forward on her hands and knees, glowering at the other man's dispassionate facade. "Tom's second in command here and Chakotay's out of it right now. So unless you want to answer to the *third* in command, get the hell out of here! MOVE!" Shaking with unspent energy, she shook her head when the Vulcan exited. "I don't know about him either," she said, recalling their conversation, only two hours old.

Tom didn't reply to save his concentration. The concussion was more serious than he feared. "B'Elanna," he said softly, "could you pull out a vial of doraxin? I'm going to have to shock him out of it. It won't hurt him, but he'll be on edge for a while. We'll have to keep him calm."

She nodded and loaded the hypospray with a smack. When she gave it to him, Tom's fingers closed upon hers, tenderly capturing her hand. His eyes came up, only briefly, and his thumb stroked her flexed tendons. Her hand relaxed a little, then.

Tom turned back to his patient and administered the hypospray.

It did what it needed. Chakotay's eyes flew open and he heaved for his breath. Again. And again. His eyes darted around and found the two faces he knew best staring down at him, one anxious, the other beginning to grin.

"Sorry Dad," Tom quipped with some effort, "we wrecked the car. We'll pay for it, promise."

In spite of herself, B'Elanna laughed and slapped Tom's arm. "Don't tell him that! He'll make us do it."

"What happened?" Chakotay asked.

"We're still not sure," B'Elanna said. "Sensors are off-line."

A sudden shiver froze the captain; Tom held the man's shoulder to the dirty floor. "Try to relax. The meds I gave you have some side effects."

Seeing Tom's careful stare and B'Elanna's concern, Chakotay broke out in laughter. The doraxin was also making him giddy and he knew it. "The last time I saw you two so serious, Jenna nearly beat the hell out of me."

Tom chuckled as he pulled out a cortical scanner. "Not that you didn't deserve it," he quipped.

B'Elanna, distracted by a spark thrown from an overhead panel, replayed the question in her mind. When it came to her, she laughed unexpectedly. "That's right, now I remember..."

48249 (about three weeks ago)

"Return fire!" Tom ordered and grinned as the Cardassian scout took a hit to the stern. Reflexively, he barreled the Marseilles just as the opposing ship launched another volley.

"They're powering up torpedoes," B'Elanna said. "I'm diverting power to the shields."

Tom barreled again and felt only a jar when the next round of phaser fire popped the edge of their shield bubble. "I'm really getting bored with this!" he announced. "Time to turn this around. Hang on!"

B'Elanna did just that. She knew how he flew--and wasn't surprised when the ship creaked with the pressure of his inversions. Within a minute, Tom had maneuvered the Marseilles to where they had the offensive, and B'Elanna began to work again. Diverting a few more systems, she looked on the sensors for the blind spot and buried a small torpedo into the Cardassian's nacelle. A welcome sight filled the viewscreen to her left. She leaned back to enjoy it. Tom was nodding, resetting their course, meaning that there was nothing else to bother them within range.

Once that was done and she had taken care of those all-too familiar damages, she ran a final diagnostic. Surprisingly, they would need no more parts to complete repairs. She'd stored enough on Avalar to take care of the rest.

With a satisfied smile, she let herself breathe--and swallowed it. A curious sensation came to her--full and... She swallowed again. She felt her blood draining from her suddenly warm face, a cool sweat spreading down her throat and shoulders, the odd swirling in her stomach as it began to crawl upwards...calm...then rise again...

"Oh God!" she gasped and flew out of her seat. But moments later, Tom's arm was around her shoulder as her stomach hurled; he pulled back her hair when she started retching in the corner, seemingly without end. As soon as she thought it was done, it began again, and her husband's soothing caresses couldn't come near to stopping it.

More than ten minutes later, Tom was cradling her half-unconscious form in his arms, carrying her back to the sleeping compartment. He left only long enough to get a tricorder and a hypospray, which he loaded as he reentered the room. "I don't know what came over me," B'Elanna whispered, her eyes still shut as he tapped on the tricorder and pointed it at her. "I know I haven't eaten anything that would... I thought this morning I'd just... Ugh, God, I've never had it come on like that before."

"You've never been pregnant before."

Her head came off the pillow. "What?!" But he was holding the beeping tricorder and nodding. He wouldn't joke about that. The word came to her again, and she smiled, then frowned, then looked uncertainly up at him. "What do we do?"

Tom was dead serious. "What's your instinct?"

On returning to Avarar, the couple silently traversed the rocky hillside, hand in hand down the hill, slipped into their house and dropped off their supplies without waking their guests, who occupied a space near the fire. Alone in the bedroom, B'Elanna stopped and grinned at him. "We're crazy."

"Maybe. Does that bother you?"

She put her hands on her stomach, tried to imagine it.

How could I think to bring a child into this world? Married only five months, back and forth from a ship under constant attack, my life and my husband's never guaranteed, Cardassians around any corner. We must be crazy. What kind of mother could I be? What kind of life...

Then she did imagine it, and she felt both a thrill and a terror like none she'd ever known. Maybe things were going quickly--but things had gone that way ever since she'd met Tom Paris. One day, she was a frightened, angry Academy dropout plucked out of harm's way by a strange Indian; but a month later, she'd fallen in love with a man who had completely captivated her, body and soul. Then she'd married him. Then... It'd only been a year and her life had been turned upside-down three times over; she still could not believe that she'd done half the things that she had.

Her life had finally become stable and comfortable. She should have known it wouldn't last.

Still, Tom Paris had never let her down, and she had never been happier, more at peace with herself. He respected her, devoted himself utterly to her. He had come into her life like a storm, but did not pass, and even as their lives were becoming more familiar, more routine, their bond grew stronger. He was there, and she believed he would not leave. She trusted him. Maybe together they would find a way through it. They'd managed to handle everything already. Not to mention she did, after all, want the baby. She couldn't deny it, even if it was, indeed, crazy.

Finding Tom in her eyes again, noticing his study of her--he was waiting to see if she was having second thoughts--she held out a hand. "Come here."

Pleased with her request, he draped his coat over the chair before complying.

"Is this a joke?"

Tom and B'Elanna didn't flinch at their friend's shock. "We know what you're thinking," Tom said. "But we've decided."

Chakotay couldn't believe his ears. His pilot and his engineer being married was one thing, their insistence on making a home base was also one thing. But starting a family was...It was perfectly normal. Chakotay fought his defeat despite it. "Do you two know exactly what you're getting into? Don't you think things are going just a little too fast yet?"

"Yes," B'Elanna said. "Things are going fast, as they always have, as you've always warned us, and neither of us expected this. But now it's done and we're telling you." She stared hard into his glassy eyes. "We're not giving up this baby. The Maquis cause means a great deal to Tom and me, and I think in some way we'll always be involved. But we're not turning back on what we're doing together, Chakotay."

He looked at Tom, whose face was set the same, if only a little more amused. Chakotay correctly guessed that the pilot had expected his captain's reaction. "So, what will you do?"

Then, Tom's smile weakened as B'Elanna turned her eyes away. "We'll have to retire for the most part," he said, but quickly added, "but don't think for an instant that means we'll be leaving without making sure we're expendable. You're our friend, Chakotay. We'd never leave you completely and we wouldn't leave the ship without replacements ready."

"You have no idea how irreplaceable you are," said the captain wistfully. "It seems like only yesterday when we started rebuilding this place. What was it? A few months ago?"

"About," B'Elanna said.

"When you decided to settle here, somehow I knew you'd end up leaving," he finally admitted and allowed himself a grin. Looking at those two, he couldn't help it. They always had been independent, and they looked even more so just then. "How far along are you, Torres?"

B'Elanna blinked at that first opportunity to share the detail. For some strange reason, it was a little embarrassing. "About a month."

As she spoke, Jenna Harlowe came down the hill from the cavern, dragging her bag and dusty from the walk. She tried to brush away the evidence, all in vain. "There's a rotten wind blowing!" she sang out to her friends, waving her arm around in the air. "You must really pray for rain around here. --When 're you getting off your ass and dusting the atmosphere, Thomas?! When's the last time it rained, anyway?"

Chakotay grinned over his shoulder as the elfish woman hopped down the rocks like a goat, complaining all the way and the frizzes of her hair flying in the breeze as she moved to his side. "Tom and B'Elanna are having a baby," he told her.

Jenna squealed and launched herself at the couple, kissing them in turns. "How long are you?" B'Elanna repeated herself and Jenna played a spank on Tom's hip. "So THAT'S what you two were doing in when you were last sleeping in the kitchen--puttin' a loaf in

the oven! I thought I'd heard more than rattling pans!"

For all his bravado, Tom flushed and laughed. B'Elanna turned, burying her head in his shoulder. "Chakotay, you could've told her after you two left."

"This is my revenge," he replied.

This delighted Jenna all the more. "I can't wait to see it! It'll be gorgeous, you know. Back me up, Chakotay, aren't I right?" She dug into her bag with a hand. "I've got to have a picture of the two of you. Where is that damn thing? Did you see me pack it?" When she looked over at Chakotay, her brow furrowed. "Oh, now, I know that look. Did you think these two would wait?"

He shrugged. "I was hoping--"

"They're not you!" Jenna told him flatly. "You said so yourself that Tom and B'Elanna were ones who lived in the now. Now you're seeing more evidence of that."

"I said that?"

It was Chakotay's turn for a slap. "You fool!" she laughed, slapping him again. "When you married them! You said it yourself!" He grabbed her arms and she wriggled free to gleefully pop him on the head with the palm of her hand. "I defy you to deny it!"

"Okay, I said it," Chakotay laughed, still trying to avoid her onslaught. "But that doesn't mean they have to go through with it."

Tom grinned and put his arm around his wife as they leaned back on a rock to enjoy the view of the captain's mock punishment. "Actually, Chakotay," B'Elanna said archly, "it's considered lucky in Klingon families to get pregnant soon after claiming a mate."

Chakotay laughed. "It's also lucky to break bones, too. --Cut it out, Jenna!" He finally spun around to try to catch her, but she spanked him hard and wiggled free.

"La! Maybe I'll break some of *your* bones!" she cried as she sprinted and swerved away from his close chase, "How'd you like that?! Aaahh!! Slow as mud, you big lump!"

Tom snorted at their scene, looking down to B'Elanna. "God, K'Karn's going to love this. We've got to write him at Oslon."

B'Elanna smirked. "Kahless forbid I don't contact him this time."

"And we'd told him we were going to wait a while before giving it a shot," he added. "I can hear him laughing already."

She giggled, at the thought of her cousin's reaction and at the fact Jenna was still outrunning Chakotay. "I can't wait to see his communiqué--'It will be an honor to the House of Tom!'"

Tom looked at her with mock insult, "Are you denigrating our house, wife?"

Her returning grin was pure amusement. "Ha! You're more Klingon than I am sometimes!" she said, leaning back into his embrace. "Tell me, are we going to Qo'noS so

you can stand in the hall of warriors and defend my paltry honor, husband?"

Chuckling, Tom took up the challenge with a nip on her ear. "You didn't seem to resist my standing up to a well-armed Klingon, either..."

47995 (about twelve weeks ago)

Tom examined their unlikely companion as they wandered beyond the city, wherein their cousin and B'Elanna had been reunited, quite by accident, after over twelve years.

They were there for supplies, K'Karn for a conference. He'd spotted his cousin across the square just as she was putting the final touches on their black-market cloaking device purchase and Tom was pulling out a box of latinum. K'Karn had said nothing--their purchase was not his business--only approached with every intent of surprising her.

After the deal was done, he strode straight to B'Elanna's side and reached to grab her arm only to end up with Tom's elbow in his temple, then his opposite fist in his jaw, catching the Klingon completely off guard and sending him spinning.

K'Karn recovered and whipped around only to see his diminutive cousin protectively held back by the man, whose glare was ready, silent but deadly in his intent to defend his woman from that sudden threat.

More, B'Elanna let him stand for her. She stood behind him, eyes wide and equally ready, but feet planted.

K'Karn laughed aloud, "Great Kahless' feats! My sickly human cousin has been claimed by a battle worthy mate!" With that, he announced himself. The fair-haired man needed a moment to snap out of his defensive mode before cracking a stunned smile. His little cousin turned sallow with shock. The Klingon immediately contacted the hearing room and canceled his appointments for the rest of the day. "You are negligent, B'Elanna," he said, half-growling, "to not inform the House of Torg of another warrior among its ranks."

Tom grinned. "Sure. I can take a Ronaran ferret, hands-down."

B'Elanna flushed. "Tom! God, it's bad enough for me over there!"

K'Karn dismissed her discomfort with a jerk of his head. He understood human sarcasm, having spent so much time dealing with Starfleet officers and civilians from Earth in the last few years. More, while his cousin's mate underscored his prowess there, K'Karn's large skull still pounded with the blows the human had bestowed upon him. There was no denying that. K'Karn nodded to himself.

"Come, we will find food and wine, cousins. There is a kiosk with tolerable drink and spiced soup." As his cousin took her mate's arm and she finally moved forward, K'Karn looked her up and down. "You are still thin, B'Elanna," he said, then eyed the man beside her. "Do you not feed your mate, Tom? Or is she still as stubborn as she was as a child?"

Lunch was no less interesting.

The Klingon was not too large, Tom noted, as they walked off a meal larger than they

had enjoyed in some time. But K'Karn held a presence--proud, but more confident than forceful, and his words were wiser than insistent. He seemed to understand their human traits and associate them accordingly with his culture, instead of assuming they should adjust to his standards. This alone impressed Tom. Still, the cousin was undeniably Klingon and dressed as one of non-military, respected society. His long, ruddy brown hair was pulled back and bound with leather. Over his black clothing he wore a thick burgundy cloak, ornamented and lined with fur. A mek'leth hung at his leg; his stride was deceptively relaxed.

Through these things, the pilot could see why the man had made the mark he had at Oslon. For nearly five years, he had been a Klingon envoy working alongside the Federation there and had dealings and connections throughout the sector. Tom felt a certain pride in the fact that the man had chosen, despite having heard about some of his past, to call him cousin. Being B'Elanna's husband had qualified him, but certainly it had not required K'Karn to adopt him.

K'Karn was not unobservant, either, even in the casual moment when Tom took B'Elanna's hand and they looked out to the gorge, into which the yellow star had begun to descend. Their eyes drank in the hot, dry light, and they stood straight and sure. *Yes, K'Karn thought with a nod, They are proud and true. In their own way, in the only way can be, they are warriors who have achieved glory and are hungry for more, for redemption and for honor.*

B'Elanna drew her eyes over to her cousin and all but blushed at the appraising stare he was giving her. She was still a bit unnerved by the sudden resurrection of her relationship with mother's family, especially at that time in her life, after all the things that had happened since she last knew them. For that reason, she could not help but feel a little defensive when she asked, "Why are you looking at me like that?"

K'Karn grinned and put his hand on her small shoulder. "You have made me proud, B'Elanna. Your mate is a good man, who would bring honor to the house of Torg, as do you."

B'Elanna laughed. "I'm not exactly what you'd call a warrior, cousin."

"You have a way of reminding me of your humanity. You don't need to." He grinned, mindful not to squeeze her shoulder as he would a Klingon's. "Being a warrior does not always necessitate battle. Being a warrior is also to act with honor and dignity, with respect for tradition and for family--and for yourself. You have made those things for yourself and only need to realize your accomplishments." He gave a slow nod to reassure her. "Yes, B'Elanna, you and your mate make those things together, in your own house."

The pilot grinned. "The House of Tom. I like that."

B'Elanna nudged him in the ribs. "Tom, behave yourself."

"Yes, dear." Still grinning, he gave a respectful bow to K'Karn and was pleased that the cousin did not find his humor insulting. "So K'Karn, will we see you again?"

"That would be difficult, considering our separate connections. If you find yourselves as far as Oslon, I would see you again." He watched the man nod, then reclaim his wife's hand. "And so you continue your present arrangements? You have no desire to bear

children?"

They looked at each other for that one. B'Elanna shrugged. "Things have gone so quickly that I guess we never thought about that."

"Perhaps you should. You live on your ship? You do not seek a home?"

"We have been thinking about that," Tom said. "We've just got to find a place we want to stay. Our business keeps us moving around a lot. But if things calm down for a while, we might settle down, have a couple kids," he shot a mischievous grin to his wife, who knew what was coming, "--or die trying."

K'Karn laughed. "You are a strange man, but I enjoy you. You make my cousin laugh. I never saw her laughing when we met. She is satisfied with you." With a blink to B'Elanna's smile of thanks, he took a breath and turned to let the sun fall on his face as well. The warmth felt good. "Where will you go after today?"

B'Elanna leaned into Tom's arm as he put it around her shoulder. "We have to meet some friends at one of the colonies," she told her cousin, "then we'll be back to work for a while."

K'Karn was still for another moment, then he turned his eyes to the couple, his decision made. "I saw your flight plan when you let me tour your ship. --Do not fear me, cousins. I will not divulge information to the Federation. There is no need for me to. There is instead need for me to make you aware. I have received information about the sect operating at your destination and those who have monitored them. Unless you are prepared to do battle, you should avoid that space and their base of operation. The Cardassians are aware of that colony's covert operations. You may want to caution your 'friends.'"

Tom was staring at him, feeling his blood drain as he calculated the Marseilles' course. "We're on the other side of the DMZ, K'Karn. We couldn't nearly act fast enough to save them all."

B'Elanna nodded with agreement. "We could never collect a resistance that quickly." She touched his arm, staring up to him. "Cousin, what else do you know?"

"Eventually, the Cardassians will act as dishonorably as they have in the past," K'Karn told them, his tone etched with a growl. "Bajoran intelligence suggests they prepare to."

B'Elanna's eyes filled with dismay. "They're going to level Avalar."

K'Karn replied to that with a look.

Tom was about to ask more--a million questions flew into his mind as soon as B'Elanna had guessed it. The approach of some uniformed Bolians quickly redirected his mouth and expression. "Actually, our Captain married us just about two months ago," he said, instantly conversational and glad to see K'Karn play along. "He was pretty stunned at first, but he seemed to enjoy getting to do the service." Easing B'Elanna around by the waist, he smoothly set them off back towards their ship. "It was a simple service, but all of our friends were there."

"We had to answer about our rings during the whole party," B'Elanna added on cue,

forcing herself not to look back at the people they'd barely avoided. "Nobody thought we'd be that traditional--though I don't know why. I didn't think we'd given off that kind of impression."

Despite his distaste for the ruse, K'Karn became curious, having not noticed the custom among those he worked with. Seeing for the first time the gold on her finger, he asked, "Humans give rings to their mates?"

Tom nodded. "Some do, yes. It's an ancient tradition. We should have just explained it for everyone all at once. Even the captain seemed a little confused at first..."

47738 (about 12 weeks ago)

When Tom took B'Elanna's hand and stepped up before their captain, he was certain he would either faint or burst. Somehow, Chakotay's odd smile held him. Funny that only a week ago the man had done almost everything to discourage them from going through with it. There, standing straight before them, he looked like no less than a proud father in the best clothes he had with him, watching two of his adopted own take that step.

Chakotay still couldn't believe he was doing it. Looking at the couple standing before him, though, he found himself believing it more. There was a singular look of hope in them--hope and promise. Besides that, even Chakotay couldn't think of a more appropriate match, the way they behaved. They had a knack for tempering each other's passions and seemed to truly understand each other--which was good, since nobody else save Jenna understood them very much if at all.

"When we got this ship and I took command of her, I didn't think I'd ever be using this long-understood right. We're fighting for our lives out here, our lives and our freedom, and we don't expect to win in a day, a month, or even a year. But our lives must go on, because if we stop living, if we stop growing or hesitate to make lives for ourselves, then we lose the fight, no matter how many battles we win.

"I almost forgot that. It's easy to get caught up in the struggle, get so involved that you lose track of what you're trying to preserve and reclaim in the first place.

"So, here we are--here I am--celebrating Tom and B'Elanna's decision to spend their lives together as husband and wife. In truth, I should have seen it coming the day they met, here in this bay.

"Since I met them, they've learned to take life as it comes, live day by day--and move forward, always forward. It's a part of them that made their love not only a possibility, but a bond that we don't see very often. With that in mind, it shouldn't surprise anyone here that they decided not to waste any time. This is just their next step in another day, together.

"I admit, I did have to be convinced of it, reminded that our lives have to continue, else our struggle becomes meaningless."

He smiled at the memory of that conversation: They were still flushed from the run from the flight deck, breathless with the news of their engagement. Chakotay stared at

the happy couple like a dumb animal. But their arguments were sound--and their love was real. Even so, Chakotay made them wait a week. It was a good thing that he did, for during their wait, Tom and B'Elanna managed to raid a Starfleet survey ship and replenish the Liberty's hurting medical and small equipment stores.

"But it didn't take too much time to change my mind--since they did that for me," and he grinned when they did. "Today, I consider this service an honor. So, without further delay--"

"Lest someone disturb the festivities," Jenna mumbled.

--the bride and groom would like to exchange rings with their vows in the old tradition." Tom gave a tiny nod; Chakotay did the same in reply. Then, the pilot and the engineer turned to each other.

As they spoke their words of love and dedication to each other, sharing the simple bands as each completed their litany, Chakotay felt a beat of pride in his chest and his smile press his cheeks, along with a fascination with a tradition a millennia old that he had somehow never witnessed in the many weddings he'd attended over the years. He made a mental note to ask them more about it sometime. Not that he expected those two to be commonplace.

Once they had finished, Chakotay took a deep breath and said, "By the duty and honor invested in me as captain of this ship, I pronounce you husband and wife. You may--" But they had beaten him to it, as Tom had already swooped down on B'Elanna's upturned lips. Chakotay laughed as he finished, "...kiss the bride." He gave a look to Jenna, who joined in with the laughter and cheers that spread through the room. "They really *don't* wait for anything, do they?"

"All the better!" Jenna sang and hurried over to a crate, which she popped open without delay. Pulling out two bottles in both hands, she returned to the young couple, both in the mists of their comrades' congratulations. "Drinks are on me, my friends!"

Tom turned around and let out a sigh at what he saw. The contents of the crate, she'd said, was her gift to the party. "Jenna, that's your wine."

"The last of it," she confirmed. "But my dear Lloyd would've liked it to be drank on a happy day, and this is one. He'd have loved to see you sober and shackled. We'll do honor to the old vineyard, too, while blessing you, okay?"

"Jenna," B'Elanna breathed, "you didn't have to do that."

"No sighs for me, young lady. Come now, there's glasses for everyone. Let's empty the casks and toast our friends."

As wine was passed around the bay, Jenna smiled at the bride, who was both graceful and womanly with her mid-thigh red tunic and dark locks pinned wistfully back, her small but powerful fingers delicate against the wine glass she held, her stance proud yet agile. Jenna felt, as Chakotay probably did, that she'd seen the girl turn into a woman in the span of mere months. B'Elanna had been in many ways a child when she got wrapped up in the Maquis. Firefights, trust, some hard and simple truths realized and the unflinching loyalty of a man had helped bring her out of her shell.

Then there was Tom. With his arm draped around B'Elanna's waist, he stood more handsome and proud than Jenna had ever seen. Not a year before, she had cried for him. Through his sheer force of will, Tom was ready to take on the life that Jenna knew he was capable of. Also, Jenna knew that B'Elanna was a part of that. Her utter understanding and acceptance, her strength, passion and blunt wisdom--needful things to a man overly conscious--proved to Tom that he needn't and shouldn't be alone.

Looking at them together, Jenna knew the two had proven it to each other. They both had a way to go, but they'd also come so far so fast. It proved all over again to her the importance of a good partner in life, no matter what the relationship.

At least, that was how she saw it.

A sudden curiosity breaking her reverie, Jenna cracked a grin. "You know, B'Elanna, you never told me how Tom popped the question--or, I asked and you evaded me. Come now, won't you tell us?"

B'Elanna both smiled and clenched her jaw, and her eyes grew a little brighter.

"Actually," Chakotay said, "I never got the honor, either."

Tom came to B'Elanna's rescue. "We do get to keep some things to ourselves, don't we?"

"What? Were you having sex?" Jenna laughed. "Heaven forbid you were copulating!" With that, Chakotay turned away, but Jenna, snickering, was not diverted. "Come on, I've been a married woman. Think of me as your momma confessor and tell all."

Chakotay took her arm and leaned down to her ear. "Jenna..."

"It was the day the Federation 'officially' outlawed the Maquis," B'Elanna said, suddenly deciding to get it over with. She knew the woman would not give up.

"We'd just recovered some of the last parts we needed to get the Marseilles up to full power," Tom joined in, "and we were orbiting the Juvosic scrap moon when the transmission reached us."

B'Elanna sighed and felt her new husband's hand give her waist an understanding squeeze. "We were installing a new panel on the Marseilles' conn, the guidance control, when..."

47711 (ten days ago)

B'Elanna watched Tom as it ended. She felt her gut tighten as a muscle in his jaw jumped; his stare darted down to a point on the floor. She reached out to touch his arm, half expecting him to pull away. Instead, his opposite hand reached up to softly take her fingers. She let out her breath. "Tom..."

"We knew it would happen someday," Tom told her. "If they'd caught us months ago, we still would've faced prison sentences." He shook his head. "No, this is their way of finalizing their commitment and avoiding a war. They never liked the Cardassians, but

they can't afford to fight them right now, so it's us instead..." He ran out of words there. Turning to see the lady at his side, who still seemed to expect him to say more, he almost grinned, the dichotomy of his feelings too severe for either a smile or frown. "I didn't think it'd effect me."

"Me either," B'Elanna confessed. "It's really final now. We're criminals."

"According to their protocol, we always have been," he shrugged. "All they've done is made it official."

B'Elanna breathed slowly, consciously steadying her quick heart. Then she noticed the tools and parts laying around on the conn they had only just replaced.

They had stopped everything to listen to the message directed at all vessels in the DMZ, their adopted home. They'd stopped their lives for a word from the Federation.

She looked at Tom again, then picked up a bundle of wiring. He, in turn, reclaimed his flux spectrometer. Only as they began to work, they began also to find the words that had abandoned them....

It took two hours to get the conn to come back to life. When it did, Tom gave a nod towards it and finished his part of their discussion. "I have everything I need and want here, anyway."

She wiped her hands on her hips, raising a brow his way. "A Barolian scout ship rebuilt to your specifications?"

Tom grinned back. "That and a beautiful woman. Yeah, that's about it."

"Right," she said, her mouth twisted upwards, "you're really low-maintenance, aren't you?"

With the impression that she'd gotten in the last word, B'Elanna moved around him to fold up her instrument box. But she was nimbly redirected by the hand, steered back around and into her lover's arms. She almost resisted, but was cut short by his kiss, to which she responded without complaint.

He broke their kiss a minute later, warmed his cheek against her forehead, then removed himself just enough to meet her gaze. "This is my life. I don't regret it."

"I know," she whispered. "I know it's difficult. I know you made your decision long ago, and I don't regret it either." She wrapped her arms around him.

Hearing his sigh--relief or acceptance?--she closed her eyes. A minute, perhaps two, passed in that embrace. Opening her eyes, she glanced down at the tools and back to him, feeling his fingers rubbing the small of her back, not in expectation of anything, but an unconscious gesture that she had grown accustomed to. Yet without his meaning to, he had changed the topic, and B'Elanna reached behind her back to take his hands.

"We'll clean up later."

When did all this begin? she wondered muzzily, not too long after she led him back

into the sleeping compartment and pulled him to her. It had perhaps been the need for his company, and not only her passion for him, that had helped her decide to leave a mess on the bridge. And yet...

I love him completely, even without...

She squeezed his hands with fingers laced in his when he moved into her again, pressed her lips to the small of his neck, tasting his skin...

If somebody had told me seven months ago that I'd feel like this, I'd love a man like this, body and soul, I would have....

He nuzzled his face behind her ear, nibbling the lean muscles of her shoulder, warming her with his silent moans as he pressed deeper into her. She gasped a breath of air, feeling traces of water collect in her eyes, locking her calf behind his knee, urging him yet further...

How could I have thought that somebody would adore me, stay with me, or make love to me like this?

"Shhh," breathed her lover as his kisses brushed over her shoulders and up her neck. He pulled himself up a little and grinned as his gaze locked to hers. Returning the expression, she told herself what she knew he meant:

For God's sake, B'Elanna, stop thinking so loudly.

She leaned back to accommodate him and felt his lips caress her again, savoring her, so slowly, tenderly. Feeling a smile cross her mouth, she closed her eyes to feel it all. He moved completely into her then, pausing there. Her breath stilled with the sensation.

Yet then, his hands released hers, slid to the small of her back, and she found herself upright in his embrace. She accepted the change by drawing her fingers over and around his shoulders. Holding her firmly, Tom turned them, pressing her against the wall as he wove his fingers into a clump of her hair, drawing it to her neck, over her shoulder. His chest rose and fell, his eyes, deep and intent, found hers. A little smile found her lips. His other hand tightened slightly on her hip.

When he moved again, she met him, eyes locked with his. Thrusting into her more powerfully, reclaiming their rhythm, he kissed her fully, inhaled her gasps as he caressed with well-taught hands her glistening skin. Her breath quickened and her body began to tighten slightly, but he did not speed, only strengthened. He held her there, driving steadily into her, touching her, holding her, consuming her.

Though raw from the diverse attention he lavied upon her, B'Elanna drove him as far as he would go, meeting his every move, hanging on to that edge with him, clutching herself to him, her fingertips digging into his flexing shoulders when her breath caught hard in her throat....

...Was it that look I caught him giving me? she wondered as they lay, facing each other. She gazed into his bright yet gentle eyes, shivering a little as he brushed his warm, dry fingertips up and down her ribs.

Or maybe it was simply his love, his respect--or when I was convinced it was real--or when I believed I deserved it.

She shivered again, but made no effort to stop him.

When did I learn to be so damned happy?

Tom's eyes glimmered; his lips twisted into a little grin. "You bewitched me," he said softly, drifted his fingers across her small frame again.

"I did?"

"Yeah. How else could I feel like this?" He eyed the little change in her expression, the flash of irony she always displayed when he surprised her. "I swear it, B'Elanna, I barely know about how we got here so soon. All I really know is that I don't want to be without you, now that you've come into my life. We haven't even known each other that long, but you're a part of me. I never thought I'd feel like that."

B'Elanna's lips turned up. "It's nice to know we agree."

Though he smiled back at first, he sighed after it. "What's wrong with us? What's wrong with me? Here we are, in the middle of a rebellion, our only break in the action since we met has been on this old scout, which we're repairing only to help in that rebellion. And here we are, like this....I've never been happier. I wouldn't trade a second of it for anything."

"You've worked hard to better yourself, Tom," she told him, "and you're the one who told me that everybody deserves a little happiness--even people like us, and even in times like these."

He grinned. "Well, I can't argue with myself, can I?"

"That would worry me," B'Elanna returned and purred when his drifting fingers pressed more warmly to her skin, circling around and about every impression. "That feels good," she muttered.

His fingers came together, then his hand caressed her. "Roll over on your stomach." With a nudge, then. "Go on." When she complied, he reached over and began to massage her back, propping himself up on his opposite elbow. "Better?"

"Yes," she breathed, arching into his gentle kneading. They had been leaning over that console for a long time, she knew, before they decided to work a few other muscles. When his hand found her upper back, she was reminded of its former aches and responded with a pleasant, "Ow."

"Ow?" Tom's twisted grin reasserted itself at that. "I thought Klingons weren't supposed to say 'Ow.'"

"I'm only half-Klingon, remember?"

"I seem to recall you mentioning it."

"Exactly," B'Elanna smiled, then turned a wise look at him. "That was a *human* 'Ow.'"

Tom laughed, truly and good-naturedly. As it subsided, he studied her face, how her eyes reflected her mirth, the quirky turn of her mouth, and he traced the sound of her voice when last she spoke. Beneath his fingers, she was relaxed and warm. They were happy together, he knew, happy with each other, when all the odds would have guessed against anything permanent for either of them. They had taken it as it came, lived for every day. Together, they had become, he finally knew...

"What?"

He realized that he had stopped rubbing her back, that he was staring at her so intensely that she'd blinked. He found her hand, paused only for a breath. "Will you marry me, B'Elanna?"

She blinked again. "Yes," she returned in a beat and was pleasantly surprised she'd actually said it.

It began when I let go, she decided. It began when I let somebody love me and started moving forward for a change. That's when it, all of this, began, and that's how it keeps going, and I don't plan on turning back any time soon.

As if to reaffirm that for them both, she pushed herself up onto her elbows and reiterated, "Yes."

A warm smile grew upon his face as he moved to kiss her. "I'm glad."

Soon after they awoke, the two broke orbit from the wastrel moon and made good speed with the new dilithium matrix B'Elanna had installed two days before. Anxious to share the news with Chakotay, Tom and B'Elanna agreed to avoid, rather than slip through, the enemy sensor nets the Maquis had mapped the week before. Tom always liked to trip the sensors, then hide and pounce on whatever came in response. That was one of his claims to fame in the Maquis. But speed was more important that day; for that matter, they needed to test the effects of B'Elanna's work.

Only an hour away from their destination, Tom looked up from his panel with a cough of surprise. "Good God, what's *wrong* with me?"

B'Elanna, who had been standing by his side, checking out the reaction time on the new panel, stared down at him, suddenly feeling a touch of fear--bordering on anger as he saw him shake his head in disbelief--that he might be having second thoughts. She hoped not--quickly told herself she was thinking in the worst case again--and forced herself to ask, "What's wrong?"

"We haven't named her!" Tom exclaimed, then moaned as though he'd committed a grievous crime. "Every ship has to have a name. How could I have forgotten that?"

"Oh," B'Elanna said, then let out a breath, offering a shrug. "Well, choose something that fits her. She will be a rogue ship." He looked intent, and she watched him consider and throw away quite a few options with his expression alone.

"What about you?" he asked. She turned her eyes away, frowning. "Well, it should mean something..." His voice drifted off.

Then an idea sparked in her. "Tom, what was that place you told me about, where you went in your third year at the Academy?"

Tom reached around and pulled B'Elanna into his lap. "You're a genius," he said, holding her warmly against him. "A rogue ship for a rogue's town..."

"...the Marseilles." Tom presented with mock formality. "What do you think?"

"It fits," Henley said with a rare smile as she finished sealing the bay doors. "Chakotay said to send you up as soon as you got here. Looks like we're back to work. We'll be meeting the Arias in two hours." Seeming to need to distract herself from that familiar dread, she looked at the ship again. "You two really did a job on her. I hardly recognize it."

"I think it's a whole new scout," B'Elanna agreed.

Tom grabbed his fiancée's hand to kiss it. "Thanks to you," he said. "Now, let's go tell him before the fleet catches up with us--again."

As they hurried though the ship's compartments, B'Elanna gave Tom's arm a squeeze. "At least Chakotay'll be happy to have another ship in the complement."

"Yeah, he will," Tom said. "And to think we'd gotten her finished in only ten days. It didn't look possible, but we did it." He grinned down at her. "I don't want to repeat that week up to it too soon.."

"Six days without a stop," she nodded, already seeing flashes of the thousands of things that happened during that time, so many that all she could recall of her own feelings was numb, ceaseless determination and filthy, stiff hands holding on to a smoking console as the ship shook and evaded again and again. "And then the coolant assembly shut down."

He nodded. "Following half the rest of the ship..."

47678-47690 (twelve days ago)

They were getting too used to the grime that had collected on everything, including themselves, but the heat was unbearable. Each time they got a little used to it, another burp of boiling air gushed from the lower compartments, making them cough and drag for breath. Worse, with each maneuver, the ship lurched anew with a variety of klaxons indicating its need to stop.

Bracing himself on a panel as Tom spun out the reach of another line of phaser fire, Chakotay stared hard at the damnably empty space around them. No reinforcements, no bases, not even an asteroid to fly around. Another alarm sounded--reserves down to only twenty-five percent--and he smacked it off. "I don't think today's our day," he conceded shortly. "Tom, get us out of here while we have--"

"No!" B'Elanna cried out. "Give me thirty more seconds!"

"B'Elanna, we can't keep on like this!"

"I'm working on it! Don't run yet." Her small fingers were dancing on her console, her brow furrowed with nearly impossible concentration. "Damn it! Just a few more... --Tom, just a little longer--please!"

In a beat, the ship banked again, sharply enough to throw Chakotay off his balance. They shook with the brush of Cardassian phasers off their port. "Paris! What hell do you--"

"One more!" B'Elanna jerked her head around. "Krammic! Go to it!" She shot a stare up at Chakotay. "We can't outrun them!"

Chakotay didn't answer. Krammic was going through with their original attack strategy, and a glance to B'Elanna's board told him all he needed to know--that she'd managed to break the Cardassian ship's shield encryption sequence. Already knowing it, Tom was moving them into position. Chakotay all but pushed Krammic out of his seat and lined up the shot--then fired.

An sharp blue iridescent beam ripped out of the banks and, finding the enemy's aft shields, sawed through and to what they all knew was their main power couplings. The charges from the beam traced ricochet flash lines over the entire ship and suddenly stopped. Then, an eerie silence.

Silence.

It'd been days since they'd known silence.

"They're dead in the water," Tom grinned, wiping his soaked brow with the back of his hand. He turned a grin towards the back of the cabin. "Shall we stay and get some more stash?"

"Get us out of here," Chakotay ordered. "Set a course for Riva, Tom. We're going to need some regrouping. Krammic, see to the repairs. We'll be down soon."

Tom knew what was coming; he set the hurtling ship into as good a speed as he could before turning around in his seat.

"When did I lose control of this ship?" Chakotay asked.

B'Elanna, still hot with the fight and the heat and twice as filthy, glared up at him. "You were looking for solutions, I gave you one!"

"When I said to turn back--"

"We couldn't outrun them and you know it!" she snapped.

"And so you made your own decision?"

"I thought you said you could trust me to be quick! Well, I was! What'd you rather be, Chakotay, dead?--If so, I'll remember that next time you feel like giving up, but make sure you drop me off first, because I'm in no mood for suicide!"

"We took the opportunity when we got it," Tom jumped in, far calmer with a conscious effort. He knew how long they'd been at it. Everybody was on edge. "I'm as much to

blame, Chakotay, and I know what you're thinking. But you haven't lost control."

"It sure felt like it back there," Chakotay returned.

Tom snorted. "Why would we commit mutiny? We don't want your job."

Without wanting to, B'Elanna cracked a laugh and turned her head down to hide it. Chakotay, too couldn't help but grin. For a moment, the tension broke, and the three just looked at each other, smiles slowly flickering away, filthy, beaten, but alive.

Chakotay bent his head. "I guess you were doing what you could," he admitted. "It's not as though you always have the time to ask permission." He sat down and leaned into his hands to rub his temples. "Everything is out of control lately. But I thought at least on my own ship, I could call the shots."

B'Elanna stared at him. Tom did too. Chakotay was tired. They all were. With the new offensives launched by the Cardassian Order and the Federation's continuing lack of involvement, the Maquis had been challenged with undeniable force. Just keeping their ground had been the hardest, and quick evacuations had been harder. They had neither the room nor the food to support any more than they had on board. Medical supplies were all but gone. The ship was good enough to scrap, and Chakotay knew everyone was exhausted. Something had to change.

B'Elanna stood, giving Tom's offered hand a squeeze, and faced Chakotay on her way out. "I guess I'd better go start on the main systems," she said quietly, then added, "Captain."

Tom turned to watch her leave, brushing an itch of carbon on his forehead. "We'd never second guess you, Chakotay. Don't you trust us enough to believe that?"

The older man grinned. "But you just did second guess me."

"Oh come on, you didn't really want to run," Tom told him. "You hate running."

"Okay. Fine. You're right."

"And so is B'Elanna. You are the captain." He touched a few controls. "Do you want me to see to the lower decks?"

Chakotay shook his head. "I'll call you if I see anything serious. It's not as if we have the supplies to do anything."

That was all. Chakotay left soon after to inspect what was left of his ship. Tom, grinning to himself about the man's last comment, took it upon himself to straighten up the bridge. The smile did not persist, though, as he realized what a mess there was.

Digging his hands into the remnants of the long firefight, the pilot couldn't believe that the Federation was still largely unaware of their struggle. He knew their ignorance wouldn't last, though. Many of the Maquis sects were beginning to grow restless, even to the point of taking the offensive against the Federation. Some sects, like theirs, maintained a largely defensive posture, but some others had become strictly militant. Weapons were being stored, not just utilized. Base camps were springing up everywhere--including formerly uninvolved border colonies like Mivadev, Calsa and Avalar,

all of which the Liberty cautiously patrolled, along with Starfleet's sensor probes. It didn't take much instinct to foresee the Federation coming into it soon. They would not risk another war with Cardassia.

I wonder how they'll twist the treaty around this one, he thought as he pulled a wire bundle out of a corner and threw it in a wasted wall panel. The Cardassians sure haven't kept up their side of it--and Starfleet knows it. How will that raise the stakes for us if we're captured--if I'm captured?

Pulling a section of half-melted wires from under one of the bunk seats, Tom peeked up at a flashing helm console. It wasn't shorting out, just assessing their position while in wait mode. At least that much was working.

Dad had been through hell with the Cardassians, too. He never talked about his capture, but now, I can imagine it. He never acted on it. Too much self-control for that. Would he struggle with his loyalties to see me now, or will he think I was just looking for trouble? He probably wouldn't understand how being here's changed me; how I'll always get that sick feeling in my gut when I think about lying about Caldik, and maybe even when I think about how I let myself go after it. Would he ever understand--believe--that I will never let that happen again? Could he ever understand that that's not the only reason I'm here?

Feeling his bile rise as the incident sprang up in his mind anew, Tom threw aside another panel to kill the ache of it.

As long as I know I make a difference, that what I do saves lives, then I'll stick it out. This fight does matter, if all the resilience of places like Avalar and Ronara are any evidence. No, Dad wouldn't give me his blessing, not as long as what we're doing is against protocol. Nor would I ask him to stop looking to protocol as his bible. It's like asking me to tuck tail, go home and become an admiral per his directions. I have my life now, one I'm proud of. Maybe he'll understand that...someday.

A couple of technicians, gray with tritanium soot and dragging their feet, came to repair the power circuits, snapping Tom out of his train of thought. Tom actually felt a little better to see that everyone on the ship was equally tired and dirty but still getting the job done. The technicians cursed and mumbled to themselves; one yawned unexpectedly and cursed that, too, but to their credit, the COMM came back on-line. The first call was just what the pilot expected.

Tom could tell Chakotay was grinning. "Paris, you really are a gamester. When the hell did you beam these supplies off the Loclor?"

"Well," Tom said lightly, though he was lifting the last hatch onto his tray of junk, "I thought we'd need them more than they did. So, when their lights went out, I played cat burglar. If you don't want them, Captain, I'm sure they wouldn't mind getting them back."

The captain laughed. "We'll find some use for them. Chakotay out."

Paris shot a grin at the others on the bridge with him, bright against his soot stained skin. "I was only being polite," he quipped and shoved the panel through the bridge doors.

The unexpected delivery made all the more difference to the crew, who, in spite of their working nonstop for over a week straight, kicked into a new gear to get it all installed. B'Elanna prayed over the ISO components and power nodes. After seeing to the list of injured and, with Jenna's help, treating them as best he could, Tom found a new conn control grid to install. Chakotay lined up his damage control crews and all went to work replacing the phaser bank flow regulators. Little by little, lights came back to full, systems whirled on-line; soon, one team after another were given permission to clean up and get some rest. Tom's raiding skills had yet again come to excellent use; once again, they were thankful for it.

Finally, Chakotay found Tom and regarded his pilot as he fought collapse. A stranger would not have known the younger man was robust and healthy. His back was hunched and his eyes bloodshot; his fingers clumsily reattached a circuit clamp under the center bridge console, and he sighed as he reached up to test the panels. The Captain, ready to retire himself, shook his head to think he hadn't trusted or respected Paris once. It was hard for him to remember the drunk anymore. It seemed like ages ago, not months.

"Tom, call it a night. Go get B'Elanna and get something to eat and some rest. But you'll have to find a spot. The aft compartments are still inaccessible."

Tom finished up the last connection and pushed the panel back into its home. Still sitting on the floor, Tom turned around and leaned against the wall. His stare was vacant. "Where is she?"

Chakotay smiled, though it hurt his face to make such a gesture by then. "Where do you think?"

Tom shared the painful grin and managed to propel himself to stand. His legs were like rubber and he had to think to straighten his back. When he did, he felt a few vertebrae pop. "Didn't you tell her to stop?"

"Do you think she'd listen to me?"

Tom laughed quietly. "I'll take care of her. Thanks, Chakotay."

"I should be the one doing the thanking. We wouldn't be in such good shape if--"

"Chakotay, it was nothing. I was just taking advantage of an opportunity. Anyone would have done the same."

"No, not anyone." Chakotay dropped it, however, too tired to argue. He held a palm towards any further discussion. "Get going, Paris."

"With pleasure, Captain," said the pilot and turned towards engineering.

He found her exactly where he knew she would be, bent over the warp control panel, her last ounces of energy spent on coaxing up the power conversion levels with crewmembers already fed and rested. Tom gave Gleeson a nod and moved through the bay with a sack in hand. He saw B'Elanna sigh and drop her head, too tired to be angry, too tired to realize she was done. She didn't even jump when Tom came from behind and took her grimy hand into his equally filthy one. "Let's go," he said gently.

Only one flash of fight came from her eyes when she looked up at him. He didn't

move. Wordlessly, she realized, nodded, numbly let him lead her away.

He found an empty nook at the end of a forward corridor and helped her down. He handed her water and cloths from the sack, then sat beside her to share the preliminary bath before eating an equally silent meal. Once done, he pulled her back into his arms and kissed her, once on the temple and then, when she turned her head, her mouth.

Without energy for much more, they leaned back together, the hard bulkhead and grate floor a suitable enough bed. Moments later, she was asleep. A minute later, he was too.

Damage control had done quite a bit during their rest, or so Tom commented after they awoke and wandered through the corridor to their storage compartments. After collecting a change of clothes, showering and dressing, Tom leaned back on a bench and watched B'Elanna brush out her hair.

"I didn't think I'd ever get clean again," he said.

She smiled. "I know the feeling. And I was starting to get used to you looking like that." She sat down by Tom and turned her back to him. As he had promised to do, he sectioned off her hair with his gentle fingers, twisting it into a pleat. She, meanwhile, pulled on her boots.

He worked slowly, enjoying the feel and weight of her hair, knowing they wouldn't have time for anything much more intimate than that if their recent luck remained the same. Once done, he leaned around and gave her a peck on the cheek. "Ready?" he asked and moved at her nod to offer his hand.

As they passed through the corridors, they found themselves more and more amazed. "God, they really went all out," Tom said, even peeking into navigation control to see a clean, operational room. Chell and Hopson gave the pair a nod, and Tom shook his head. "Are we on the same ship?"

"Nah, it's an alternate universe," came Jenna's voice from behind. She laughed. "What did you think? We'd just lay down and wait for you two? You were asleep a day, you know."

B'Elanna was shocked. "An entire day? No one woke us?"

Jenna nodded. "Chakotay told them not to. You needed it." She breezed by them and crooked her head towards the lift. "Come on. You'll be glad you got your sleep. Chakotay's got some news for you."

They complied and, arriving on the bridge, their Captain first apologized. "I thought we might get a break, but..." He leaned over and punched a button to reveal the communication he had received. "Gul Alore's back--and headed for Olsidar."

Tom bent his head. "Alore," he said, as near to a growl as he ever got. "Why Gul Alore? Couldn't they send us someone we don't hate as much?"

B'Elanna shook her head tersely. "Hasn't he had enough blood?"

"Then you know what we have to do," Chakotay said--not a question. He knew them well enough. "We're three days away."

They took their positions without another word and began preparing the ship for a fight. For much of the day, they laid coordinates, coordinated their teams, ran through a few simulations and damage control scenarios. That time, Chakotay was in full agreement with their procedure. None of them were Starfleet anymore, and their ship would be considered the opposite of anything Headquarters would dare let loose from McKinley Station, but he knew that as they were, for who they were and what they were about to do, they were as ready as they could be. Naturally, they were due for a distraction.

"What's this?" B'Elanna remarked and furrowed her brow at the sensors. "Chakotay, there's a small ship out there. It's floating."

"I see it too," Tom said with a nod. "Let's check it out."

The captain glanced at his own panel and shook his head. "Tom, we don't have time."

The pilot thought fast. "We'll tractor it into the hold," he suggested. "That won't take long. Come on, Chakotay, we're already ahead of schedule."

"Five minutes at most," B'Elanna confirmed, trying not to grin at Tom's sudden excitement. It'd been a while since she'd seen him so boyish. "If it's operational, we can use it." She knew that route would work when Chakotay didn't respond at first.

Tom tried not to give away his thankfulness for her addition, tapping quickly on the sensor panel. "If it's damaged, we can fix it enough to...I'm getting a reading. It's Barolian! What the hell is a Barolian scout doing out here?" He grinned at the thought: *B'Elanna and I could fix her up, get her moving, that would make all the difference.* "It'll only take a minute."

The captain grinned. "You two really think it'll help, do you? Or is it just that you want to captain your own ship?" Tom got the joke; Chakotay nodded. "Okay. But if it's too badly damaged, we leave it."

"Yes sir," Tom replied crisply and stopped the Liberty nearly on top of the tiny, battered craft. "She's had some hits, all right. Systems are offline, but there's a strong warp signature."

Chakotay stared at the readings. "It's scrap."

"I could get her going," B'Elanna said quickly. "Bring main power and weapons online. Tom's right, the energy signals aren't weak. And if we take it and it's not repairable, we can use the parts that aren't damaged and use the hull as a decoy."

Tom was already sold on the scout, however. Beaten as it was, it was a slick little ship; gracefully designed, he knew it'd fly like a hawk. *We could take her to Juvosic, grab some parts, fix her...* He drew an innocent expression over to his friend. "Please? I promise I'll walk it and feed it."

Chakotay couldn't help but chuckle. "You're insane, Paris. Fine, but it's your time and parts."

Tom caught B'Elanna's smile, thanking her with his eyes. She engaged the tractor, he called the cargo bay.

They'd been excited to get into the scout, but once they opened the hatch, they both drew back at the all too familiar stench that greeted them. "Decomposing Barolian," Tom muttered. "And to think I didn't know what I wanted for breakfast." He turned a look to one of the technicians. "Frank, beam the corpse out of there and refresh the air, if you can." That done, Tom and B'Elanna crept into the emptied grave.

As the Liberty headed to its destination, they succeeded only in repairing the most serious damage, sealing the battered hull and bringing main power on-line, that haphazardly with the leftover supplies Tom had stolen from the Cardassian ship. Cardassian and Barolian technology needed a little help to be compatible, so B'Elanna had to take a few extra steps to make them work together. The weapons systems came next, and then the engines. For lack of time, they had to jury-rig the latter. As it was, they spent most of their time off the bridge on the scout.

From time to time, Tom glanced at B'Elanna, who looked intent as ever in her work--a bit too much, he thought as it continued. But he didn't say anything about it. The work had been complicated, requiring their best wits much of the time. At the same time, he felt a need to scope out her silence. She was a little *too* quiet.

"I hope we get this done in time," he said, almost under his breath..

"It'll take more time than we have to make her decent," she replied, maneuvering a flag bolt into its new home. "But she'll fly and shoot. That'll be good enough for...for now."

"It'll be good enough for Chakotay," Tom filled in for her and held her gaze when she looked up. "This ship's as much for him as it is for us. I know, I feel bad about it too. I don't regret it, but I wish he'd given the order."

B'Elanna sighed and shifted onto a hip to rest her knees. "I didn't think at the time that he'd feel betrayed. You know how sensitive he is about that. I feel like I need to make it up to him somehow."

Tom eyed her. "You're only as bad as I am. We owe him our life--and we did the right thing out there, B'Elanna. You and I--and Chakotay--we all know it."

Her mouth turned down. "Of course, we'll still feel like spoiled children knowing they've gone too far." Tom met her eyes. "We'd might as well admit it. We need him to approve of us."

"It makes us feel like we're repaying him," Tom agreed.

B'Elanna sighed quickly, accepting it. "So, we'll give him some help. We can always use another ship."

"My thinking entirely."

She was about to say more, but a sudden shudder stopped her. The ship lurched, and she threw a hand down to the floor to support herself. She jerked her stare back to Tom's,

she knew what he did.

Somebody was early.

"Aloreg." Another blast from outside. He crawled over to where his coat laid and punched his communicator. "Paris to Chakotay!"

"*How's the scout, Tom?*" asked Chakotay, loud over the buzz on the bridge.

"Main power, navigation and weapons are on line. The shields---"

"*Time for a test run! We're already cut off on four decks and seven sections, so keep an open comm line and get the hell out of here! Take some heat off my tail.*"

Both pilot and engineer were up before their captain finished. "We don't have much in the way of shields," B'Elanna reminded him as she threw her toolbox into a storage locker and claimed a seat at the rear of the bridge.

"I'll have to avoid their fire, then, won't I? --Paris to Grearson, open the bay doors. We're hitting the trail."

"In *that* thing?" came the young man's shocked reply.

"You're damn right," Tom returned. "Do it!" His fingers pranced over the controls, and he felt his face grow hot, his heart beat harder. "I've wanted to say hello to Gul Aloreg for some time, anyway," he muttered. "This time, we're doing it my way."

As soon as the bay doors were clear, Tom ground the scout out, pushing it to full impulse maneuvers as soon as he got past the Liberty's shields.

He'll pay for my nightmares, Tom thought, and for all the others who can't sleep at night because of him. This time, you bastard, I'm in my element.

With that burning in his mind, he spotted the Cardassian cruiser and barreled in for his first surprise of the day. "B'Elanna, you can shoot as much as you want without diverting navigation."

"You got it," she returned and began to line up the shots as the little cruiser spun towards its target.

Chakotay flew with equal abandon and was taking his lumps for it. Scars were appearing on the Maquis vessel, but it did find a few targets--knocks on the shields lit both ships, and a few torpedoes buckled the Cardassian's shields. All the while and like a mosquito, the scout buzzed about, waiting to find a vein. The Cardassians only swatted once or twice, seeing not much of a threat in the scrap heap to its port.

"Damnit! Weapons are offline!"

"Do what you need," Tom returned and pulled them off. B'Elanna kicked he console with another curse and set into the computer to find the correct glitch.

As Tom banked off and around the Liberty, Chakotay's voice returned to the speakers. "*What the hell are you doing, Paris?*"

"Spot repair. We're holding on. Give me a minute."

"*This won't *last* another minute!*"

Regardless, the Liberty banked as another round of fire ripped from from the Cardassian cruiser. A resulting burst in the Liberty's starboard shields showed they'd finally been broken. The enemy cruiser turned to finish their work.

"Yes!" B'Elanna hissed. "We're up! Get in line!" Blowing a breath, Tom dove the little craft toward a new set of fissures in the Cardassian vessel and she let loose a volley of torpedoes into its belly, drawing a line up its shields like a slit.

"Aft!" B'Elanna shouted immediately after, above the noise of the engine and the fire. "I'm seeing a crack in their shields! --Torres to Chakotay! Fire aft!"

"*I can't get aft! They're blocking the wound and we're-- Divert power to shields and weapons! Wait, let me--*"

"To hell with this!" Tom interjected and swung the scout fully around the perimeter of his enemy, bending the scout to its limits. Tom pressed his feet to the floor, keeping his balance as he grazed around the Cardassian's deflector grid. Spots of phaser fire grazed the unprotected hull and a panel blew out to his right. "Impulse is off-line!"

B'Elanna's eyes were afire when she glared at the viewscreen, seeing Cardassian hull and the unmistakable veins of conduits crawling into crevices--plasma constrictors homing to the warp drive. Her stare narrowed. "Go for it, Tom! It's the only chance we'll get."

Without delay, he did. Bringing the scout in position for another lunge, he held a finger steady over the key, waited for the right moment... "Thrusters on!" he announced and smacked the panel. "Fire!"

B'Elanna did, and then again, then one last, even as their system began to fail. "Die, damnit," she muttered, then let out a yell. "We've ruptured their warp conduits!"

This was both good and bad. "They're feeling it!"

"Get us out of here!"

Tom's heart was beating through his chest when the realization stopped it. "There's not enough power to get far enough!"

B'Elanna's fingers flew to the engineering panel. "Diverting all systems to the engines!"

"There's not enough--" Suddenly a thud and they were moving away--backwards. Tom looked down and grinned as his sensors told him they were being tractored. "Son of a bitch!" he laughed aloud and threw his head back against the dirty seat. "Captain, my captain!"

Chakotay's voice came on the COMM. "Hold on, you two, and enjoy the view."

Tom looked, so did B'Elanna, as the Cardassian ship began to shudder and spark, and never had such a grisly sight been so pleasing to him. He never thought his wait would be so short. Vendettas like his usually took years, even lifetimes to achieve.

He touched B'Elanna's arm--she had come forward to watch--and led her to sit in the chair with him. Hugging her as his pulse began to slow, Tom knew they had been lucky. The element of surprise was what turned the tables, and Chakotay saved their necks in return.

The pilot reached around the engineer's back and hit his main COMM line. "Maquis Scout to Cardassian vessel," he said and checked to see if they could hear him. They could. "Rot in hell, Alorege."

Moments later, the ship disintegrated.

"To Tom and B'Elanna--and the scouter!" cried Jenna.

"Ah," Tom said in correction, "to the element of surprise."

"To all of it," Chakotay said and accepted Jenna's offer of Bajoran wine, though to only a half glass. Glancing over, he saw Tom choose some Sauran nectar instead. Taking a drink, Chakotay peered over at the poor, battered ship, with its phaser scrapes and the piles of blown out panels and arrays, now removed to the cargo floor. "Well, if she wasn't ready for scrap before, she might as well be now."

"We could still fix her," Tom responded, "now that we have a breather."

"It wouldn't take too much work," B'Elanna joined in. "We could cannibalize some of the scrap around Juvosic. There's plenty there."

Jenna regarded her askance. "When did you become so interested in scout fighters?"

"Let's just say it was an acquired taste," she quipped, grinning slyly up at Tom.

Jenna laughed aloud. "Good God, you two are starting to sound alike!"

"We are not!" B'Elanna retorted.

"She and I sound nothing alike," Tom agreed.

Jenna wasn't convinced. "You're too close to see it. Or maybe we've been too busy for you to. I don't know. But I know what I hear."

Tom smiled at her. "Maybe B'Elanna and I have picked up some things together," he conceded.

Jenna giggled. "Including me."

Tom and B'Elanna laughed at that. "I think we've paid you back count for count on distracting the enemy," B'Elanna snickered.

Seeing him furrow his brow, she patted Chakotay's arm. "I don't think we ever did end up telling you about that one, dear," she said, "when we got those medical supplies a few months back. That first and last covert mission you sent me on?"

Chakotay's eyes widened a little. "No, you never did tell me what happened."

Jenna's mouth pursed. "Well, I was trying to provide a distraction for these two, and in my enthusiasm, I fell on my face in the middle of the bar--a little *too* hard and too much of a distraction. Tom had to pick me up and drop me off at the sickbay there to have my nose fixed. Literally a bloody mess, that."

Chakotay rolled his eyes, even as he grinned. "Now I know why you asked never to go out again."

"Oh, but I'm not sorry for the trip at all. Not one bit. You see, that's when I got to know this little lady, here." She smiled again, oddly inward as she looked to that same lady's amused expression. "Oh yes, not at all..."

47363 (about four months ago)

"Momma, loves you, you do know that, right?" Jenna said, trying to keep a positive face, even if it was just a letter, and that she could edit it. Still, she knew, if she let herself go then, she wouldn't get it back. And she knew she'd never have the strength to edit. She had to just get it done. "Now, Tommy, you take care of your sisters and brothers. You're the head of the house now. And be good. Well, I don't have to tell you that. You've always been good. Until then, then... I love you."

Quickly, she flipped off the recorder and directed the message to Earth, where she had sent her children, seemingly a thousand years ago. Aching for missing them, miserable and guilty, she swallowed hard in her swollen throat. With her second mission accomplished, she began to pack her things to leave the station. She was anxious to go. It felt unsafe. She didn't like the feeling as much as she was keen to it.

Thinking of Chakotay coming gave her a little hope. The man, so much like Lloyd, had been a rock of support for her and certainly less troublesome. He allowed her to join his crew, though she knew nothing about working on a ship and much less about political rebellions. She had some first aid skills, gained in her two-year stint at the university before she got married and ran off to Tinalat to grow grapes. Chakotay said he could use another medic, and so he took her on board. He and Tom had also helped get her children to safety.

Why she didn't go with her babies was clear to her. She didn't want them to see her anger, a buried rage that counseling and explanations would never abate without the satisfaction of helping the Maquis do some damage to those beasts. Her children were the future and she was full of rage, and Jenna didn't want them to live with her like that. In short, she had to do something to vindicate Lloyd's life, their home, their children's well-being, so brutally snatched away. These were feelings well-known among the people she had decided to home herself with, and there were countless more families and children in danger....

"Leaving already, Harlowe?"

Jenna stopped short and looked at the Starfleet doctor. His pretty brown eyes were smiling at her. For the first time, she had to force herself to smile back at a man. "I'm afraid I've got to get going."

"Oh, the chief's going to be sorry for that. It's not often he has a fellow countryman to talk with."

"Maybe I'll come back," she said, knowing he knew she didn't mean it, glad that he didn't counter her. "I do have to run, though. Deneb and a cask of tastings await."

"I'll walk you to the dock, then," he said, summoning up some cheer.

Jenna almost said no, but relented before her face could show it. The young doctor had been very kind to her, and it was too bad she had done what she did. Of course, his supplies could be replenished, as would the deuterium and plasma particles that Tom and B'Elanna had collected.

The doctor was left completely unaware even as he peeked in the hatch door and saw a tall, blond human male storing some supplies. What struck him as odd was that the man was wearing the familiar beige outfit of a Bajoran civilian with a sanguine vest and a dark gray three-quarter coat--an odd combination at the least, even if it did seem uniquely stylish on the young captain. He jerked his attention back to the lady and smiled. "Well, it looks like this is goodbye. Take care, Mrs. Harlowe. Have a safe journey."

"Thank you, Dr. Bashir, for everything. Tell the chief I... --No, tell him the Celts once had such a time and history doesn't blame them. Tell him that. He'll understand."

Though confused, the Doctor nodded. "I will." Peeking in the door, he tried to catch the other man's attention. "Take good care of her, Captain."

Tom didn't realize at first that the doctor was addressing him, but quickly recovered and shot him a nod. "I certainly will." He came back only to take Jenna's bag for her. "Time to go."

"Very well," she returned and gave the doctor a peck on the cheek. "Avoir, dear." She gave him a final smile before the hatch doors closed, then dropped her shoulders and her smile and went to the front of the borrowed shuttle to sit by B'Elanna, who was silent, as usual.

Chakotay had told her the girl was merely slow to warm up, though Jenna didn't believe it, seeing how she was with Tom. He'd met B'Elanna only days before Jenna had, which was but a couple months ago. *Is the sex that good?* she wondered with a little smirk, but immediately crossed that thought out--even if it was likely a part of their quick bond. *No, I know Tom, and he's got a way of cracking shells when we wants to. God knows he's in love with this girl. It's likely she responded to that, if nothing else.*

"We're clear," B'Elanna said curtly.

"Setting course for Solosos," Tom replied and turned a sly look over to his copilot. "When we arrive, maybe we can finish what we started."

B'Elanna came as near to blushing as she would allow herself. "We can talk about that later, too, Tom," she muttered, her returning stare both admonishing and anticipatory.

Giving her a wink, Tom shrugged the rest of it off, knowing that she didn't like people butting into the details of their relationship. Though to Tom, it was hard to think anyone wouldn't have drawn the right conclusions. They'd been all but "officially" sharing quarters

on the Liberty, always laid together when they set camp at a base or hideaway planet--not that he would have it any other way. If she wanted to keep it their business, he didn't mind, even if it was hard to hold his tongue sometimes.

Jenna seemed to see this too, and she found feeling like a third wheel more than uncomfortable. "So," she said with a breath, "how'd we make out?"

Tom grinned. "Candy from a baby."

"Even though you were recognized," B'Elanna added with a touch of bite. "We need to be more careful on these 'missions.' The last thing we need is Starfleet spies following you around."

"I'm glad to know you really care."

"That's not what I meant! Tom, they'll put you in prison if they find out you're the one who's been raiding their supply depots."

He grinned. "You were there, too, you know."

"But I'm not... Well, I'm recognizable, but not infamous." She rapped a few commands into her console. "You have to be more careful--that's all I'm saying."

Jenna cut her eyes at him. "She's got you there, and she's right. You've got to take care and not end up back on Earth with your father standing over you."

Tom's face hardened. "I couldn't give a damn about him standing over me. Not anymore."

"Maybe, but you sure don't want that 'disappointment' lecture, either, nor your lady standing alone and your friends out a pilot in the bad, cold world out here, hmm?"

"When all else fails, use fear and guilt," he frowned.

Jenna grinned. "Works for me."

He glanced over at the two women, who both sat waiting for him to agree. "Yeah it does, doesn't it? Fine, you both win. I'll be more careful, okay?"

Satisfied, B'Elanna turned back to her work, and Jenna relaxed, leaning back in her seat. "So, is Chakotay meeting us at Solosos?"

Tom and B'Elanna froze, the former breaking only to bend his head. "He had to go to Kopchu. A friend of his from the academy was killed in an attack. Another sect took care of the raiders, but Chakotay wanted to see the family. We got the news just before you came on board."

"My God," Jenna breathed. "As though he's not lost enough of his life on that side."

"He's lost a lot," Tom quietly agreed and got out of his seat. "I'll be back. I've got to straighten up the cargo before we make our next stop."

B'Elanna glanced back as Tom exited, then at Jenna. "He's tired. It's been a tough

time with the civilian injuries. He wishes he could do more."

"Indeed," Jenna nodded.

The younger woman worked at her sensors for a full minute before speaking again, and it seemed to Jenna that she was searching for words. "Thank you, by the way, for backing me up there. Tom can be too reckless sometimes. He tries too hard."

"He's a boy," Jenna agreed, "and he's impulsive. Just a by-product of a quick mind, I know, but I worry after him as well." Sighing in her smile, she shook her head. "Heaven knows he's had enough mess. Odd that now, in all this mess, he's starting to find his way. I guess you know how that is."

B'Elanna snapped her gaze to the older woman. "Excuse me?"

Jenna's reply was swift. "I have eyes, dear, and what I've seen is you growing in a quick way. It can't all be blamed on your boyfriend, though maybe he's been an example."

A grin twisted the engineer's mouth. "Example? The way he acts, I'm surprised he's not dead."

"Are you still smarting for his pickpocketing that rustbucket last week? Or the Starfleet shuttle before we got here? He's all snakes and snails, you know."

B'Elanna's eyes narrowed. "Snakes and what?"

Jenna laughed a gay little laugh then, to think the girl had never heard it. "Snakes and snails and puppydog tails, that's what little boys are made of. Sugar and spice and everything nice, that's what little girls are made of. It's an ancient Earth rhyme."

"It's sexist," B'Elanna said dourly, turning back to her controls.

"Yeah, it's sexist as hell, but true enough for Tom, and for you."

That summoned an incredulous laugh from the engineer. "I'm not sugar and spice and everything nice." She shook her head. "I can't even believe you said that."

"Oh, bull," Jenna replied, meeting B'Elanna's eyes when they pointed her way again. "You're strong and bitchy when you need to be--sometimes, I'm sure, when you don't mean to be. But I see how you are when you're with Tom. You enjoy being treated like a lady--and teasing him like one--as much as he relishes in treating you. You love being reminded that you're a feminine little thing, especially now. I dare you to deny that."

"I'm not in the Maquis to be treated like a lady," B'Elanna replied.

"I don't see you fighting it off with a stick, either. Of course you didn't. Still, you wouldn't have been here in the first place had Chakotay not been such a needle and paranoid enough about his precious parts to go hunting for his supplier. So get over it. These things just happen for a reason. You just happened to get something pretty damn nice out of it, I think."

B'Elanna went silent, but when she looked again to the lady beside her, she saw Jenna's grin disappear.

Jenna watched the stars in the viewscreen, moving, feeling the silence, feeling the weight of dead air. "God I miss that stupid son of a bitch."

B'Elanna continued to stare at her. She didn't know Jenna very well, but had never seen her somber. Even Tom had never mentioned it. "I was sorry to hear about your husband," she offered.

"Dumb bastard didn't listen, refused to listen to me," Jenna muttered, somehow unable to stop the rare mood once it'd started. "Always thinking for himself, for his precious grapes. Didn't stop to think about how I'd be if I had to carry the look of his corpse in my mind the rest of my life; how it'd be for our babies, me with them. Thomas was right, things can be replaced, lives can't--and the bastard didn't even hear that... Oooh! What am I going to *do* with it all?" Jenna shot her stare to B'Elanna then. "How do you do it? What do you do with your anger?"

B'Elanna opened her mouth, but nothing came out. A hundred answers passed but were thrown out. For all the complaining she'd done about her infamous temper, she'd never thought about *doing* anything with it. Unfortunately, it was a good question.

Unanswered, Jenna turned back towards the viewscreen. "Lloyd and I fought endlessly; he made me furious, constantly. I don't think we had one peaceful day together." She drew a deep breath, nodded firmly, as if to confirm herself. "But I loved him. God, I loved him. Now he's gone and I've got nobody to fight with, and this *anger* sits there, instead. I've never felt this way before. How do you deal with it, B'Elanna? When you get very angry, I mean?"

Again, B'Elanna was lost for words. She nearly shrugged, nearly shook her head. "I don't know," she said quietly. "I guess...I guess you just let yourself be angry."

"Oh, and that's what you do?" Jenna challenged. "You just let yourself get it out whenever you've the urge to wring someone's neck? You hate that in yourself."

"I don't like being out of control, if that's what you're saying."

"Well neither do I! I feel like killing something sometimes--but I'm like Tom, I don't really want to hurt anyone, and then I see..." Jenna shook her head. "I liked who I was, I loved my life, and now it's gone. I've lost my husband, my home, my babies are back to Earth and safe. --God, I miss them! I want to be with them. But I'll go insane if I don't *do* something. But in the same breath I know that wiping out the whole of the Cardassian Union won't cure me."

B'Elanna watched the woman's face, tense and red, half on the verge of tears, the other half seeming to ponder smashing the panel in front of her. Unused to being on the other end of that dichotomy, she muttered, "I guess you do what you can."

"What I *can*?" Jenna snorted bitterly. "What can I do? --And why am I asking the likes of you, anyway? You wouldn't be here if Chakotay hadn't made the offer and if you weren't so damned needy for the work and the company. You didn't lose your home to those bastards."

"Well, I'm here now!" she retorted. "How can you say I don't care about what's happening here? They almost killed me, too. You were the one who said things just

happen. Well, they did. Now I'm involved. Your husband was killed. That just happened, too."

"It wouldn't have if he'd had any damned sense about him!" Jenna snapped back. "And don't turn 'it just happened' around on me. You're looking for acceptance and an outlet for all your frustrations. If you'd not found something to latch onto here, you'd have moved along your way by now and you know it. I've got the feeling you've been walking away from things for a while."

B'Elanna's eyes narrowed, her hands unconsciously tensing into fists as she willed herself to remain in her seat. "I don't have to listen to this--not from you."

"Oh? So, what are you going to? Run away because I'm telling the truth? It's not easy, is it? Being you? Having to hear people behind your back say 'Oh, this is good, we've got a Klingon, now?' Or thinking what they will about you because you've got ridges on your head?"

"You don't know *anything* about--"

--"You hate it and you know it! You'd have rather been born human and if you could do it all over again, you'd have it that way in a second."

B'Elanna's stare turned to a glower; her body grew deadly still. "Who the hell do you think you are?"

"A lot more than you think you are," Jenna returned without flinching. "You hate your heritage, you hate your anger. And you can't stand the fact that you'll always be different, convinced you'll be alone in the end, no matter who you love--you'll be alone! They'll just run out or give up or die and leave me to fend for myself all over again..."

B'Elanna blinked.

And Jenna realized, froze. Silence filled the cabin, the consoles' slight buzz grew loud, then Jenna's slow exhale broke it. She glanced to the girl beside her, her pale, tense--hurt--face.

"Oh heavens, I'm sorry." Leaning her mouth against her fingers, she turned her eyes down. "I'm so sorry." Jenna shook her head, closed her eyes. "I don't...I turned it on you, and I'm sorry."

B'Elanna was yet still, as if ice had been poured on her boiling blood. She too looked down, crossed her arms, looked away. Gritting her teeth before, she stilled again in a breath. When she opened her mouth, her words were oddly soft. "Tom told me the same thing once," she confessed. "He was right. So are you."

"I'm still sorry, B'Elanna."

"You lost your temper," B'Elanna said, terse but trying. "You're allowed, I guess, after what you went through. I'm pretty used to it without the cause."

"You're not used to being on the receiving end, though. People don't dare with you, thinking you'll kill them." Jenna sighed. "In a way, I'd say that's lucky."

"I don't think you know what it's like to be half-Klingon. It's more trouble than it's worth."

But Jenna shook her head again. "You only think you're much worse than you are because you're so self-conscious about that warrior half. It's all insecurity, B'Elanna, not genome. I suppose I'm feeling pretty insecure myself right now. Doesn't give me the right to flay you for yours. I used to be just as bad."

B'Elanna found herself staring at her again, almost amused that time. The lady looked nothing like a threat. No taller than she was and sworn to flat-heeled boots, Jenna had an impish face, frizzy red hair and a tiny, upright frame. Even her clothes were designed for fighting little more than a garden weed.

Tom had told B'Elanna quite a bit about Jenna Harlowe, how she had come after him in Canton, how she had helped him during his recovery, how she was so much of herself and relentlessly full of herself, outspoken in such a way that produced either endearment or annoyance. There was no middle way with her. B'Elanna had in fact been hesitant to get to know the woman, and for the same reasons that Tom credited his initial recovery of his senses--Jenna's extraordinary gall and care. As appealing as her friendship might have seemed, it was also frightening.

Recalling this, B'Elanna couldn't help but be curious. "You were?"

Sadly, Jenna grinned. "When you're young, B'Elanna, as you are, you're only just starting to get the pieces of your life. Sometimes even the bad things can turn into good later, if you know how to use them. I'd say I had a lot of bad to work with, but was just too stubborn to let it be left as useless."

Playing with a loose string on her dress, her voice became unusually quiet, then, her face oddly distant. "When I was a girl, Momma and my father divorced and he never bothered to come back for a visit. Oh, I got letters every now and again, for a year. Then nothing. Ten years later, I found out where he was. He was dead, died a couple years before, leaving a wife and a boy--about nine years old. I never met them. I just supposed they were what he wanted and left it at that. I didn't have anything to say to them."

She could feel B'Elanna's eyes boring into her, but she forced herself not to look. "It's hard to grow up like that, thinking your papa doesn't give a damn about you. Tom had that problem in another way, you know. It was one of the things that made us close from the start.

"His papa gave too much a damn, but he didn't know his boy, not really, only what he wanted and saw was good for him--and his momma couldn't see the ache in Tom's heart, or his powerlessness. Very frustrating for a young man, I'd think, especially when he knew better than to complain. But she was always there for him, supported him as best she could. When she died, the cord was cut for good. He had nothing left to lean on. I know that feeling.

"My momma was the sort who was always getting after me to be some sort of coquette. She even lined up my boyfriends--believe that!--told me how to do my hair, put on make-up--I had terrible freckles and kept going in the sun. She took me for dermal treatments thrice a year." Jenna laughed. "Oh, Momma thought I was the most hideous girl, climbing trees and fighting with the boys! That and this wretched red hair. Raggedy

Ann, she called me, and though it was true, I hated her for it, and I acted even worse just to piss her off. Looking back now, I suppose she just didn't know any other way to be, as she was very feminine and pretty, a lady of letters in the oldest and most gracious way, and she didn't realize that what she was doing hurt. It made me feel even worse for rebelling against her.

"After a time, my momma and I split paths, went our own ways. After learning my papa was dead, I went to school and she stayed home. Then I met Lloyd and never went home again. I wrote. It was easier getting along with her from a distance. She's a good woman and so am I, but for a long time I thought it was my fault. That was wrong.

"I can't tell you what I had to go through to realize that simple, stupid truth. And God, how I blamed myself for not living up to what she wanted and hated myself for trying to appease her. I was damned all around."

Jenna finally looked up and saw B'Elanna's softened expression. She shrugged. "But when I finally let go of the ghost and started living for me, started being who I was--not my mother's poor imitation or my father come to haunt her--that's when I finally started seeing things straight. Funny it didn't happen until just after Tommy--my son Tommy--was born. I... I suppose I never appreciated how much I needed that stability until now, until Lloyd was killed."

Jenna paused, as if caught in the memory B'Elanna had only heard about, or at least that's what she thought as Jenna's mouth turned unnaturally downwards. But the older woman quickly blinked it away.

"I told Tom about Momma when we met," she continued. "I saw in him a lot of the same things I'd been through. I'd hope it's been helpful to him." Jenna gave B'Elanna a hopeful smile. "I'm a pain in the ass, sweetie. I'm all mouth and mind, and the only sense I've got is granny wisdom no one respects until it works. But I learned long back how to recognize bits of myself in others. I see a lot of the discomfort in you that I had, when I was just trying to find something, anything that fit, hoping it'd work out. Who knows, maybe this has. But you're still wanting. I can tell. You still have pieces of your life hanging about that you need to complete. Well, maybe my mouth might come in handy for you someday, too. Heaven knows you don't need anymore people walking on eggshells around you. I'm happy to see Tom doesn't."

B'Elanna rolled her eyes. "Well, you have that much right. He was almost as brutal as you just were."

"Well, we've been there, dear. And we know where to go with it."

"How do you mean?"

Jenna's lips turned wryly up. "Do you really want to know? You know I'll say it."

B'Elanna leaned back her seat, grinning at the challenge. "Have at it."

"Well, in your case, stop putting yourself in halves," Jenna instantly replied, seeming happy for the distraction from herself for a change. "You have Klingon and Human bloodlines and there's some physiological affects in your heritage. I'd think it was hard coming up as you did, not one nor the other, and *you've* got to deal with that. When you

start thinking of yourself as a whole person, you'll find some peace. But you've got to stop being so cynical and paranoid, stop thinking you're not good enough and being angry at yourself for things you can't control. --You've been guarding yourself for likely a lifetime, and you've a selective view of events, as do we all.

"I'd think Tom's the only person you've let near you, which is wonderful and full of possibilities I don't doubt. But you need more. He can't give you everything, much as you'd like to believe it. Maybe some security, some trust, will do it, and you'll stop feeling the need to back off and away...and maybe you'll even start believing Tom when he tells you how pretty you are." Jenna held a finger up to her reaction. "We're allowed our opinions, B'Elanna. Well, one day, you'll accept it, and yourself. I think you're on your way to it."

"That's easier said than done."

"Bullshit. --Pardon, but it fits. You can do anything you want if you want it enough. And, yes, it's hard. So is life. If you go by that 'easier' crap, then you're just making excuses for fear of failure. That's the truth of it: You're scared to death that it won't happen though you've set your heart on it and tried so hard. You've been disappointed a lot, I'd think. But that's no reason to go running away every time reality starts catching up. A little advice, B'Elanna: There's nothing worse than wondering what might have been, especially when it involves something you *didn't* do, especially when you made sure to avoid it."

B'Elanna continued to stare at the woman beside her, not knowing whether to be enraged, humiliated, or thankful--this for the second time in a month. *I asked for it, all right.* After collecting her breath, swallowing any defensiveness she knew would be useless, she managed an air of calm. "I guess you did teach Tom a thing or two. He told me about the same thing."

"Did it make much difference?"

B'Elanna thought about that. "I think so," she said slowly. "I mean, I couldn't believe it at the time. Actually, I was angry at him at first for saying it--furious, really, probably because he was right and I knew it." She shook her head, distracted from her anger by the memory, now fond, that found her, and B'Elanna grinned with that irony. "I wanted to yell at him, hurt him more than he already was. But I couldn't. Maybe because he understood somehow, and I knew how much I needed someone to know me...for me. Now you're saying the same thing. But how do you just pick up and change?"

Jenna chuckled, leaning back in her seat to cross her arms on her lap and shake her head. "Oh dear, you don't. You don't. God knows, I'll always be shuttling myself between dissenting emotions. All you can do, really, is start living for the things you love and going for what you want absolutely. You stop being scared of life and start taking advantage of what's good in it. Get over yourself enough to know you're not the only person in the universe who's an insecure mess too proud to admit it."

"And you've done all that?"

Jenna laughed. "Hah! No, no! And you say that after how I've been acting today! No, all I've done is realized that I'll always have to work at it. Though, I will say, it gets easier, and I've stopped beating myself up--most of the time." Jenna eyed B'Elanna, a

nudge of curiosity making her unwillingly shift the topic. "You said Tom told you the same thing?"

"Yes. When we first got involved."

"Ah, yes, he was pretty much able to lecture people by then, even if he was still getting his own bearings back. He had quite a day of judgment not long before."

"But he wasn't lecturing me," B'Elanna said, then smiled at her own denial. "Not really. It's just that we were trying to keep going. We made it into a game. Truth or dare, he called it. We ended up with a lot of truths in the first two days. He actually managed to get me to talk. I ended up telling him more than I'd ever told anybody. And he told me everything. Everything."

B'Elanna grew a little quieter at the memory of those nights, her eyes catching a point of space outside the viewscreen. "I couldn't believe how honest he was. He had to stay awake somehow, but I thought he was very brave to be that candid. Anyway, that's when he told me everything he'd observed about *me* during the time we were talking, taking everything he'd already noticed and everything I'd told him." Her eyes turned down, though her mouth was still pleasant in the recollection. "It sounds weird, but he reached into my soul. I'd never felt like that before. I fell in love with him, crazy as it all was." B'Elanna snapped herself out that reverie with a short breath. "He sees into people."

Jenna nodded. "Indeed, he's a lot smarter than he likes people to know. But, dear, I'm a little confused. When did this catharsis all occur?"

"When we were trapped in the bunker at Rislos. Didn't I say that?"

Jenna didn't answer, but gave a long nod. "Oh, the bunker," she intoned. "Chakotay told me you two landed in there fighting and came out lovers." She winked. "I was the one who mended Tom's clavicle after all."

Not seeing the wink, B'Elanna was both shocked and indignant. "I don't know what you'd been told, but that's not at all how *I* remember..."

47278-47293 (one month ago)

It was getting cool in the bunker. She pulled her knees up to her chest and sighed. Then she looked down at the man, finally asleep by her side. He said two days was more than enough, that he could sleep in relative safety and that she should too. After all, he was the medic--medic, pilot, former--discharged--officer, admiral's son-- *Too many titles already*, she thought, not for the first time.

B'Elanna couldn't sleep. She would have preferred he stay awake, too, if she could have come up with any rebuttals to the blunt facts with which he had exposed her very soul. Considering she had none, she was glad he was out for a while.

How did he do that? Am I that transparent or is he a closet telepath? Maybe, somehow, he does know all about it from personal experience. The bastard.

She sat in stillness, yet felt nervous and bare, wondering how he could stand her from

what he saw.

*What a mess I am, and did he see it! Nobody has *ever* talked to me like that, probably because they were scared I'd put a knife through their heart--and I probably would have....He's not scared of me, which makes him either very brave or crazy. He certainly isn't stupid.*

He stirred in his sleep, cringing against something, perhaps pain, perhaps a bad dream. B'Elanna let her hand fall from her knee and almost touched the wound on his forehead, thinking better of it at the last moment. Instead, she touched his hair, all of sand and soot, and she noticed the edges were a little singed. The rest was soft as down, even dirty as it was. She almost smiled to touch it. He stirred again. "Shhh," she breathed, "it's okay."

Even as she comforted the man, she wondered why. She wasn't the sort to. Then again, she knew she was attracted to him. She had been before, but she didn't think he might be all that interested. He was courteous and helpful, even stuck up for her, but he was also busy, always on the way to something without looking back. Still, when his eyes met hers the day they met, his gaze was so intense that she barely knew what he might have been thinking.

Of course, that was part of the attraction, too. Though he was handsome, with an expressive face and a smile that made his eyes shine, he was curiously enigmatic. Outwardly, he seemed very personable, easy going, but B'Elanna sensed from the beginning that there was more to it--even if she had taken his stare the wrong way at first, resisted his protectiveness, spoke sometimes too plainly to him. She wondered why he wasn't fazed. Most men would have given up by then. Once she knew what was beyond the mysteries, she was all the more intrigued.

This is a man putting his life back together, trying so hard to forgive himself for both what he couldn't help and what he might have prevented. Could I do the same? Can I forgive myself for being so damned scared of dealing with it? He seems to think so. He seems to think I can do a lot of things.

Staring down at him, she began to memorize his face. She already knew it well, could see him in her mind. Before she only felt attracted to his presence, something she felt she could not touch. This man was like her, however, in a backwards way. *He was so-called perfect and normal, but it all went to hell with a couple mistakes, little help from a father too deluded in his vision and a mother just wanting to keep the peace. I was painfully different with an ordinary life I couldn't handle, a father too scared to face me and a mother as pushy as his father had been. We both ended up feeling manipulated and powerless, made ourselves alone and angry and hurt. We both ran away, lonely so not to be hurt more. Cowards.*

She drew a small breath, her body warming with that truth.

He saved my life and now he's trying to get me to...to what? Why is he so concerned about making me see myself? He did it even when I told him to shut up, that I'd see he didn't get out of this hole, to leave it alone; he didn't back down. He made me listen, wanted me to understand what he was saying. He said he didn't want to see me hurting, that he knew that look in me...

B'Elanna touched his hair again, that time in a silent thanks. In the dull yellow glow of the bunker's one emergency light, she could see his face relax a little at the contact.

What does it matter to him? What does he want?

In her mind, she could see him again, running ahead of the firewall that came out of nowhere. He leapt over fallen struts and dead bodies while she was stuck without a place to go. She had never been involved in a ground skirmish like that, didn't know where the bunkers were and felt wild, frozen with confusion. He screamed her name--a sound she would never forget, as she'd never heard her name spoken with as much emotion before. A couple seconds later, he grabbed her as another blast blew them down. He grabbed a disengaged sheet of metal and pulled it over them as the flames burst in its wake. He crushed her against him, putting his body on top of hers to protect her when the firewall whooshed over them.

Before she knew it, he had dragged her away to the safety of the bunker, though she fought him, argued with him, cursed him. She insisted they get back to the ship. He told her to shut up and shoved her into small space, sealing the door behind him. With another blast, the door was blocked. Seeing no way out, she whirled around to curse him again, but he had fallen to his knees, then to a hand, wincing in pain.

They had been trapped underground since.

B'Elanna would have remained furious were it not for two things: He had nearly gotten himself killed saving her life, and he was injured in the process. He diagnosed a broken shoulder and a concussion. So they stayed awake for his sake, bearing their souls to pass the time--she somewhat unwillingly, though she had been the one to start the conversation that he turned in to a curious game. At the time, she was more afraid of his going to sleep than talking about herself, and she did owe him. So she talked as he did and he figured the rest out.

She pulled her legs up to her chest, feeling her sigh well after breathing it.

I guess I finally got what I asked for, she grinned to herself. So now what do I do with him? How could I have guessed the right man would come along now, when I'd sworn myself off that stupid idea once and for all?

She was still embarrassed.

"You're still awake," Tom whispered weakly, a little teasingly.

"I'm not tired."

His lips turned up, and he reached over to touch her calf. "Do me a favor, Miss Torres, and stop lying to me. You're exhausted and we both know it."

She felt her face grow hot and turned away. She did not, however, pull away the leg he was touching, even though the contact unnerved her, sent a quiver in her chest. *Why does he have to be attractive, friendly, honest *and* tactile?*

"Maybe it would help if you told me what's keeping you up."

"Maybe you shouldn't call me Miss Torres," she returned shortly. "My name is B'Elanna."

"I know." He sighed. "I'm sorry if you took that the wrong way. Sometimes I don't realize I'm being annoying."

"It's all right. Maybe I am tired." She felt his hand leave her leg and struggled with the idea of missing it. Feigning a lack of anywhere else to go, she stretched herself down next to him and, resting her head on her hand, stared at the ceiling. "I was thinking about what you said, about how I should stop making excuses for everything bad in my life. That I was the one being afraid."

"I did leave you hanging on that thought. Sorry."

"No," she said suddenly, looking over at him. "I was angry, but..." *Come on, B'Elanna, be brave about this. He's been so honest, why can't you be?* She struggled another moment, then, "I was angry because you were right and not afraid to say it. Maybe I have taken the easy way out."

Tom grinned. "Well, then, B'Elanna, that says a lot."

She hesitated asking, but forced herself to anyway. "About what?"

"It says that you're a lot more normal than you think you are. Normal people naturally do easier things. Our problem is that our easier ways involve some pretty deep set insecurities. But, since I spent a few years torturing myself and more time blaming my father for my inaction, I think you can get away with blaming your Klingon qualities for everything you think's wrong with you."

"So it's okay to be a coward?"

"I don't think you're cowardly at all," Tom quietly replied, holding her dark gaze in the dim light. "The fact that you admitted what you did proves the opposite. Though, I have no idea why you admitted it to me, games aside."

B'Elanna looked a little shy as she turned her head away and took a slow breath. "I guess I told you because you seem to understand, and you've been so open to me. I don't know, I'm not exactly known for trusting people at face value."

"You've been hurt too often," he observed.

She almost didn't acknowledge it, stilling a moment, but then she nodded. "But for some reason," she continued quietly, "and I don't know why, I think I can trust you."

"Thank you. That means a lot more than you probably know."

"I think I have an idea," she said. "You're not the only one with some insight, you know."

Tom smiled. "Really? Indulge me."

"You like to be trusted," she told him, "and needed, because you grew up without much proof that you could think for yourself or make your own choices. Your father kept making them for you, and you felt obligated to go through with it, even if you didn't really want it." She glanced over to see him grinning inwardly. Her voice softened. "You tried to fight it, but then you made a mistake and refused to face it. So, for a while, you

tormented yourself out of guilt, didn't trust yourself at all, and it caught up with you."

"I was lost," Tom agreed, "and I did everything I could to not think about it." He paused. "I can't imagine what would've become of me if Jenna hadn't literally knocked some sense into me."

"You needed someone to take care of you. You probably wouldn't have let your family do so much."

"I didn't, actually. Mom went through Jenna, instead. Still took me a while to agree." He met her stare again. "You're good," he commented.

For her life, she could not turn away from his attention, and she fought to control her breath. *I hope he can't tell how I'm feeling. Maybe it's just dark enough in here. The way he's looking at me... No, he couldn't know...*

He picked up enough, however. "Are you all right? You seem nervous, or have I embarrassed you again?" Her eyes went wide and he placed a gentle hand on her arm. "Relax, B'Elanna. Nothing's going to happen here. But you really do look tired. For that matter, I could use a little more sleep." He reached around her as best he could, maneuvering her onto her side and simultaneously pulling her against him. "Put your head down. --Don't worry, it's the other shoulder that's hurt. Now, close your eyes."

She did. Suddenly, she was forced to accept her exhaustion as her eyelids relaxed, then became heavy. She couldn't deny that any more, either. Probably for that tiredness, she found herself asking what she had wanted to all along. "Tom?"

"Hmm?"

"Why are you so concerned about me? You said you wanted to help me, before you went to sleep. Why bother?"

He took a breath, and for the first time, he was the one hesitating. With some effort, he finally said, "Because I'm interested in you. I find you attractive, intelligent, compelling and even familiar. I just wanted to get to know you better, so I guessed about you from what you told me. I didn't know I'd be that right."

She was awake again. "You're attracted to me?"

"Is that such an unusual thing?"

"Maybe." *Or maybe the fact that he never bothered to let me know was.*

"I wouldn't understand why, but I'll take your word for that. My case still stands, B'Elanna. Do you mind my being attracted to you?"

She started to think that he was beginning to be a little too direct again.

Feeling her tensing up, he shook his head. "Sorry. You don't have to answer that."

"No," she said and saw him nod, more to himself than to her. "I mean, I don't mind."

Tom grinned and closed his eyes again. "I'm glad you don't mind, B'Elanna."

She closed her eyes, too. *Well, that's it, then isn't it? He's not a telepath--he really is crazy. But he's a crazy, attractive, medic, pilot and so forth, who's attracted to me and asks nothing about it but if I mind. I could do much worse.*

Grinning to herself, she finally relaxed in his arm.

"Oh, God! No!"

B'Elanna bolted up at his yell and all but pounced on Tom, still struggling in his sleep. "Tom! Wake up!" Grabbing his collar, she forced his side to the floor lest he make his break worse than it already was. "Paris!"

His eyes flew open. Suddenly, he stilled, staring, confused. Then he realized, relaxed a little. Blinking, breathing, he finally found her stare--then broke it. "Sorry," he croaked.

"Just a nightmare," B'Elanna said gently, unconsciously placing her hand on his cheek to calm him further. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah." He pushed himself up with one arm to sit upright. He turned a little away from her when he did. Slumping a few moments after that, he glanced back to her curious stare, which turned down upon his noticing it. "It's okay, you can ask," he told her. Her gaze returned to his. "I was seeing Alorek at Avalar again."

"Who?"

"Gul Alorek," he whispered. "He's why we're here. He masterminded this little incident, like the one at Tinalat." He closed his eyes, opened them again, swallowed. "Do you remember that spy he planted with us?"

"Seska? I met her when I came on. She and Chakotay had some history, right?"

Tom nodded. "I had a bad feeling about her when she pushed us about stockpiling some weapons. I'm glad Chakotay listened, even if he was pretty pissed off at me for suspecting her. It was more like a challenge when he let me send Suder to follow her around. Even then, though, I didn't think she was a spy. I just thought she was doing some independent work, so to speak."

B'Elanna understood. "Cardassian spies are hard to spot."

Tom gave another nod, none better for explaining what he felt she needed to know. "Gul Alorek's half the reason this part of the Demilitarized Zone has a Maquis sect in the first place," he continued. "The Federation has no idea of what he's been up to; they don't seem to want to listen. Ever since the treaty, he's been using his own methods to clear the colonists out of here." Tom shook his head again, wishing he could push away what was stuck in his mind, the images...that girl. "I've seen his work. I've seen what he's capable of."

"Enough to wake you up screaming at night."

Tom's eyes reflected an eerie blankness as he nodded and confirmed, "Enough to wake me up screaming for the rest of my life. Enough to make me see how important this all

is. Enough to scare the hell out of myself." He grinned humorlessly. "Just when I'd started to get the other gremlins under control."

B'Elanna eyed him. "Scare yourself?"

He looked down at her hand, oddly delicate, graceful, but strong. He couldn't bring himself to touch it, though he wanted to. His limbs felt frozen. "I never hated anything, truly hated anything, until I saw what he had done--and did it just to show how brutal he could be. If I ever get the chance, B'Elanna, I'll kill him. I know I'll kill him, or die trying, and I'll never have the taste for it again, only that memory of having this time murdered someone."

"That wouldn't be murder, Tom, not when he's done so much."

"I'm not a judge or jury. To me, it'd be murder--justifiable, maybe, but still a crime I'll commit in a heartbeat if I ever get the chance. And it scares the hell out of me that someone can drive me to think like that."

Seeing his fingers reaching yet withholding from hers, B'Elanna touched his hand. She wished she could drive the pale, hurt look from his face, having come to know it being so different. "Nobody could blame you for that," she told him. "In a way, we all have demons driving us in one way or another."

Tom grinned. "I've got enough things to feel guilty about without Alorege spinning in my head. But thanks. I appreciate that." Closing his fingers around her hand, he finally, willfully, let go of the nightmare for the time. "I'm sorry I woke you up."

"It's okay," she said, feeling her heart beat a little faster at the touch of his fingers. She looked around, finding something to say, some way to change the topic. "We must have gotten some sleep, because I'm not nearly as tired as I was."

Giving her hand a little squeeze before releasing it, Tom leaned over and looked at his tricorder. "Last time I looked, it was twelve hours ago."

"That was a few hours before I went to sleep." She arched her back, stretching it, then brushed off her sleeves. "How long have we been in here?"

"More than three days," Tom replied, finding himself both diverted and amused by B'Elanna's sudden attempt to straighten herself up, running her fingers through her hair, pressing her dirty hands over her dirtier face.

Obviously, she had no idea how awful she looked. Her hair was clumped in unkempt curls on her shoulders, she was smeared with dirt and soot; her outfit, once maroon--and lovely on her, he'd thought--was unrecognizable for the beating it'd taken. He could only imagine what he looked like, having taken the brunt of the blast.

Still, she fussed with her hair, cursing it. "I swore to myself I was going to cut this mop. I know I will now, it's such a pain in--"

"I'll help you," Tom interrupted. "Turn your back to me."

At first, she squinted at him, but found a friendly grin below his tired eyes. He made a circle in the air with his finger. Considering, she finally did as he asked and he turned

himself to get behind her.

With his undamaged arm, he slowly sifted out the tangles with patient fingers, one clump at a time, trying not to pull. He managed one lock free and threaded his fingers into her hair for another. Her shoulders began to relax. "With two older sisters," he explained softly, "most boys get tricked into helping them with it." His face was close to her neck as he spoke. She could feel his breath. "You have nice hair; you might want to change your mind."

"If you manage it, I'll think about it," B'Elanna said with mock seriousness. It was the only way she could think to counter his playfully seductive tone.

"I'll make that a promise if you like," he said, quietly enough that he noticed a slight shiver in her, which pleased him in turn. "I'll even braid it if you want. Yeah, they taught me how to do that, too. Braids, crowns, French twists--anything you like."

"If you're willing to keep your part of the bargain, fine. Otherwise, it's coming off."

He peered down at the side of her relaxed expression, the clever twist upon her lips. "You know I'm joking with you, B'Elanna."

She smiled, closing her eyes to enjoy his touch. "I know."

Reaching for another clump, he began again.

"That's the last of it," Tom said as he handed her the last supplement bar from the med-kit.

"What if they don't come?" she asked, holding the ration away from her nose. She was hungry, but dreaded to take the last of their food.

"They'll come," he assured her. "Aloreg was on his way out when Chakotay ordered me to gather who I could find and head for a bunker. We're not the only ones, and this isn't the only hole. I'm not surprised it's taken them a few days to clear away the garbage. Once they get the sensors up and running, they'll find us."

"And if they don't?"

"Then I'll die exactly the way I would have wanted," Tom said, grinning jauntily, "alone with a beautiful woman."

B'Elanna found herself unnerved again, but smiled despite herself. "Shut up."

"Make me." When she laughed, he was glad he took the risk of teasing her to it. He liked her laugh, its clear, lighthearted sound--as he knew he would. "Well, are you?"

"You're not seriously suggesting that I physically shut you up, are you?"

His eyes lit at that, and his smile grew. "I am curious about what method you'll choose."

The edge of her lip curled up with the challenge, and she took a bite of her ration,

then quickly straddled his knees, pressed him against the wall and shoved the other piece in his mouth. He almost choked for laughing.

After eating her morsel, she watched him recover what was left of his dignity as he swallowed his. Yet as his laughter subsided, his eyes again grew fond, oddly familiar, forcing her again to that particular shyness that she was getting used to feeling with him. He seemed to be getting used to staring at her like that, too. Suddenly, she found herself unable to break their gaze, unwilling to move from atop his knees. She felt her chest pound few times, felt the warmth of his presence beat in her heart, then spread outward from there.

I've only known this man a month, I can't let myself get bowled over like this! She still didn't move, nor break their gaze. *He's attracted, so am I, but don't take this so damned seriously....*

What she couldn't accept anymore, she realized, was her fighting it. They were there, those two lonely, hurt people, trying to find their way. He'd found her soul--she was sure of it. Likewise, for whatever reason, he'd bared his soul to her. No other man had ever come close to doing so much, shown her so much trust, nor had any come close to earning hers. For that alone, she knew she was taking him very seriously.

His look said the same.

She was summoning the courage to say as much when they heard a cracking in the wall, then the sound of a laser on the thick metal casing, just as Tom had predicted minutes before. Instead of saying anything about it, however, Tom gathered B'Elanna into his uninjured arm, shielding her from the wall in case that torch was as strong as she suspected it'd have to be to get through the bunker door.

Before the team outside succeeded, he bent and snuck a kiss onto her lips and felt her brief response before they were forced to part for lack of privacy.

That was all B'Elanna thought about until they were safely onboard the Liberty, until she was finally able to get herself a shower. Then she passed a mirror and gasped.

For three days, she stewed in her humiliation and was glad she and Tom were both too busy to meet, even if the memory of that kiss, his gentle touch, the truths told during that time alone, still crept into her more distracted moments, made her heart beat and a rush of warmth pass through her. She had never been near anyone like him, had never been so engaged or challenged, nor had she ever been so singularly attracted to a man, felt so connected. Despite all of it, she was furious for letting herself get so wrapped up with a man she had known for so little time.

How did he do this to me?! Disbelief flashed through her every time she found herself missing him, wanting to touch him, seeing that fond look of his in her mind. Finally, infatuation won out over humiliation. She decided to see him, if only to make sure she wasn't crazy--or perhaps make sure he was. It just couldn't be that easy, she knew as she forced herself to at least finish out her shift. Something had to be wrong with the whole situation. The more she thought about him, the more her mind wandered and she cursed herself for it, the more she needed to confirm her suspicions before she was totally out of control.

They had plotted a course for Grinara, a planet uninvolved in the growing conflicts of the neighboring DMZ, yet very involved in the trade circuit. Chakotay had decided two weeks before that they needed a new impulse manifold, but after the incident at Rislos, he knew that it would be helpful to his still somewhat new crew to get a break from their increasingly dangerous encounters with the Cardassians. Most of his crew had never known of such global devastation, including the bright new engineer.

"I'd been an officer before leaving to protect my home," he told B'Elanna after inspecting her work on the antiquated shield array and telling her the news. "I understand the need for shore leave. Besides, I have the feeling this chance won't come again for a while."

"I guess so," she said with a nod. Then more casually, "Do you know where Paris is?"

Chakotay grinned, cleared his throat. "He's in his aft compartment. His shoulder was bothering him, so I had Powers take over the conn. I just let him go before coming here."

B'Elanna started at the captain's amused expression and felt her blood begin to rise. "Why are you smiling at me like that?" she demanded. "What the hell did he tell you?"

Surprised by her sudden change, Chakotay was instantly on guard. "He didn't tell me anything, nothing that I didn't already know."

"And what do you already know? What has he been saying about me?"

"Calm down, Torres. Nobody's been--"

"That son of a bitch!" she screamed and stormed out of the engineering section, ignoring the useless call behind her. Whatever he had to say, she wasn't interested.

I should've known! she fumed to herself as she punched the button for the lift. *I knew I was a fool for letting myself get carried away, thinking he'd have any real attraction for me. Just like the others. I am such an idiot--damn them all!*

Growling, she paced the lift until it stopped.

The door couldn't open fast enough for her to shove herself through--through the doors and a couple people waiting outside.

Well, this time, I'm too mad to be embarrassed. Wait until I get my hands on him! I swear I'll show all of them that I won't be used for their amusement! --Damn him! Damn him!

Hearing the heels of her boots pounding on the metal deck, she hoped it was loud enough to ward off any interruption of her mission. Her heart beat hard and she was breaking a sweat for all her fury when she found her way through the aft bunkrooms, glancing around each partition as she made her way through. Approaching the next corridor, she heard a cough and moved closer, then stopped. Breathing the air, she detected a scent and knew it was his. She double-backed into the port hall and burst into the last compartment.

"What that hell did you tell Chakotay?" she demanded, cutting off any greeting he might have conjured.

Tom met her glare, surprised. His arms, in the process of sliding off his vest, stilled at his sides. "I didn't tell him anything about the bunker."

She was not abated. "But you told him *something*, didn't you? How much fun *did* you have at my expense? Win any bets?"

Her accusations shot an equal dose of anger through his spine. Just as quickly, however, he remembered what she had said about herself. She'd been through the gossip mill before; a lot of talk circled about her for being half-Klingon alone, not to mention the temper she was living up to just then. Knowing that again, Tom stood his ground, holding her steadily in his eyes.

"He tried to get me to talk about what happened," he told her, quiet but firm, "because he could tell something went on down there. He said he could see it in the both of us, that we were distracted and working twice as hard as everyone else." There, he grinned a little, draping his vest on a nearby chair before facing her again. "As glad as I was to hear you were distracted, too, I'd never betray you, B'Elanna, only myself. He wanted an answer, so I told him how I felt about you, and I'm sorry if that's embarrassing. I told him I was in love with you."

She blinked, felt her blood drain. Her body went still. "You're what?"

"I'm in love with you. Do I have to say it again? I will as often as you need me to before you believe it. I'd do anything, B'Elanna, to make you happy, to protect you, to be your friend or just be near you. It's all I can think about--and trust me, it's the last thing I *should* have going on with me right now. But I won't lie to myself, or you."

Her lips parted, but the man had left her speechless. *My God, he's telling the truth!*

He moved across the compartment and took her small hands into his, feeling her shiver at his sudden closeness and the warmth that quickly generated between them. Leaning close, his mouth was dangerously near, and yet, he withheld to complete his confession. "I think I loved you from the first moment I saw you, and you're all I could think about since we left that bunker."

*What in the world do I say to *that?**...

"Me too," she whispered, lost in his heavy gaze as she confessed it. He was so intense just then she thought she might melt.

*How does he *do* this to me?*

Before she could answer herself, he was kissing her. Before any doubts might have arisen, she ran her hands across his chest and responded to that kiss. She felt his hands move to hold her, one around her waist, the other to the back of her head, his fingers weaving through her hair as he slowly, gently devoured her. Her knees weakened as she pressed herself to him; every muscle in her body demanded his touch--and equally confusing to her was that nothing within her fought his advance or her welcome of it.

Breaking from her mouth, Tom found her neck and B'Elanna found herself trembling as she leaned her head back into his hand, waiting for the next step, softly moaning at the feel of his caresses. But consummating his passion had only made him more careful, more

tender, when she'd expected to be thrown on the bed.

Is he determined to keep me at bay, or is this just his...

She heaved in a breath as his mouth massaged the muscles of her neck, his tongue ran along her pulse. Suddenly she didn't know what to do with her hands.

What I do know is that if he stops now, I think I'll die--or kill him. She was sure of the former when she felt him nibble at what he'd tasted.

When she put a shaking hand to his neck, Tom looked to her again to see if she was frightened or unsure, but her eyes were wide only in the shock of sensation. Her lips were flushed and parted to take shallow, short breaths, but her trembling was but expectation.

Then, her hand slid tentatively under the collar of his shirt to spread across his muscled shoulder, now healed. She delicately moved it underneath the cloth to close upon his arm. She watched herself do this, bent close to kiss the bone of his shoulder, lightly nuzzling his collar, as she moved her soft fingers over his skin.

It was he who trembled then, his open lips brushing against her temple, her ear, her cheek, warming each with his breath. When she looked up again, her face flushed and lips full, he returned his mouth to hers, rendering her all but breathless.

Flooded with sensations she could not have even dreamed up, B'Elanna explored with curious fingers the feel of him, his warmth and scent and the reaction of her body to his touch. So caught up in those feelings, she hadn't realized he had opened her blouse until he parted from her again to caress aside the cloth, to taste her shoulder as his deft fingers continued to bare her. Then she felt his hands drifting over her suddenly sensitive skin. She gasped aloud but did not repulse, even as he slid her clothing off her arms.

In response, she pulled away his shirt and cursorily caressed his bare skin before pressing herself against him. She shuddered at his warmth, his obvious arousal, and she shuddered again when his fingers danced over her body, tracing every bone and muscle, kneading gently while encouraging her ever closer. Still, even at that point, he was mercilessly tender. Despite or because of it, she made no move to speed things along, only wondered when he would take another step as she relished in the pleasure he was giving her.

His kisses moved below her ear, easing downward, his caresses around the curve of her breast, then softly over it. Purring at his touch, arching into it, she turned her head to explore the line of his collar with her open lips. Her heart beat wildly by then, and her trembling had not ceased, yet the taste of his skin, finally experienced, added as much ache to her desire without driving her to collapse. Before, with others, she had never realized that innate instinct, the power of taste--never felt comfortable enough to explore her natural, acute senses. That time, she invited it, allowed herself to relish the sensation again, along with his scent, and yet more when she heard and felt his response in a low moan and a gentle bite upon her neck.

Her fingers immediately threaded into his soft hair and pressed his teeth deeper in, her body more firmly against his. Tom complied to her silent request, biting hard, issuing a growl from deep within her. For a reason she did not try to guess, it felt good.

She then realized she was boring her nails into his arm. Releasing it, she drew her hand down, pressing it between them to stroke him through his trousers. He groaned, almost in relief, leaning into her grip as he lifted his head just enough to see her. B'Elanna looked up to see nothing but desire reflected in Tom's eyes.

At last, she felt his fingers return to her waist, while his lips blindly, deeply, found hers once more, and then with more strength. Her blood coursed anew as she responded to him, knowing they were ready.

Yet as his fingers rubbed the seam at her belt to find the closure, she found thought creeping into that next step. Though she didn't want to say anything, barely could at that point, she had to ask. Even so, her voice was but a thick whisper, as his replies were murmurings:

"What if somebody comes in?"

"Nobody comes down this way."

"But what if they do?"

"Then we'll tell them to go away."

"What if someone hears us?"

"We'll be quiet."

She drew another breath. His hand was moving down the line of her hip, his other still weaving through her hair, then down, his fingers pressing little lines on her neck, then her spine, the curve of her back, easing away the barrier there. She ran her hands down to his waist.

"Okay."

He should have been gone long ago by now, B'Elanna thought. Somehow, she kept imagining him making some sort of pretense to leave the small bed they had finally retired to. *Of course, he took his time getting into this. He might be just as slow getting away.*

It was not that she wanted him to leave--far from it. The feeling of his arms, warm and dry, holding her against him, equally warm, completely relaxed. One of his legs pressed to the back of hers; their other legs were entwined. Despite their great difference in height, they molded together perfectly, restful as bears in hibernation.

Yet once she woke, she waited. His breath against her neck, an occasional nuzzle of his cheek, alone was capable of arousing her yet again. No, she wanted to stay there as long as it was possible. But she could not imagine that he would want to remain with her as soon as he was rested. He would need to be busy soon. He always was somehow. She would have to go soon too. She had work, too. That would make it easier, even if she didn't want to get up.

"B'Elanna," came his gentle whisper, her name warm upon her skin before he tenderly pressed his mouth to it.

She breathed deeply at the feeling despite herself. "Yes, Tom?"

"Stop thinking so loudly."

She let her fingers caress his hands, snug against her belly. "How does one think loudly?" she whispered.

"You're considering and reconsidering, and a different set of muscles tense up each time." He paused, making himself guilty of the same thing for a moment. "Are you having doubts? Do you think we've moved too quickly?"

Here it comes, she thought with both the dread of parting and the satisfaction of knowing she was right. "What do you think?"

She felt his grin against her hair, his fingers bend back to weave into hers, and then another kiss. "I think I could stay here the rest of my life if you'd let me."

"Why would you want to?" she asked, wanting to believe him, wishing she could--and then she suddenly realized that she'd asked him.

Slowly he moved and rolled her onto her back so that he could prop himself above her. "I hope you don't think I'd get you just to dump you. I might have been like that for a while, but that's in the past, as far as I'm concerned."

She gazed into his eyes, and to her horror she felt her chest tighten. Swallowing it, she forced herself to shrug--a futile movement, but as good a diffusion as she could muster with him half on top of her. "You said yourself you've been with many women."

"So? That's got nothing to do with you, B'Elanna. Most of them were distractions or just a little flirting gone too far over too many drinks. I told you that, too." Her stare turned and he knew he'd hit the mark again. "Did you actually think, that after last night, after letting you torture me with your charms on Tinalat and Negheris, being so impossibly polite for two entire weeks on Netari--after all that plus what happened on Rislos, you think I'd be making a swift getaway?"

"I didn't know for sure," she replied, cursing herself as she admitted it. "I guess somehow it didn't cross my mind in the first place you'd be interested in me. --I mean, you were always polite and watchful over me, but I couldn't understand why. Chakotay said you were being chivalrous; I was willing to believe that."

"It was a hell of a lot more than chivalry," he told her, a little hurt at that, "and it still is. But why did you think I'd want to leave, after last night?"

"I wanted you to want to stay with me. Last night was... Don't mistake me. It was beautiful, and I never thought I could feel like that, be as willing as I was with you. I've never just let go before. I've never felt as much." A little smile crept to her lips, then faded slightly as she continued, "If you really want to know, I like being sure of where things stand before setting my heart on it. It'd hurt too much if you wanted to get out of it after--not to mention piss me off, but that's another problem."

Tom grinned as she did, allowing her humor to relax him a little again. "I can understand that," he assented, meaning it. "So let's lay it out on the table." He reached out to her, caressed her temple as he gazed deeply into her unblinking eyes. "If I ever

hurt you, B'Elanna, you have my permission to kill me, stick a dagger in me and leave me to bleed, because I'll deserve that more than any other punishment I've earned. Knowing what you've been through, I would never have kissed you--even the first time--if I didn't know exactly what I wanted. I want to be with you, for as long as you want me. Even then, I wouldn't give you up without a fight."

Again, she stared up at him, silent.

He moved himself completely above her, then, wove his fingers into hers and held her hands above her head. "I am completely in love with you, B'Elanna Torres. How this happened so quickly and right now in my life, I don't know. I don't even know if either of us are ready for what I'm thinking about. But it's there, and it's real, and for that matter, *you* wouldn't still be here either, worrying about my leaving, if you didn't care. So get over yourself and start believing that this crazy, pain in the ass, lovestruck guy lying naked in bed with you isn't going anywhere and doesn't plan to. I mean it, Miss Torres. I'm staying."

B'Elanna found a grin creeping onto her lips. She did not resist his gentle pinning, nor his unabashed stare. She felt a warmth spread over her as she drank in his expression. Why she wasn't scared to death was something she decided to figure out some other time. "You really are serious, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am."

A minute passed, in which she seemed not even to think anymore, but was suspended in the simple realization of his earnestness. To his credit, he waited patiently for her response. Finally, her smile grew. "I believe you," she finally said, her voice clear and unwavering. "I don't understand any of this, either, but I do believe you, Tom."

Releasing his held breath, he kissed her and let one of her hands go to touch the soft skin of her shoulder. Parting to look down into her brightened eyes, he couldn't help but smile at her, drink her into his mind. "Good."

She touched his cheek, drew a breath as he pressed it, then a kiss, into her palm. "Can I ask you one question?" she asked quietly. She met his eyes that time without apprehension when they returned to hers. "What do you see in me?"

Tom grinned, continuing to caress her. "Everything. --I know, it's not much of an answer, but right from the start, I didn't have a chance. I tried to convince myself that I was just asking for trouble when I'd finally gotten out of it for the most part." He touched her lips as her eyes widened at that confession.

"It wouldn't go away, B'Elanna," he continued softly, drawing his finger over her cheek, around the corner of her jaw. "There was something about you, the look in your eyes, the sound of your voice, that drew me to you. I felt this insane need to know you, to understand you. Then I tried to convince myself that I was just acting out of a need to be with anyone. After all, you're beautiful and smart and spirited, all of which appeals to me. But the entire time, I knew it wasn't just that, and the more time we spent together, the more I felt--and to hell with Chakotay being a mother hen. If anything, I wanted to be your friend." In afterthought, though, he grinned. "No, scratch that. I would've wanted you anyway."

"So much for chivalry," she chided, wrapping her arms and legs around him, much without thinking. "Even so, when you were being so protective, looking out for me, helping me all the time..." She paused there, collected a small breath. "You know..., I don't like admitting it, but I liked it. I liked how it made me feel...cared about. Safe. I'm not used to that."

Tom held her gaze, aware of what an admission that was for her to make. "When that jerk hit on you on Negheris," he said quietly, "I got a little too angry for my comfort, right as it felt to stand up for you. I knew I couldn't stop what was going on by then. When we started talking in the bunker, I decided to have it done with and tell you everything, just to see whether or not you'd take a man like me. When you didn't turn me away, and when I learned about you, I knew my instincts weren't playing around with me."

"And I knew," she whispered, "that somehow, I'd finally found somebody who could know me." She pushed his hair from his brow, a little uneasy to continue, "It frightened me, Tom. I never thought I'd feel like I was a part of something besides myself--and it's hard for me to think it'll last."

"You mean you're scared it won't," he clarified.

"Maybe."

"Well, I don't know what I'll have to do to make that go away." He squeezed her gently. "But I want it to."

"I guess I'll just need some time before it does," B'Elanna answered. "It still feels weird, but I want it. I want you to stay with me."

He grinned. "I've never felt like this, either."

Again, her smile grew. "Well, then, I'll try to resist telling you to stop," she returned, guiding him down to her waiting mouth. "So, when did it start, then? On Negheris?"

"No." He kissed her twice, each time softly. "In the cargo dock, at Tinalat City." He laughed quietly, drifting his fingers behind her temple and into her soft locks, kissed her a third time. Then he whispered, closer still, "I was talking to Chakotay about the flight plan when..."

47198-47242 (one month ago)

"Get your filthy hands off me, you pig!"

Tom's brows rose to the sound. Turning, he saw the back of a petite, sable-haired woman with a fair fist upraised. He also saw the man--the so-called pig--who'd dared to give her a reason to scream. It was Johansen. He backed off quickly, his hands raised, apologizing for what he called an accident. She whirled around and marched back to her assigned duty. Tom felt his breath quicken at the look in her dark eyes.

Suddenly, he caught himself. *Don't you even think it. You just dried out, you're still working on getting things together. Don't let a beautiful woman distract you now.*

But he couldn't break his stare. "That isn't your new recruit from Mesler's ship, is it?" he asked Chakotay, who was grinning.

"That's her. B'Elanna Torres. She's fiery, but she's the best engineer I could have hoped for. She was in the academy for a couple years before she left. The word I've gotten from a few old friends is that she took the place by storm, bashed their theories and their heads together before going out to work on her own. From what she's done so far, I'd say she's a genius. She's already gotten the dilithium matrix reconfigured. It's almost a shame she didn't graduate. Starfleet regulations were hard for her."

"That wouldn't surprise me," Tom said. "They didn't often like cadets who were too self-willed."

"It's clear that she didn't take it well. She despises Starfleet."

"Well, it sounds like she's in the right place, then." Tom watched the young lady, B'Elanna, as she continued with her inventorying. Already in her face, he could see the struggle, see her forcing herself to calm down. *She's probably thinking she was too hard on that guy*, he thought, examining the traces of her brow, knowing what that likely entailed. He had a few Klingon acquaintances and so he knew a bit about their culture. With a name like Torres, the other half had to be human.

That must be hellish, all that bouncing around. No wonder she's ruminating her temper, she's got reason and instinct spinning in circles. And here, I've been struggling with just being my father's son. How could I have thought I was any worse off?

He wondered how she controlled it, trained her face down, or if she was just burying it, as Tom had done for much of his own life. Yet even as he considered her state of mind, he thought her beautiful as he studied her.

Chakotay seemed to find something in Tom's expression; he put a hand on his friend's arm. "Tom, I'd be careful if I were you."

Tom's gaze didn't divert; his tone turned cleverly without his meaning it to. "What do you mean, Captain?"

"Don't let yourself get carried away," he told him, purposefully frank. "I don't think you're ready just yet to get involved with anything, especially her. She's plainly got more than a bad academy experience going against her. Don't push it."

"You're right, I know," he said, his eyes still pinned. "But you have to admit, Chakotay--and don't insult me or her by lying--she is lovely."

He never was much of a stoic, the older man grinned to himself. Reason for Tom was of the quickest kind and was used for abstractions and creativity and solutions; otherwise, he flew mostly on instinct and feeling, sometimes subtly, sometimes without care. Though it was finally turning out to be a gift, it had also been the young man's curse. It had not only broken him with his family, but corrupted his better judgment when his life took a nose-dive. It was worth wondering if the man would someday succeed in balancing that instinct with his sharp wit. *It'd be interesting to see*, Chakotay mused.

For the moment, however, the pilot's better instincts were on the new engineer, and

Chakotay had to give in. Not that he'd been doubting Tom instincts lately.

"I suppose she is. She's not my type."

Tom snorted. "No, I guess not."

He stopped on that, clenching his jaw at the reminder.

Seeing it, Tom turned an apologetic eye back to him. "Come on Chakotay, do you think you're the only man who's gotten involved with the wrong woman?" he asked. "I feel better knowing I'm not the only one."

"I'm still trying to believe it," the captain said, restraining a sigh for his own unwitting involvement in it all. "I wonder if we should even be staying here, since we have no clue what information Seska sent, how much she communicated to her contact."

"I know. I have a bad feeling about it, too."

"Maybe we should speed things up--avoid Riva for a while, give them the impression we've abandoned it. I'll tell Adams that we're heading out in two days instead of three. We'll drop off whoever we can first and come back in a few days and take some more. Maybe by then we'll know better how much they know."

Tom nodded. "Good idea. Do you mind if I go out to the Harlowes' and try to get them to hurry things up? I'd hate to see anything happen to Jenna or the kids. I'd like it if they're out with the first group."

"I didn't know Lloyd Harlowe had changed his mind."

Tom looked around aimlessly before admitting, "He hasn't. The least I can do is get the kids and Jenna. Maybe I can convince him to come later."

"If it'll make you feel better. But Tom, don't be disappointed if you can't change his mind."

"I won't. I'll just lump him in with the others who want to stay. I want Jenna out of here, though."

Chakotay assented with a pat on the pilot's shoulder. "I'll come by later and we'll continue our sessions. Is that okay?"

"Actually, I'm interested in keeping this up. I know it hasn't been that long, but it's really starting to make sense--for what that's worth. It's made me see a lot of things."

"It takes time to understand what you see in the vision quests, Tom. It'll take longer than a couple months. I told you that when we started."

"I know. In any case, I want to keep it up."

"Good," Chakotay nodded. "I'll see you at dinner. Tell Jenna not to hide dead animals in the food this time."

"See you then," Tom chuckled. The captain's warning and their plans to continue his

therapy still digesting, however, he found himself regarding the young woman again as soon as Chakotay had turned away.

What is it about her that's so familiar? Maybe if I could figure that out, maybe I could get rid of it. No, I'm not going to deny this. No more turning away or bottling in, making excuses. I've promised to be honest with myself no matter how uncomfortable. I promised myself that when I started all this; I'm not going to let myself go backwards. This means too much. I can't go back....

Despite--or maybe following--his self-inflicted advice, he took a few steps around to get a better look at her, though he still kept his distance. Simply put, improving his view was probably the worst thing he could have done to calm himself. He took a good breath, let it out. *No backing off, no lying. Fine, then, she's beautiful, intelligent, from what I've heard... No, her eyes alone prove she's brilliant. She's got that spark that says it. Okay, beautiful, intelligent, spirited and...looking at me. Damn.*

"What the hell are you looking at?" she demanded, getting up from her work to chase him away.

To his credit, Tom didn't move, but rather, bowed his head slightly in greeting. "Sorry, but I was looking at you. You're the new engineer Chakotay told me about." His years of experience prevented him from giving away the little cyclones churning in his mind when he offered her his most neutral grin. "He told me you'd realigned the dilithium matrix in record time. I'm impressed, especially considering that it belongs in a museum."

"Thanks," she said, softening slightly, forcing herself to keep face before the handsome man's intense gaze. To her memory, nobody had ever looked at her like *that*. "I'm B'Elanna Torres. You must be Tom Paris." She shrugged at his expression. "The captain told me about you, too."

"Did he?" Tom grinned. "And he was the one who said I should keep a low profile. He'll catch some hell for that. --No, don't worry. I won't give you away. I just like having an excuse to keep him on his toes." He offered his hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you, B'Elanna Torres. Welcome."

"Thanks."

When she briefly wrapped her fingers around his, he drew a slow, unnoticeable breath to calm himself, then released her hand, lest he pull her in. "I'll see you around sometime. It's hard not to cross paths on a ship this small."

She nodded, schooling herself into seeming more comfortable by raising her chin. "Yes, I guess so."

He had almost escaped, having turned--not too slow, not too quickly--and started away. A moment later, her clear-tempered voice called out--

"Hey, Tom Paris."

Tom swung around and saw the young woman's shy, pretty smile asserting itself through her failed air of casualness; her small but well-postured body planted itself to the ground, while her fingers, extending from her tightly crossed arms, fumbled unconsciously

with the folds of her vest. Her inquisitive, birdlike eyes, however, were bolted to his, as if testing his resolve.

Then and there, Tom knew he belonged to her, and he smiled right through it.

"Yes, B'Elanna Torres?"

"It's just B'Elanna."

"And I'm just Tom."

"Well, then, Tom, I hear we're headed for Netari-Three on our way to--what was it? Riva?" Tom nodded. "Have you been there? To Netari?"

"A few times. In fact, I just got word we're skipping Riva and going directly to Netari. --Changes in plans are pretty common, here. We'll be at the trade post in a couple days, maybe three."

"Oh? Well, maybe you could show me around? I've got a list of things to do there. Supplies."

He gave a short, gentlemanly bow, but kept his neutral grin. "It would be my pleasure, B'Elanna."

She blushed--and hid it by shifting her stance and training down the corners of her mouth, popping her lips before nailing him with her stare again. "I guess I'll see you then."

With a nod and one more look to what he knew was the most captivating set of eyes he'd ever encountered, Tom turned swiftly and headed to the closest exit.

*Damn. Damn. Damn! She's got a soft spot and she's not all dilithium and ISO chips. Not to mention she responded--asked *me* to go shopping. Why when I finally get close to making sense out of my life, someone comes along. Hold on, stop. She's just a beautiful woman who's not all bad--and who says that it had to become anything? Give her and yourself a little credit. Nothing's happened. Yet.*

At thirty-five, Jenna Harlowe's skin was tawny from the sun and her shock of brassy hair regularly escaped the trappings of her crudely constructed French twist whenever the right wind hit it. She rarely bothered to fix the curls back in place. Her fingers were rough and stained with dirt and grape juice, and manicure was not in her vocabulary. Reinforcing her salty reputation on Tinalat was an infectious cackle that often followed her unflinching opinions and edicts. Not surprisingly, everyone on the Harlowe vineyard knew exactly who Momma was and they minded without question. Everyone except Lloyd.

Tom arrived to find them in another round of arguments, which in itself wasn't all too unusual. They bickered as heartily as they loved, and as a result, all of the Harlowes were known to be an excitable bunch. So, Tom felt no need to turn around, but took a seat on the well-appointed patio and poured himself a glass of juice from the selection sitting on the table while the yelling continued inside.

"You can't ask me to give up everything just because the Federation's decided to curl

up and play doggie to those monsters!"

"And you cannot ask *me* to endanger the babies by staying here! Lloyd, I love you, God knows I do. But if anything happened to them, I'd die. I know I will. *You* know I will."

Silence, and Tom gladly noted that the children were nowhere in sight.

"Where will you go?"

"I guess we'll head back to Earth. Your mother's invited us. She'll have a conniption when she finds out you're not along. But better that than nothing."

"Fine. Oh God, stop looking at me like that! Okay, fine! When the harvest is in, I'll come."

"You promise?"

"I promise. I *PROMISE*, goddamnit! Now will you stop running your claws down my back?"

"Oh! And I thought you liked it when I left trails!"

Tom nearly spit his drink. His quick reflexes alone held it in held it in as her girlish laugh echoed out of the house.

"Or maybe that'd be my lover!" Jenna railed on. "I do get you two mixed up sometimes."

"If--God forbid--you had a lover, Regena," he retorted, "there'd be twice as many of your babies running around the house."

"La! Who says the first five are yours?"

Her laughter echoed out again as he shot back his preferred expletives; soon after, Tom heard the creek of the door and her small feet hitting the steps behind him.

"Oh, so you've come to take our cider, have you?" she chimed as she approached. "Just prowl right in and--" Jenna stopped to peck the side of his head, "--make yourself at home."

"I'm not getting in it with you, Jenna," Tom grinned. "You're already charged up."

"Crap. And here I thought I'd gotten myself another beating post." She plopped down next to him on the settee. "How's it been? What's going on?"

"We've moved up the leave date," he told her. "You need to pack--tonight. The first shipment's in two days."

Jenna laughed. "You think I can get five kids and an unruly husband in line in but two days? Tom, that's mad." She heard the door behind them and turned to see her husband. "Did you hear that?"

Turning, Tom saw Lloyd, his tan face furrowed into a scowl, his clothes dotted with

mud from work. His hands hung stiffly at his sides. Upon sight of the Maquis pilot, his slate-colored eyes sparked anew. "Jenna's right, we can't be ready that soon."

Tom sighed. "We flushed out a spy on our ship, a Cardassian agent. We don't know what she transmitted, but she knew the plan and everything else going on here. When they come--and they *are* coming to clear this planet--we won't have the element of surprise on our side. You're all in danger here."

"Clear the planet?" Lloyd growled. "What the hell do you mean by that?"

"From what we've heard, they want to use it as a mining base."

"What?! My vineyard, my house--everything's going to soot?"

Tom nodded, sighing at the thought. It was a beautiful place. It reminded him of the countryside outside Marseilles. He and Jenna had met at the bar and he went with her on a day trip to that countryside a few days later. *God, how long ago was it?* He snapped his attention back to the present and found Lloyd's bitter face again. He offered a short nod of sympathy. "They probably let us know it to insult us. Either way, we want the civilians out of here--now. We have another ship here by nightfall to take the first load. We'll be taking the rest."

"Us? We?" Jenna remarked, looking at the young man's certain expression. "You really are involved in this, aren't you now? You're committed totally."

"Yes."

Jenna took a thought at all of it; looking around, she did seem to fight back her tears at the idea. Yet there seemed to be little dissension in her mind, for in less than a minute, she pushed herself out of her seat.

"I'll make dinner, then," she replied, deceptively simple. "And when the children get home, we'll get our best things together. Tomorrow, we'll go to the port and climb aboard whatever'll take us." She stared back at her husband, her eyes strong and sad. "For the babies, Lloyd, I won't take any chances. If it works out otherwise, we'll have just called it a vacation. But I'm not risking the children to those bastards. Even if you were stupid enough to ask me to, I wouldn't do that."

Lloyd nodded, but waited for her to go inside before looking at the young man across from him. He hadn't liked Tom at all until he'd sobered up, and he still didn't trust him much. Sure, he'd watched the man suffer during his stay there, heard all about his troubles, but he never warmed to self pity much, either. It disgusted him. But if the boy had gotten off his ass like his wife had told him, Lloyd figured he could give a little. "I want to talk to that captain of yours. If what you say is true, I wouldn't mind helping you people out."

"He's coming for dinner."

"You invited him?"

"No, Jenna did."

"Damn me if that woman isn't always stirring her brew. Well, this time, I suppose it's

convenient." The man took a long, tight breath. "Take down my vineyard. For that alone, I wouldn't mind putting a few Cardassian heads on my garden pikes."

"There's more to this than land, Lloyd."

"What would you know?" the older man snapped. "You've never had a home you loved, one you built up with your own hands. You wouldn't know what it's like to have some madman's treaty come and take it away."

Tom was bruised and showed it. "I didn't say that it didn't matter," he told him quietly, "I just said there was more. And houses can be replaced. Lives can't." Finally he met the older man's eyes. "That's something I *do* know from personal experience. If anything happened to Jenna or your children, you know you'd never forgive yourself. For that matter, I wouldn't either. At some point you've got to stop being stubborn and let go. You can build another farm, Lloyd, but you won't get your family back."

He seemed a little taken by Tom's show of strength. It wasn't something he'd seen before in the young man. So he nodded curtly and didn't argue his last point. "Go inside and help Jenna, would you? I need a little time."

Only when he knew he was alone did Lloyd bend his head to his fists.

"You really have changed."

Tom turned from the case he was packing to see the ruddy-haired boy giving him a plain stare. They had been working silently for more than an hour, getting the kids' things ready to leave Tinalat, and Tom had wondered what had kept Tommy so quiet so long. It hadn't occurred to him that he would seem so different to others.

"Have I?" he said, the corner of his mouth turning up a bit. "Well, you're used to seeing me on the other side of a busy night, Tommy."

Tommy shook his head. "That's not all of it," he said. "You're..." he sighed in his search for the right words, "...more together, somehow, more serious. Momma told me what happened." Tommy smiled at him. "You know, I like you like this."

This brought a look of mild surprise to the pilot's face. "Really?"

"Yeah. You know, I was always curious about you, but you were scary--in a way that we didn't know if you'd still be alive by morning. For that matter, you don't look dead anymore. I'd think that's pretty good on its own."

Tom grinned. "Your parents raised you well, Tommy. Mine tried, they really did. But it wasn't their fault, not really." Laughing quietly to himself, he stuffed a few more shoes into the case. "It's hard to turn around and realize that you've let things happen to you."

"I guess so. But you did end up righting yourself. That should make you feel good, knowing you did."

Tom turned from his work again to see the young man's face, bright and admiring, so unafraid and reasonably secure, so unlike himself at the age--or least what he knew he'd really been, then. "Thanks," he said. "That means a lot to me."

"You mean you didn't know how far you'd come?" Tommy asked. "You have to know you come off totally different now."

"Amazing what a day can do," Tom replied, his eyes turning down. "I saw something that I will never forget. It shocked me hard enough to kill a part of me...a part of me that dwelled on all the wrong things. It made me see things clearly for the first time in years--ever, really." He nodded, more to himself. "Yeah, I'm different, I guess. But I'm not sorry for what happened--strange, huh? I guess I like myself now, too."

Once more, Tom looked at the young man, unconsciously straightening his posture as he concluded, "Now that I know what I want, what I need, I can do nothing but go after it." He grinned, feeling it. "I've finally found a reason to live."

Tommy nodded, then grinned. "That reason wouldn't be a lovely lady just come to the Liberty, would it?"

Tom laughed. "What would you know about that?"

"I heard your captain saying you nearly tripped over your tongue on first sight." Tommy's smile increased as the man turned quickly back to close the suitcase. "Is she very beautiful?"

Tom locked the case, then closed up another, chuckling to himself. Young Tommy was a lot more like his mother than Lloyd would probably have liked to know. "Very pretty," he answered, "and more. But Chakotay says I'm on woman restriction until I get myself a little more stable."

"Are you going to listen to him?"

"We'll see." Tom set his knee on the side of the case to close it completely. "I don't want to do anything to hurt myself or her, but it's strange that I can't stop thinking about her. Maybe it's the sobriety--no workable distractions." He chuckled to himself. "To think my father always said I couldn't concentrate on anything. I sometimes still wonder what he'd think if he knew what'd happened to me."

Tommy shrugged and collected one of his cases. "Why don't you write and tell him?"

"That's a good idea," Tom said, wondering why he hadn't thought of it. But then he shook his head. "I don't think he'd listen, though. --I know what you're thinking, Tommy, but you've never met him. It takes him a long time to turn around on an idea he's cemented himself into, if at all. The fact that I'm a Maquis now only makes things more complicated." Tom shook his head. "I'm not ready to tell him anything about myself. When I feel the need, I will, though. I guess he deserves that much."

"It couldn't have been that bad."

But the pilot sighed. "I'd like to believe that, myself. Unfortunately, I did the worst thing I could have done to him, and to myself. I'll never be the son he thought he knew again. I refuse to try to anymore. His dreams for me died the day of my court martial, and in a way, I died, too, because I'll never be willing to do what I did to myself again--or force myself to be anything but what I am. I didn't start living again until only recently; I don't think he'll recognize me." Tom sighed, a wistful grin below his watery eyes. "What's

left here to pack?"

They hadn't expected the fires to come so quickly. Even at the port, they couldn't have known that the countryside was quickly burning to a crisp. But seeing how bad it was, Tom ran even faster, scared to death that he would trip or go the wrong way and lose her forever. No, he couldn't let that happen. *I should've kept my eye on her after the blast! Sure, there's a lot of other people and the kids, but damnit, I could have kept an eye on her, too!*

Finally, he did catch up with her--doubling his movements and swiftly grabbing her arm to rip her around and face him.

"Let go!"

"Jenna, you can't go back!" Tom screamed. "There's not enough time!"

"But my Lloyd!" she cried, trying to jostle herself free. "I got to see! I have to go to him!" Jenna finally squirmed out of Tom's grip and ran through the fields, now afire and wafting a thick smoke. She charged through the cinders, knowing her friend was on her heels and not giving a damn about that, either.

"Jenna, you can't save him now!" he hollered. "You've got to save yourself and the kids!"

His words only sped her. "I'm not leaving Lloyd!!"

She was nearing the house. She knew her land, in every bump and turn in it. Though thick smoke blinded her beyond two meters, she ground her feet into the hot ground, feeling the singe of nearby flames, the wind carrying them in all directions though she couldn't see it either, only the blackened ground, a rock, a path. It was definitely her land, and turning sharply in a path between some stones, she ran hard towards the house.

Then she stopped dead.

Tom almost ran over her, skipping to a stop. When a drift blew aside the smoke for a moment, he too found himself frozen. The ground was lined with a sight he'd seen before--one too many times already. Only seconds later, the rage he knew as well began to grow in his gut, sickening his heart and shaking his limbs...

Then the fire changed direction. Blinking the acrid smoke from his eyes, he remembered there wasn't time even before they got there. But Jenna, agape, saw nothing but the corpse of her husband, and bending as if to collect him in her hands, she began to convulse with sobs.

Deciding quickly, Tom grabbed her small body and sacked her over his shoulder to return from whence they came. Jenna screamed with bloody protest as he turned, cringing at the shrieks in his ears and the memories flashing behind his eyes, mixing with the new. Grunting to force them away, he ran hard back towards the city--or what was probably left of it by then--grabbing his communicator as Jenna kicked and beat his back with her fists, crying out for her Lloyd the entire way.

He managed to get her to bed a few hours later, promising ten times that the children were safe and sleeping too. With her continued protests, Tom took her to check on them twice, and on the way back the second time, he held her as she sobbed in his arms. He stayed even after Chakotay's numerous calls to the conn, knowing she needed someone then--knowing also he owed her many times over. In the end, however, Tom was forced to slip a sedative on Jenna and find someone to watch over her.

Despite his feelings of duty to her, it was a guilty relief to return to his post on the bridge. When he sat, he initiated a few sensor sweeps to busy himself as they flew away from Tinalat for the last time.

Now I have two women on my mind. One a new widow and the other my counselor can't in good conscience let me pursue. Why do things always have to come all at once? How is she going to tell the children? I wonder what B'Elanna Torres would think of me if she knew about me? What the hell will Jenna do on a Maquis ship?

Tom took a sharp breath and began a diagnostic.

Chakotay had been on the bridge when the Cardassian ship began to administer its evacuation orders, but he'd heard that Jenna had almost gotten herself killed by leaving the port--and Tom too, when he went after her. Thankfully, they'd managed to get back in enough time and the Liberty was en route to a trading colony, where more transportation was to be arranged for the colonists. Finally taking a long look at his stony faced pilot, he asked the question: "What happened down there?"

"Lloyd's dead, along with the others who decided to hold their ground," he answered. "They were executed."

"Executed?"

Tom stared at the console. "Their hands were bound and they were phasered. It couldn't have been after the fires started. I think anyone who wasn't boarding ships in the city were taken down."

Chakotay ground his teeth together, but seemed to bear it well enough when he gave a nod and let out his breath. "That does it, then."

"You said it'd get worse." Tom shook his head. "Damned idiot. He wouldn't listen to me or you or anyone else. --And Jenna's got to take it. She's in shock. She saw everything."

Chakotay understood. "Is she resting?"

"With some help," Tom replied, then turned a look his captain's way. "She wants to stay, Chakotay, send the kids to their grandmother's on Earth and help out with the effort. I told her I'd tell you about it." He shrugged. "I can see why she'd want to, though I think she needs time to make the choice--and the ability to change her mind."

"We'll see." Chakotay paused. "Jenna said she'd taken some medical training before she got married. Need an assistant?"

"Never hurts to have help." Jenna's request finally taken care of, his fingers still tapping at the well-worn panels, his thoughts began to drift back to the other woman on

his mind and would have remained there if Chakotay hadn't spoken again.

"As soon as we drop these people off, get the Harlowe children's transport arranged, we'll head off to Nagheris to help them build their defenses. After that's done, then we'll drop in on one of the bases, set up some new strategies."

"Nagheris? That's still being negotiated, I thought."

"Do you think that's made any difference? There are only nine hundred colonists there, and they haven't had communication with Starfleet in years--only from us last month. They have some deflector matrices they used during the Border Wars, but it won't be enough. The Cardassians will walk right through them. --Tom, I need you on this. You're good with people. I want you to coordinate with their representatives and see what else they might need."

"And if they need more than Adams thinks?"

"We'll arrange to have an eye kept on them, then." He pushed the COMM line. "Chakotay to Latres."

"Yes? What?"

He grinned at his lack of regard for his rank, but continued anyway. Not being in Starfleet still sometimes caught him off guard. "I need you to arrange a team to analyze the Negherisian defenses. And bring Torres along. It's time she got out of the engine room, and she's got a business sense they won't mess with." He gave a nod to his tactical officer. "Go help see what we can spare for the meantime."

Tom turned in his seat once the COMM was cut and Yardley had left the bridge. "Are you sure about sending Torres to deal with the Negherisians? She's still pretty new."

"She'll do fine," he said, easily amused by Tom's defense of a woman he hardly knew. "I thought you agreed that it wouldn't be a good idea to get yourself involved with anyone just yet."

"I've kept myself busy," Tom replied, a little insulted. "Besides, I only met her, it was ridiculously professional, and I've only talked business with her since. I want to get to know her, but...God, why am I telling you this?"

Chakotay didn't answer, but said, "All I'm saying is to be careful. It doesn't mean you can't be her friend. It's just that not too long ago, you were praying for death." He took the seat next to the conn and gave his friend an understanding smile. "I know what infatuation looks like. I've had it myself; I don't blame you. In a way, it's good to see you getting back to something a little more like yourself, and maybe something might click between you two. But I don't think you're ready right now. I also don't want it to cause any conflicts on the ship."

"I hear you," Tom relented. "I don't want to, but I do know what you're saying. --But at the same time...I remember seeing her when we were both at the Academy, in my last year, but when she looked at me, the expression on her face after she told that guy to go to hell...I know what lust is and this isn't it, not really. What I really want to do is know her. I can't help it. Trust me, I've never wanted to pick the brain of any run of the mill

woman I've found attractive."

"She fascinates you," Chakotay nodded, "and that's fine. Just don't let yourself get carried away. --And don't let her think there's any more to it than friendship. I have a feeling she won't take that well."

"I wouldn't do that. I can tell she's been hurt."

"You can?" Chakotay asked incredulously, but then reconsidered. "Well, I guess you would know it when you saw it." He grinned and turned back to the controls. "Don't worry so much about her, Tom. She can take care of herself."

Tom's mouth turned down. "Yeah, well, she should. She seems to have a lot of experience at it."

Not ten days later, watching his pilot and the new engineer sort and install parts into the colony's control center, Chakotay smiled to think his senses had been dead on after all. Paris had not only organized the Negherisian supply list, but had used his charm and easygoing humor to earn their uneasy trust. Meanwhile, Torres' quick and single-tracked mind had kept the work flowing from one project to the next--often before the Negherisians realized it was being done. Things were going smoothly as a result. If their supplies came in on time, the Liberty could be out of there sooner rather than later.

Tom was doing so well, in fact, the captain allowed the pilot his now regular diversion--watching the young engineer build, almost from scratch, the new shield grid. Chakotay didn't even argue with the younger man's offer to assist her. Tom dug right in, all business and pure efficiency. B'Elanna's concerted coaching over their slim meals and little spare time was well-digested by the pilot and put to good use. He took over the task of explaining to some of the colonists how the new equipment worked, how to maintain it, sparing her from a good deal of distraction. Still monitoring them, Chakotay found his expectations outdone as they gave each other a nod from across the room and turned to continue their separate tasks.

Maybe this'll work out after all, he thought, then turned to talk to a Polson, the colonist who had been assigned to oversee the modifications.

B'Elanna tucked a strand of hair behind her ear as she leaned over the next circuit board to be installed, trying to ignore the proximity of one male colonist, who seemed little too interested in her panel. "Tom," she said, purposefully louder than necessary, "you can bring me that isolinear grid now."

Tom examined the colonist beside her carefully before stepping back. "Sure, B'Elanna," he said and moved to find it in the pile unceremoniously beamed onto the maintenance room floor. He bent to pick it up, not taking his eyes off the two for more than a few seconds, feeling his hair crawling on the nape of his neck.

B'Elanna felt her shoulders tighten as the man leaned against the panel beside her. "You mind getting out of my light?" she asked, clipped but neutral. She'd been informed that these people didn't get out often, so she tried not to cause any trouble, even if the man was making her teeth grit.

"I've never met a Klingon before," said the man.

B'Elanna's eyes didn't move from the board, even as they narrowed. "Well, now you have."

"I never thought I'd see such a pretty one."

"I have work to do," she said, deadly quiet. "If I don't finish this, it's possible you'll never have the chance to see another *one*. So if you don't mind, let me get on with my work."

"But it's your work I'm here to see."

B'Elanna fought her rising blood, raising her chin, replying coldly, "I'm sure Latres would be thrilled to tell you. Go find him."

"I'm not talking about the shields, Torres."

She felt his hand running smoothly down her back and she jumped aside, ready to strike, opening her mouth to yell--

But all she saw was the man hurling back, collar-first. "Get your goddamn hands off her!" Tom bellowed and caught the man's fist as it came around. Twisting it in his long, muscular fingers until a couple knuckles cracked, Tom's other fist popped the colonist's mouth and jaw in two quick punches. His elbow came back on the rebound, snapping the colonist's head around with a spray of blood and sending him spinning to the hard floor. The man hit it with a thud.

Staring at his damage, Tom drew two deep breaths, reigning himself in as quickly as he'd burst. Then his stare latched onto B'Elanna, who could only stare back, gape-mouthed. "Are you okay?"

She blinked, then straightened. "I could've take care of it," she told him abruptly, feeling suddenly vulnerable not only for having her fight taken away from her, but under the weight of his attention. It made her uncomfortable all the same. "He's not the first man to make a wrong move on me, you know. I can defend myself."

"I know that," he replied. "But you shouldn't have *had* to." Before she could argue that, too, he reiterated with more emphasis, "Are you *okay*?"

Seeing his chest moving hard, his face tight with stress, his piercing stare, B'Elanna finally gave a short nod. "I'm fine."

Tom didn't break their eye contact before she did. Once released, he flexed his swollen fingers, then bent his head, gritting his teeth. "Damn."

Chakotay and Polson arrived a moment later. "What the hell's going on, Paris?" the captain asked.

Polson looked agape at the younger man. "What happened, Paris? What happened to Gill?"

Tom's anger flared again at their demands--and partially because it was a stupid

question. "I hit the son of a bitch, that's what happened!" He turned his glare to the older colonist. "I'd appreciate it if your *trainees* had a better idea of what equipment they're *supposed* to be working on," he snapped and didn't wait for a reply or explanation--though he'd expected neither. Stepping around the body, Tom turned to his captain. "I'll send Jenna to clean this mess up. She needs to be busy."

With that, he spun around and scooped up the isolinear grid. Placing it gently in B'Elanna's hands, catching her gaze one more time, he turned to leave without another word.

B'Elanna leaned against the wall she'd been working on, too stunned to be embarrassed by the pilot, or even angry at him anymore. While Chakotay apologized for his pilot to the flabbergasted representative, she looked down to the unluckier man. Blood had begun to form a puddle around the man's gaping mouth, and his breath had been reduced to gurgles. Polson turned Gill over and her brow rose as the older man gasped at the pulp he found there...

On impulse, B'Elanna set the grid down and moved to try to follow Tom. She almost called out, but Chakotay caught her arm, stopping her.

"Let him go," he said quietly.

"But..." She let out a quick breath. "I didn't thank him for what he did."

"Thank him later. Let him cool off for now."

B'Elanna still stared at the corridor Tom had disappeared into. "He's helped me a lot since I came here, Chakotay, from day one. Right down to working in this pit--and he's asked nothing in return. You were right about him; I don't think you know how much I respect that. Even so, I didn't even think he'd be capable of..." She gestured to the unconscious man, not bothering to finish. "It took me more off guard than this idiot did, and I spit on him for it."

The captain grinned. "Tom's got a chivalrous sense of honor, B'Elanna. Get used to that--and get used to him being unpredictable. He's usually not this excitable, but when he lets loose, he means business. So let him get his wits back in order. It's no good to talk to him when he's heated up."

Knowing that need too well, B'Elanna relented and moved back to her work. Facing the open panel again, however, she did allow herself a little smile. *But he stood up for *me*...*

She spent several more seconds in that pleasant distraction before realizing she didn't have a hyperspinner.

Meanwhile, Jenna materialized a meter away from Chakotay, only to raise her brows at the heap Tom had told her to break herself in on. "That's my boy," she quipped and knelt down by the body with a tricorder. Turning a quick look to Polson, she shrugged. "He'll be fine. Just a barfight bruising--a couple teeth popped out and a little concussion, is all. Oops, that and a broken jaw--but it's all fixable. Why don't you get some people to get him to a bed and we'll get him re-toothed, hmm?"

The older man hurried away upon the suggestion, and Chakotay kneeled beside her, perusing Tom's victim, then Jenna. "You sure you're up to treating--?"

"If I don't keep busy, I'll go mad for certain," she cut in and immediately continued, "Now what the hell happened to blow our Thomas up on this poor wretch?"

Chakotay looked up to see B'Elanna thankfully wandering away; he gestured to the man at their knees. "He was getting a little too familiar with our new engineer," he said quietly.

Jenna almost laughed, but stuffed it, turning a regenerator down to the man's mouth. "Oh damn, little wonder. Tom's got it bad, you know."

"I'm starting to see that. I don't know if it that's a good thing."

Jenna shook her head. "It's fine, Chakotay. Frankly, I think he's being too careful sometimes, always worrying if he's doing right or no. Let him be. He won't go anywhere wrong with the girl."

"I think there's too much conflict of interest with relationships on the ship."

"Oh, bullshit," Jenna countered. "You're just scared they'll make babies or something like crazy like that. For that matter, I thought it was a hell of a lot more conflicting when you hired a man you despised on sight to fly your precious piece of crap." She readjusted the regenerator's intensity. "Or don't you recall how much you hated his guts? *You* were the one learning to calm down when you and I first met. You'd have rather drop-kicked him than think a good word about him."

Chakotay's eyes turned down. Against his will, a grin twisted his mouth as her words struck home. "It's so different now," he admitted, "I have a hard time believing how well he's done, especially remembering..."

47072-47116 (about two months ago)

When former officer sought out discharged officer, we didn't know what he'd find. Paris was like that, and it made Chakotay distrust him even more. Sometimes in his drink, the pilot was lucid and clear-minded, but other times he was so annoying that it was hard to be in the same room without seriously considering knocking him out. When he was sober, he was so distant Chakotay couldn't have gotten to know him if he tried.

Once he found Paris, who had returned from his first mission the day before, he noted the gleam of a flask in his hand, open for business. The odd part was that his hand was shaking and his eyes were lost in thought. Usually possessing good peripheral vision, Paris didn't even blink when Chakotay's shadow crossed him. *Maybe it was the heat of nearly getting caught*, the captain thought, knowing Paris probably *would* have been in a Starfleet brig by then if it hadn't been for some interesting interference.

When Chakotay had been alerted to that potential recruit, Paris had been residing with an old friend on Tinalat whose family owned a sprawling vineyard--an irony Chakotay could only shake his head at. Before the mission, a suddenly inspired Paris sought out the

friend and borrowed some shipping cases and hid his cargo inside of them. The triferrous compounds lining the interior of the cases--designed to protect delicate wines from changes in atmosphere and gravity--rendered the illegal isotopes impossible to detect. They had been stopped by a Federation patrol, but let go.

Paris, of course, denied it, but he seemed a little bothered by the incident, which was saying a lot, since he never seemed to give a damn about anything.

So Chakotay sought him out for curiosity's sake, on the pretense of belatedly thanking him. He found what he expected, even if the shaking hand, the ghostly stare, unexpectedly concerned him.

"Paris?" said Chakotay, and he tried not to show his disgust when the younger man turned his bleary eyes to him. His expression was a pale wall, his blank stare a cast iron shield. He hadn't shaved, and his hair, as usual, had only been combed by his fingers. His clothes were rumpled. *What a mess*, the captain thought, but kept his face in check. "I wanted to thank you. You did a good job out there."

The pilot smirked. "I thought you'd retired your commission, Chakotay."

"What do you mean?"

"Rein in your hostility any more, you'll be nothing but a black hole." He took another swig from the flask, gritting his jaw upon the taste of it before looking again at the captain. "I might deserve your hatred, but I don't deserve your lies."

Chakotay felt his face redden, his jaw clench, but he chose not to fight the drunk that day. "Get some sleep and a shower. You need both."

"I can never go home, you know," Tom said laconically, a trace of sadness had reaching beyond the mask. "If they'd caught me today, they'd have thrown me in the nearest prison. Wonder what my father would have said, if anything. Probably nothing."

Chakotay watched the pilot fade away, shaking his head without pity. What a waste that a man would let his life flush away without stopping to see what he was losing. With that in mind, he didn't bother moving Tom, but simply walked away. He had a feeling the pilot wouldn't be around much longer. If there had ever been anything special about the admiral's estranged son, there was nothing left.

Thinking on that, Chakotay felt an unusually bitter grin grow on his lips. *Well, since there's nothing left, maybe it'd be to my advantage to use him tomorrow, just in case things get dicey. The way he acts, he'll make a good distraction....*

For the remainder of his life, Chakotay was certain, absolutely certain, he would never forget the look on Tom Paris' face.

Whatever the pilot might have drank that day was rendered useless; all the bravado, the jokes, that damned grin he'd shot only thirty minutes earlier, just before they arrived at the planned rendezvous, arguing as usual--this time about Seska, whom Paris openly mocked. All of that was gone. The man Chakotay had brought there was gone.

Upon the sight of Gul Alore's trade--for twenty minutes and counting--Thomas Paris

was silent. His skin was pale, his hands trembled, and his eyes...saw hell.

How he held it together so long was a mystery to Chakotay, though he knew the man had reached an edge that no one could have predicted. Maybe he was on the edge before and just needed a shock to send him over. Maybe he'd already been there. Chakotay couldn't tell. He too, had felt his stomach crawl when he saw Alore's work. But Paris was changed. What was left of the young man's innocence and ignorance had been killed. Chakotay couldn't figure out if he was glad or regretted it. He'd hoped to teach that self-made waste a lesson by bringing him to the negotiation, but not to show him what they were witnessing. Nobody deserved that. Nobody deserved the trauma that Paris undoubtedly, albeit silently, was enduring.

What frightened the captain most, though, was the young man's stillness, while his eyes, blank with a hatred, burned into the Gul, who had "returned" the prisoners to their homeworld.

"I apologize if our interrogation was, perhaps, too harsh," said Gul Alore in conclusion, scratching a nub on his neck as he gestured breezily over what the Avalaran Council had paid so highly for--and Chakotay had personally arranged to get in a desperate bargain between connections. "But, these things happen."

Without warning, Tom lunged out at Alore, crying out as he tackled the man onto the mossy ground. With animal brutality, the pilot dug his fingers into the gul's neck, tearing at the gray skin there and grappling for veins the moment he saw blood. But a thrust thrown into his side by another Cardassian knocked his hands loose. Another kick and he was hurled off Alore.

Landing on the dirt, Tom came face-to-face with the little girl--though she barely had a face anymore, only a gaping, bare-toothed mouth and shock-open eyes.

Tom jerked back, terrified at the sight anew, trembling enough that his teeth chattered. "Oh god, oh god..." he whimpered over and over, unable to stop the tears from forming in his eyes or stop his shaking. "N...no...oh god..."

Chakotay started to bring Tom back nearer to him, away from that girl, but Alore, back on his feet, was too well-protected by the representatives on either side of him. Aiming their weapons his way, they effectively convinced Chakotay to hold his position. Then the Gul smiled, making Chakotay almost take the chance and finish what Tom had started.

"Our part of our bargain is done, now that you've kept your part of it. In spite of your entourage, you see we can have equitable dealings. I hope we might do business again, Captain." With that, he tapped his badge. A moment later, he shimmered away from sight.

The moment they were gone, Chakotay moved across the line of dismembered and partially clothed bodies, then knelt down to Tom, who had put his pale, jarring hand on the little girl's bloody hair. "Come on, Tom. Let's go."

"No...no. I...I can't go."

"You don't need to be here. You couldn't have prevented this. None of us could."

The pilot didn't move, but his eyes took in the grisly sight again--the line of Avalaran children and teenagers, twelve in all, and the five adults that had been flying the ship back from a neighboring planet. Clearly, they'd all been tortured. The older females might have been raped; what was left of their clothing made it a possibility. Their wrists still bore the marks of being tied; their feet had been burnt, some to the extent of charring. Many of the facades on the young corpses reflected what had been done to them, their last, excruciating moments...

Tom looked down at the smallest girl again, saw his tears drop onto her phaser-burnt face. He choked back on it, nearly unable to hold back any longer. "What have I done?"

"You didn't do anything," Chakotay said firmly. "Tom, we need to go."

"How could I have thought that I'd ever had it bad?" he said quietly, his voice quivering in a way Chakotay could never have expected. He sounded like a hurt child. "God, what a piece of shit I am. Look at these kids--they never even had the chance, and all I've done is wasted mine. I threw everything away. I was too gutless to face it."

Again, he touched the little girl's singed hair with a bloody hand, as if caressing her to sleep. A moment later, his trembling stopped the motion. "I killed three people, Chakotay," he choked. "Three people I loved. I didn't mean to do it; it was an accident. I lied. I don't know why. Scared shitless. I got what I deserved. But none of them, not *one* of those pompous bastards ever gave a damn how I felt about it. They wouldn't even *look* at me when Mom died, they just stared at me. Yeah, I lied, and recanted. But that didn't mean anything. It didn't matter. They didn't care about the...about...not when I was useless to them."

Tom swallowed hard, struggled a breath as he caressed the child's head again. "He didn't even bother to come near me after I'd admitted what I'd done. He was so ashamed, he didn't care that I wanted to die. I wanted to...I wanted to make him proud of me a hell of a lot more than I wanted to be an officer, got as selfish as he was trying to be what he wanted and hating him for it. And now...now, I'll never bring those people back, no matter what I do, what I say, what I want to believe. Nothing will bring Mom back. I'll never be able to unbreak her heart. She died thinking I was lost...and I was. I am." He nodded to the girl. "Nothing will bring her back. And I'm still here."

Chakotay's eyes grew wise at the man's confession. He opened his mouth to speak, but Tom continued first.

"Why the hell did I survive?" he mumbled hoarsely. "For all my thinking about it, Chakotay, I don't understand why I'm still alive at this point. I don't deserve it; I sure haven't done them any justice."

"Maybe you can change that," he offered, a touch of hope in his intent.

Tom looked at his captain, no more resolved, but with a new note of strength in his tone. "I know you don't like me, and that's okay. But I want to stay. I need to bring justice to this. If I don't--if you won't let me--then you'd better bury me with these kids, because I'd rather be dead than live like this anymore. I can't, not after..." He looked at the girl once more, trying on the verge to swallow his heart yet again and failing. He shuddered. "Oh God, how could they do that to her?" At that, he finally gave in.

Chakotay had to steel himself for watching the other man sob aloud, releasing the flood of pent-up pain, restrained too long. For many minutes, Paris did just that--let it go, convulsing with each throw of emotion, pressing a fist at the bridge of his nose, blind to the man who watched him. Silent, the captain let him cry, figuring he needed it.

But after several minutes of feeling useless, the captain decided to be otherwise. Getting to a knee and grabbing the man's shoulders, Chakotay finally answered him, first by looking him in the eyes. He tried to maintain that as he put together the words, though Tom could barely focus at that point, and his sobs had turned to thick coughs. "You can stay on two conditions," he told the pilot. "No more drinking, and you start talking to me. I can't help you if you're drunk and pulling the same evasions that got you here."

Paris' eyes narrowed. "Help me?" he croaked. "Why the hell would you want to help me? Yesterday you wanted to kill me."

"Yesterday, I didn't know you had a heart left. Now I know you do care about something, and I'm getting an idea of what's going on with you, so I've changed my mind."

Even as he spoke the words, he couldn't believe he was doing it. Since they met, Chakotay had used Paris as an outlet for his own anger as much as Paris used his captain as an outlet for his own frustrations. The pilot was impossible, without a shred of respect or sobriety--or so Chakotay thought. He flew well, that was certain, but everything about him reeked of a self-pitying admiral's brat looking for excuses.

I've been so busy vilifying him that I never thought about why he was making himself deserve it, thought the captain, cursing himself to realize it.

Suddenly, it occurred to him that he had been no more caring than the system of protocols that sent him to defend his homeworld soon after the treaty was signed--no more caring than the system that refused to look after an admiral's disgraced son. Chakotay had read the young man's record. He knew what the pilot had done before Paris' first day on board. He also knew that Tom was offered little or no counseling after the accident. After he was court-martialed, Starfleet simply let him go.

Though it didn't excuse Tom Paris' subsequent behavior, it did explain a great deal to Chakotay. How else, after all, was a young, sheltered, albeit cocky kid supposed to react when everything that had guaranteed him a good life dropped him like garbage when he needed their support and forgiveness the most? Tom probably knew few alternatives to Starfleet. Once dismissed, and for what he was dismissed for, little of value remained.

The realization of all these things seemed to fall into Chakotay's head; once it had, he resolved himself to follow through on his promise. With a firm breath to give him strength, Chakotay put his arm around the collapsed pilot--"Come on, Tom. Let's go."--and helped him to stand.

Chakotay waited in the airy front room of the farmhouse, where Paris' old friend had been staying when they came to Avalor. When they arrived, Mila Morgan, the friend's cousin, hurried up the stairs ahead of the two to open up the door to the guest room. She called for a doctor, who treated Tom's bruised ribs and prescribed bedrest and a psychologist. Having plenty of other patients and heartache to deal with that day, he left

as soon as his job was done. Mila then contacted her cousin-in-law, who had been in the city most of the day and had only just heard about the tragedy with the children.

At sunset, the woman finally arrived, pulling off her cloak as she approached the waiting captain and intent enough to skip the formalities.

"How is he?"

"Asleep, I think," Chakotay answered. "The doctor gave him something when I told him what happened. If you don't mind, I'd like to ask you some questions."

She suppressed a snort as she regarded him. "Oh? What sort of questions?"

"I want to help," said Chakotay, plain and simple. "He has a lot to deal with. I need to know more before I can decide what to do."

The woman laughed in disbelief. "If I remember how to read, that wouldn't be 'counselor' pasted on your forehead. Why would *you* of all people want to help Thomas? I saw how you treated him in town the other day. Kicking him around like your mother's bastard. If you must be enlightened, he's sensitive to a fault. He feels everything and stuffs all of it behind whatever he can so you're thrown off track. It's how he was trained and why he drinks--to get numb, get forgetful of the weight he's got inside. And now, here you are thinking you're God's gift to redemption? How am I to trust you, after you drug him away from me just to beat him around? You think you've got some sort of magic spell to snap him out of it?"

Chakotay shook his head, but kept his eyes on her. "I don't think that."

"Well, good, else I'd have branded you the village idiot for certain."

"You seem to be taking this pretty lightly, Mrs. Harlowe, but Tom's in a bad space right now--worse than you know."

"What do you think I don't know?" She took a breath, let it out heavily as she leaned against the back of a chair. "His life took a rotten turn, and he didn't know how to avoid falling down with it. I'd had him at my house for near six months before he joined your band of merry men. Though he still drank like a fish, he did start with a counselor. He was trying--or at least he'd wanted to."

Sighing again, she looked up at him. "So, what do you propose we do? --Yes, *we*. I'm here a couple weeks, and until you get your rustbucket back together, so are you. I don't see you masked marauders stopping off at every planet in the DMZ for his couch session, so it's up to us right now. Come on, spider head, think quick."

Ironically, a little grin crossed his previously somber expression at her bare-faced insults, and he gave the lady a nod of acceptance. "He needs to sober up. He's agreed to do it."

"That'd be about time," she breathed. Then, "He needs to start talking about it, not deflecting us like asteroids--and oh, he's good at that. But I suspect that's no secret to you, hmm?" Her smile returned as she realized what was happening--what she'd hoped would happen since she'd caught up with Tom again on Earth. "You're really serious about this? You're going to help this lad, for whom you have no regard at all."

Chakotay had to give her that. "I know it sounds strange. But you didn't see what I did today."

The woman was instantly serious at the reminder. "Yes, I'd heard about what those creatures had done. God, that they were my children, I'd be in the grave with them."

"Paris nearly ripped the throat out of Gul Aloregh."

"You're kidding! Tom did?"

"Honestly, I thought he'd seen one body too many. For a minute, I didn't think he was still there." The image filed into his mind again, making him pause, his eyes turn down. For all the reasons he'd turned his back on everything he'd worked for, the look on the pilot's face somehow brought it all home again. "It changed my mind. It changed a lot of things. So, I'll be here. I'm willing to help. My engineer doesn't need me right now, anyway."

"Today has been quite a day." Finally, she nodded, wiped her clean hands on her hips. "Well, then, I will let you to it. After all, I'm the only one Tom had left, next to his momma. But that dear lady's gone, so I think I've some responsibility to pick and choose. Now he's got two who give a damn. What will the boy do?" Without another word, she whirled around and threw her cloak over the couch. "Mila? You in the kitchen, girl?"

"You're back already, Jenna?"

"Do I sound like I'm somewhere else? Be a dear and fix us some tea. I'm going to look in on Tom and try to get him to come down." She looked back at Chakotay. "He shouldn't be allowed to oversleep--and trust me, he'll strangle the sheets for over a day if he's let to. The way he's feeling, he'll likely want to stay there. And call the doctor for me. If Tom's getting off the booze, he'll need some help."

"Don't you think he's better off feeling a bit of it?" Chakotay asked.

Jenna gave him a long look. "You've no clue how much he drank," she said and continued up the stairs.

Thanks to Jenna's insistence to keep the man medicated for the time being and Paris' sudden need to talk, it didn't take Chakotay long to understand exactly what had happened to the young man in his charge. As a bonus, he likewise learned about more than Paris' reputation as a crack pilot. He was amused by Tom's hobbies and interests, which were unusual at best and spoke of a personality not readily apparent. He was pleased to learn how "normal" Tom's upbringing actually was. He laughed at some of the stories originating in Marseilles, his eclectic group of friends and acquaintances and adventures over billiards. He was surprised to learn how his mother's sudden death affected him. It was her death, not his disgrace, that convinced him his life there was over and made him want, rather feel obligated, to leave for the colonies.

As for Jenna, she watched over Tom like a clucking hen, whipping him out of bed early, fussing over him constantly, which eventually resulted in Tom either laughing at her or telling her off--the latter ironically pleasing Jenna all the more. She used every wit and charm with "her boy," confiding in Chakotay that the more Tom fought it, the more he

probably appreciated it.

"He'd say nothing if it really bothered him," she told him once. "Now that he's sober, I can *really* get on his nerves."

So, many an afternoon ended up being spent between the three of them, with Jenna railing on Tom on their way down the steep roads to the city transport, forcing him to react, if only to defend himself. When necessary, she'd sit him down and talk back, more gently then, like a mother to her child, her corrections firm but loving. Gradually, as the haze began to lift from the pilot's eyes, he started to listen. By the time they got to town, Tom found himself with a counselor already unguarded.

It took a full week for Chakotay to understand Jenna's underlying motive. He learned quickly that she almost always had one.

Though he was rarely involved in Jenna's "walking talks," the captain did find them interesting, listening intently to it all. Chakotay was glad to realize that Tom Paris did not think himself extraordinary, but rather just a person with a few quirks thrown in. Or at least that was how he wanted to think of himself. With a shrug, he already knew he was an excellent pilot. That was the *only* thing that he'd never questioned. Though, in those empty years, years he readily admitted he'd wasted, he had been nothing at all and barely remembered half of it. He could hardly recall the months after his breakdown, either.

"That bothers me a lot," Tom said, taking a seat on a mossy rock one day when Jenna had left them to go off alone.

Tom had chosen to traverse over the open paths of the nearby mountainside, for a reason Chakotay had also learned. Paris was naturally quite active, and he didn't shy from brisk exercise and getting lost in that unfamiliar land. He also had an affinity with the slopes and heights, with the nature of the mountains and the feel of looking down into the vastness of a plain far below. The more the captain learned about Paris, the more he understood the reasons for that as well. Like flying, it afforded a sense of freedom.

"I always had a great memory," Tom quietly continued, "but the last few years are like a blur to me. Either I didn't want to see what came to me, or I was too drunk." The pilot shook his head. "I'd do anything to clear it up, now. Maybe it'd help me straighten out the rest of it, if I could see where I'd been. I mean, I know what I did...but not..." There, he stopped, shook his head again for lack of an intelligible conclusion.

Chakotay knew what he meant, and he gave himself a few seconds to consider, again, his idea. He'd mentioned it to Jenna, who pounced on it immediately. But Chakotay had hesitated as soon as he'd brought it up, knowing the amount of commitment Paris would need to make it successful, knowing too well what it would take to make it work.

Yet he had promised to help. He'd promised Jenna he would at least make the offer, try for Tom's sake.

Finally, he eyed the younger man. "There is something. But answer this first: Do you *really* want to remember? --To deal with it and work for some closure? It'll take time; it's a long-term effort, but it might be useful. And in time--if you do work at it--you'll be able to do it on your own."

Tom looked up from where he'd been picking at the moss. His eyes were liquid but sane. "I have plenty of time," he replied. "What do you have in mind?"

"What do you have?"

Tom laid out the tokens Chakotay suggested he bring. He looked a little nervous, a little unsure, but he had reaffirmed his desire to go through with it. He needed more, and he reminded himself so. He needed help figuring out what talking and sobering up and determining himself to do better could not. He needed to figure out what steps he had taken to land himself in that hell, the *real* steps that had brought him to where he'd ended up: Emotionally collapsed and nearly insane at the sight of a little girl with her face burned away, a face that continued to haunt him in his sleep, joining the others.

He needed some sense of peace. It'd been so long, he'd forgotten that, too.

"A book my mother used to read to me," Tom told him, "a slip of Jenna's hair's inside the locket--she gave it to me before we left Tinalat." He hesitated before bringing out the next. "A portrait of my squadron; my Academy pins. I don't know why I brought them. And this is an old-fashioned bottle opener from Sandrine's." He grinned. "It's all I have, really, aside from the coat on my back."

"It's more than I expected," Chakotay admitted as he finished setting out the medicine bundle. He reintroduced the stone and its origins to the younger man, reminding Tom of everything it meant and was supposed to do. "A vision quest is not an easy answer," he continued. "It won't solve your problems for you. That's *your* responsibility, to deal with what it helps you see. And it will take time, Tom."

The pilot brought his gaze up to his captain's, his features unusually resolute. "I know. I'm ready. I want to do this."

Chakotay offered a nod, a tiny grin crossing his mouth. He was quickly getting used to this side of Tom Paris. His wit, instincts and impulsiveness had survived the trauma of but two weeks past, yet sobriety and determination had already begun to temper the mercurial edge in those elements. It was a good sign. "Now, clear your mind of everything around you and focus on the patterns in the"

In spite of his wanting to, relaxing alone proved harder than Tom expected. A couple times he was sure it wouldn't work, and he'd done all of his preparing for nothing. But finally, at Chakotay's urging, he did manage to put his doubts aside and stop thinking. Soon, he found himself back a full step in his life, back to a place not so long ago--which struck him as odd. The memory at first was unclear, the images fleeting. He recalled sipping at a lousy scotch, the patterns on the table and then he saw.... "Yeah...."

46938 (one month ago)

Tom said nothing as he nursed the pseudo-scotch beneath his lips, which had twisted into an annoying grin. If he realized the effect of his expression, he didn't try to change it. He only listened, feeling the liquor more than the other man's words.

"What I need," continued Chakotay, "is a pilot, someone who can fly reconnaissance, covert supply runs and get out of a jam when necessary. The Cardassian patrols have a subjective sense of what's their territory, and despite Starfleet saying they have no evidence of it, we have it on good authority that they are smuggling weapons into this," he raised his fingers and his gaze, "Demilitarized Zone. We're going to try to control this, or, hopefully, stop it. Because of the new treaty, many of the colonies are having to relocate. Some of them are refusing, and Starfleet refuses to get involved. It's why I retired my commission and, when I saw what was going on, why I began to assemble a crew."

Tom just stared, sipped his drink without much more reaction than a blink.

"For violating the treaty, being caught means being charged with treason. For utilizing weapons, even shipping them, inside the Demilitarized Zone, it's the same, maybe even terrorism, depending on what interpretation they choose. You could have me turned in for even offering what I have."

"But you'll take the chance with someone like me?"

"I have a ship," Chakotay conceded, "I need a pilot. Without the Federation involved, the Cardassians will creep up on us. There have already been several incidents. With the evacuations to come, it's going to get worse."

Tom finished his drink and put the glass down, not realizing how crookedly he'd set it until it toppled over on its side. He chuckled lazily to himself, looked at the former officer with mock humility. "Why hire me? There have to be other pilots around here with better reputations and personal habits."

The muscle in Chakotay's jaw visibly flexed. "There aren't, actually. I just lost mine. I need another. I've already offered my price."

A glint of reason dissolved his small smile. The captain sitting across from him was in earnest, and Tom had already seen some of the tensions play out in the zone. More than that, the thought of flying again, being of some use again. That alone was enough to help him decide it was worth making himself into a mercenary. So he nodded, offering the captain a firmer stare than he felt capable of pulling off. "I'll be there."

"Good... But," Chakotay added, more an afterthought, "you cut the drink when you're on duty. I refuse to pay you to hurl us into the blind side of a--"

Chakotay jerked back when the pilot's fist crashed down on the table, rattling the glasses and bottle there.

Tom leaned into his assault. "If you don't think I'm good enough for your lousy bucket, why don't you just say it?"

"I never said you weren't good enough. I just said I won't have someone in your state flying my ship."

"You keep your side of the bargain and I'll fly us just fine," Tom snarled. "You don't have anything to worry about there."

"I'd better not." Chakotay threw a few credits on the table and stood to leave. "Write

home, Paris. You probably won't get the chance to again."

"What the hell's that supposed to mean?"

Chakotay returned an unusually vindictive grin, and he leaned over, his hands on the table. "I've read your record. I know what you did, who you are. It might make you feel better to burn your bridges before you get involved in this. For aside from a drunk and a screw-up, you'll also be a criminal."

"I'm already a criminal," Tom replied. "Trust me, I can't disgrace them any more than I already have. I can try, but I don't think I'll succeed."

"Then you really are a waste," Chakotay decided.

"Do you want me at your conn or not?"

The older man stood straight again and shrugged. "I need a pilot. You're the best I can find."

"When and where?"

"Tinalat City, main port. The Liberty. Two days."

"Fine." Tom got to his feet and left without another word. Only outside did he leave himself go enough to stumble.

When his eyes opened, he saw a familiar smirk above him and groaned at it and the sensation of light. Before he could roll away from the pain, a freezing compress dropped on his face. "Aaaah! Damn! Don't do that without warning me!"

"Oh, you're the one to complain!" Jenna sang out and cackled when he shrank at the sound. "*I'm* the one who pulled you out of the bloody bordello last night and dragged you here by the boot--*and* kept Lloyd from shooting you to put you out of your misery."

"You should've let him."

"Now why do you say a thing like that?"

"Take a good look, Jenna. I've pretty much screwed up what I could." He groaned again at his own talking, but finished despite it, muttering, "I got a commission with the Maquis."

"Je-*a*-sus," Jenna intoned, raising her eyes in line with her palms. "And I suppose you're to be paid for this mercenary work?"

"It'll take care of my bills."

"*I'll* pay your damned bills--"

"The hell you will. I do have some dignity left, Jenna. I'll pay for my own mistakes from now on." He rolled over, holding the compress on his face. "Thanks anyway," he mumbled in the end, then moaned at the discomfort of the new position.

The woman softened immediately at that, got to her feet. "I'll get you a shaving kit to take and some wearable clothes. You'll need a coat."

"On a ship?"

"You won't always be on a ship with those people!" she responded, watching him shrink more as her words rose in pitch. "Now, I'll make a call to W'Teeka. She'll make one just right and in no time, tailor it if need be. I'll also soup up some wearable clothing. You'll need something heartier than you've got for that kind of work. I'll also send for some dysrexin. It'll make you feel better."

"I don't want to feel better," Tom mumbled. "I just want... I just want to get some sleep."

"You've slept half the day away as it is."

"Is it afternoon?" Tom queried and rolled over enough to peek through the side of the cloth. "I guess it'd be asking too much to get a glass of wine?"

She shook a finger at him. "The most you'll get is grape juice from me, Thomas Eugene, and don't try to push me any farther. You've already made my day a pretty one, going out to get yourself shot holes in, you little brat!"

"Yes, ma'am. Anything else, ma'am,?" His tone was properly light as he covered his eyes again. Jenna Harlowe was the only person Tom knew better than to argue with. He knew he'd end up obeying her--it was his meager payment for her undying loyalty and for her refuge over the last six months, even if he still enjoyed teasing her. It seemed to please her that he still had that twisted sense of humor that got him in trouble more often than it made people like him.

Of course, Jenna understood that side of him, and knew its purpose.

For all that, and in spite of the young man's hangover, Jenna made sure he had clothes laid out, and had bathed and dressed before lunch. For his part, and with a triple dose of dysrexin, Tom managed to get himself ready by the time Tommy, Jenna's oldest, came to fetch him.

"How do you feel?" asked the teenager before he even came in the room. He knew their houseguest didn't like intrusions and Tommy Harlowe knew to expect nothing in the way of mood from the "Troubled One," as his father always called him. "Is it all right to come in, sir?"

"Don't worry," Paris said as he adjusted his new shirt with fingers he refused to accept were shaking, "no green slime, no heads turning around in circles."

Tommy crunched his face up in confusion and looked in the door. "What?"

"It's from an old motion picture from... Never mind. You're safe to come in." As the boy entered, Tom regarded his new coat. Knee-length and the color of coal, with a fleece gray collar and deep pockets, Tom almost hated to admit that he loved it. Trying it on--it was a good weight and really had been tailored well, but wasn't too warm or fancy--he was glad it was as comfortable as it looked. He glanced back at Tommy, who slowly approached, his eyes wide with curiosity. "Time for lunch?"

"Yep," the boy answered, "Momma's made you some apple crullers, too. Says they make you smile. --Yeah, they do."

"Your momma's too good for me."

"That's not true. You're not all bad. You drink too much, Dad says, but I think you're okay, once you've got half your head on. I always thought so, anyway. I've liked having you here."

Tom turned a stare toward the boy and nearly let himself let go on him. But Tommy was just a kid, and he didn't know any better. Pilot alone was intriguing enough for a fourteen year-old kid from the outer colonies, let alone a new person in town with a colorful reputation. "Look, Tommy, I'm not good. Not the way I should be, anyway. Your mother is kind and your father is right. And you shouldn't even be near me."

"Why not?"

Tom shrugged. "Bad luck travels fast."

"Momma says you've been trying to make your own way. That's not a crime, is it?"

"Don't glamorize me," Tom warned. "You'll just be disappointed. Trust me, it's not worth it." He leaned over, holding the back of a chair, to slide on his boot, and then the other, then gestured to the door. "And life would be worse still if we were late for lunch."

"No kidding! Momma'd have both our hides."

Tom watched the teenager spin around and hurry back out. Going to the stairs, the pilot only caught a glimpse of the youngster's reddish hair going around the corner of the landing, his feet carelessly making a racket down the remainder. Tom sighed and made his way more carefully. He was still a little dizzy.

When was the last time I ran around like that? When was the last time my father told me not to? I wonder if he'd be happy to know, I'm not running anymore Tom shook his head again as he turned at the bottom of the stairs to go to the patio. *Shut up, just shut up. It's not his fault, all the typical things. He screwed up, but not on purpose, not all the time. He gave me what he could. As for what I didn't get...*

"Laura, get your sister out of those berries! We'll be scrubbing her for weeks! Patrick, go wash and tell Alex if he doesn't get himself out by the bell, he can forget about dessert tonight. God, why do things go to hell every time I try to make a decent... --Thomas Eugene Paris, what a sight you are!"

"Is that good or bad?" he teased, putting his best face forward, though she probably knew better.

"Damn sight nicer than a few hours ago." Jenna put both hands on her hips and smiled brightly. "It's more like the Tom I know and love."

He grinned, barely feeling it. "Now if I could keep it that way, I'd be all right, wouldn't I?"

Jenna huffed a breath. "Don't play with me, boy. You won't have me coddling over

your pity pot and you know it. Really Tom! Now sit and get something to eat. You're not the only one who knows what day it is."

Tom jerked his head up as he was sitting and almost didn't make it to the chair when he lost his balance. That was usually the last thing to come back to him after a binge. "How could you know that?"

Jenna stared at him. "My God, you really are blasted. Don't you remember when I told you should come live with us?"

"Yeah," Tom said with a nod. A bitter twist formed on his mouth.

"You do know that it was your mother who'd come after me?" Tom said nothing. "She and I talked for hours. She was scared for you, couldn't hardly ask me to take you away. But I got her calmed down a little afterwards by distracting her. That's when she mentioned the cake you made for her, a week before Christmas, for her birthday, the last time you were home for the New Year." Jenna watched his face go blank. "She knew you could get better Tom. She was never angry with you. You know that, right?"

"I wonder why she thought to enlist a pen pal and no one else."

"Maybe because of my sparkling personality," Jenna quipped then said, "I don't know, really. She told me you'd told her about some of the things we'd talked about, and it'd clicked somehow in her head. Even Sandrine thought it'd be good for you to get away. You know, she still asks about you when she writes."

"What do you tell her?"

Jenna crossed her arms and gave him a hard stare. "I tell her you're debauching this side of the quadrant." When his eyes turned away, she sighed. "No, I don't. I tell her you've been better but you're doing all right, that you don't comb your hair and you need a decent woman for a change. I suppose I don't tell her much. But what can I say, Thomas?"

"I don't know." He fumbled with a fork on the table. *When did my hands get so clumsy?*

"Tom, I'm worried about you."

"Still." He glanced at the clock Jenna always set out at the table. The tick and tock, so old fashioned and wired to work with a twenty-five hour day, the sound was almost exactly like the mantle clock at home...at what used to be home. "You pulled me away from that place. It was the first time you tried to straighten me out. I guess you didn't know it wouldn't be the last."

"Actually, I knew it wouldn't be. You were in a hell of a twist. You still are. You need so much."

"Mom..." he almost laughed, but only a sigh resulted. "She was the only one who tried...and I couldn't even be near her. I felt like I'd betrayed everything she'd done for me, and she still stood by me. Even the neighbors wouldn't look at me when I left the house the last time."

He opened his mouth to say more, but the words couldn't go past the stage of thought.

He still couldn't speak of that time in full, Jenna knew, and didn't expect him to yet.

Her eyes were sad when she reached out a hand to place on his arm, which was strangely cool to the touch. He was once so warm. "Yes, darling, I know. Heaven knows I won't forget..."

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"Jenna Harlowe?"

When she turned, baby Lizzie on her hip, Jenna ran her eyes up and down the tall, beautiful woman who stood at the door of the bar. All in cream and taupe to light her golden hair and rosy face, the woman's uneasiness was all the more apparent for it seeming an unusual aspect of her character. "That'd be me." She gave another look and laughed. "Heavens! You're Tom's mamma, aren't you? You've got to be!"

Alaine Paris smiled in spite of herself. "Yes. Yes I am. It's nice to meet you. Tom's told me so much about you."

The lady silenced as soon as she'd spoken, a little off guard, so Jenna took the initiative and approached her. "You're here about our Thomas, aren't you? I can't think of another reason."

Alaine looked down at her. "I contacted Tinalat," she said. "They told me you were here. Do you know what happened?"

Jenna gave Sandrine a gesture before leading the lady back to her table. "Only the base reports, really, and some hearsay. His letters since the accident were evasive." Jenna sat and waited for her company. As their drinks were placed on the table, Jenna pressed a bottle into her daughter's mouth and got herself comfortable, all the while keeping an eye on Tom's mother, who grew more uncomfortable even as she sat down.

In spite of it, Jenna had to ask. The question had been killing her, had been the reason she insisted on making the trip back to Earth during such a small variety trade. "He had a breakdown, didn't he?"

Alaine breathed to release some of the pressure in her chest. "You could call it that," she managed. "He couldn't hold it in, the guilt. But even after he'd confessed, he couldn't talk. Then he left."

"Left? They didn't hold him for professional treatment?"

Alaine looked at her, almost ready to argue the need, then shocked that she hadn't thought of it herself. "Treatment."

"For the love of God, Mrs. Paris!" Jenna huffed. "Didn't you ever think he'd had more going on than the accident? Oh, yes, losing his friends was the tragedy of his life, but his troubles didn't begin there." Jenna took a sip of her water, shrinking a little at her companion's paled face. "Look, I'm not blaming you. Tom's got an wrought-iron facade. It'd be hard for you to tell. But then, I've not seen him for a while. Only had the letters--though they were enough."

Alaine didn't know what to say, and she wondered how much the woman knew. She certainly didn't want to tell her everything, not yet. Not until she decided whether or not to go through with her idea--the only solution she could conjure in that mess.

"I know he'd always had trouble with his father," she started carefully, "Owen intimidated him a lot more than we were willing to see at the time..."

Jenna laughed. "The man ran his life--as ambitious parents only can. Always tried to steer him into what he wanted, using every means possible, even you. Most of the time, Tom gave in, and you've got to know he resented allowing himself to be manipulated. But what's a boy to do, right? The accident, I'm sure, only made him feel like more of an incompetent mess, totally out of control and guilty in a way he never imagined possible."

Alaine nodded slowly, fighting back her seemingly ever-present tears of late. The woman *did* know, and she felt the sting of it, the fact that a correspondent would know more about her son than she had, until it was too late.

"Yes," Alaine admitted, "I know I should have done something about it." Her mouth turned up ironically. "I just...I don't know why I didn't see it sooner. I thought... I guess I thought I could make it okay if I gave him all my support, that it'd balance my husband's expectations. It wasn't enough. I should have seen that. Owen has a particular presence. I should have realized that sooner."

Jenna sighed, pausing to examine the lines in the wooden table rather than look at the other woman's pain, imagining if it were her son in such a situation. Though, she didn't regret her directness with the woman. She could tell Alaine Paris adored her son and was doing what she could. At the same time, Jenna knew she needed some hard truth. So she pulled her gaze back up, took a breath. "I knew he was lying about the accident."

Alaine's bowed head popped up. "How could you have known that?"

Jenna shrugged. "He seemed too easy with leaving, to getting on. Tom'd always been the sort to hold on tight, not let go. Mrs. Paris, he watched his dear friends die. And he--Tom?--wanted to move on? Took a plain-wrapper commission as his father had planned for him and hoisted himself up to live life faceless in a crowd? I didn't buy it for an instant, less so after his letters so changed.

"Oh, how wonderful and literate they were, those letters! --And honest. He poured his soul into them! After the accident, they were like bad ghost writing. I knew there was more, much more. I knew he'd done something and wasn't telling. After hearing about the court martial, I learned what it was. So I came here, hoping I might run into him during the trades."

Alaine stared at her. *She's just as Tom said, all right, and even less afraid to show it.*

Drawing a deep breath, Alaine reached out for the glass of water, running her slim yet strong fingers over the perspiring surface, deciding. "I need your help Mrs. Harlowe."

"Ask me"....

The next morning, Jenna was standing at the edge of a Asian marketplace, staring up

at a boy she hardly recognized. The pits beneath his eyes were proof he didn't sleep, his thinness a sure sign he didn't eat; the expression he wore, a small grin beneath an empty gaze, confirmed his mother's fears and Jenna's instinct. He wasn't well at all. That alone cemented her resolve to the agreement she'd made with Alaine Paris.

At first, too, Tom seemed glad to see her, embraced her and gave her a smile that Jenna knew he didn't feel. Then, just as soon as he found her eyes, he looked away. "Let's walk. You want to walk?"

She had no choice but to join him, watch him saunter through a tree garden a step ahead of her. Jenna felt her blood rise to think of what had become of the young man, whose witty glances and contagious good humor had befriended her three and a half years ago. How can this be the same boy? she wondered, though she didn't doubt he was still in there, knew the shields were all the more opaque for ease of practice and recent necessity.

"Tom, your momma's sick with pain over you," she said, deciding not to bandy her words. He'd had enough of that, she guessed--and he'd see right through her, anyway. "She's worried to death. So am I."

"You shouldn't be," Tom said lightly. "I'm actually having quite a vacation out here. I'd never had the opportunity to travel on Earth."

"Don't give me that crap. You're about as relaxed as my garden flagpole." She saw him grin, yet only for a moment, as his pace sped a bit, leaving her to rustle just behind him. She growled at that maneuver--*Does he actually think he can evade me that easily?*--and caught up to him. "You've been through hell and you won't even admit that! You won't talk to anyone, face anyone, all because of that stupid pride and your father's bad training."

Tom gave a bitter laugh. "I'd say that's about it, Jenna."

"You're scared to death of letting anything near you--and you've gotten so used to that you've let yourself die! Well, we won't have it!"

"It's my life Jenna," he replied, just as lightly. "You encouraged me to find one, so here it is."

"Bullshit!" Jenna screamed and hopped into his pace to shove him aside.

Tom stumbled and, catching his balance again, spun around to face her, his eyes bright with anger. "What the hell did you--"

Jenna slapped him--hard. Tom froze. Furious, she slapped him again with a resounding crack, snapping his head the other way.

"You stupid bastard!" Jenna spat. "You think I don't know? You think I didn't feel for you? Cried for you when I heard about the accident, then about the rest? What the hell do you think I'm doing on Earth, anyway? I came here for *you*, you witless ass! You don't even care that your momma's in all agonies over you. She's begging *me* to take you away. I'll be damned if I don't do just that." At his furrowed brow, she nodded furiously. "I'm not fooling around. You're good at following commands? Here's mine--and I'll kick you to pulp

if you argue me once: You're coming away from that fool of a father and all this Starfleet idiocy. You're coming to Tinalat, you're going to a counselor and getting some good food and rest. It's been planned and done. You need only get your bag packed."

Tom was silent as his façade of earlier melted into wonder, almost disbelief.

Jenna let her breath out, taking his arms more gently than in her farmwoman's hands. "You're like a little brother to me, like one I never had. So I'm going to take care of you, whether or not you give a shit about the hell I'll have to take for this. But unlike some others, I *will* force you to get better. I know I'm a meddler and a pain in the ass, but it's for your best."

"Jenna, don't--"

"I won't give up on you," she continued, forcing his gaze to meet hers, "even if you spend the rest of your life treating me like garbage with a mouth. I won't let you let yourself go. It hurts too much to watch. I can see why your mother couldn't."

He looked down at her rough-knuckled hands. For all the concoctions he'd tasted the afternoon, he could certainly feel her grip. And though he could have broken away from her, he didn't. Somehow, he remained. Finally, he found her steely stare again. "You didn't have to come."

"You didn't think I would, did you?" She saw him shrug. "Well, I could give a God damn about disgrace, or that you got weak. You might have lied, but we all have our moments. I might have done the same thing, under your circumstances. --Don't look at me like that, boy. I understand what goes on up there, so stop trying to be so goddamned special." Jenna gave him a shake, forcing him to meet her stare again. "You screwed up and paid enough for it--more than enough. What's crazy and wonderful is that you told the truth after."

"I had to, Jenna." His voice was soft, but that time, it was felt.

That was all she needed to hear. She blinked a nod. "Yes."

That settled, Tom's eyes drifted off to the trees, freshly bloomed and full of loud, busy birds. Taking her arm that time, he started walking, slowly. "I always loved the spring," he said. "The seasons don't really change here, but other places, the trees start blooming about this time of year. Mom took me once to see the cherry blossoms. When I was a boy, she said it was proof that the trees hadn't died."

Sandrine had been worried. A fight in her bar didn't disturb her as much as when her favorite had returned to her so heartbroken and for so short a time. He had dropped in one night, looking, sounding and acting nothing like the Tom Paris she knew, then abruptly left. Then Jenna arrived, and then Tom's mother a few nights later. Tom and Jenna returned together the night after that, discussing their plans to go to Tinalat. But that was still two weeks away and Tom was prone to disappearing. Jenna was too, soon after he was out of sight, to find him and drag him back.

Nightmare or savior, the lady was determined to look after him.

Sandrine was not often one to be anxious, but for her Tom, she couldn't help herself. She had always liked him so. Thus, when Jenna, baby on hip and Tom in hand, brought him back to the wharf-side pub, again, her relief was plainly put as she flew over and embraced the young man warmly.

"Where did you go, Thomas?" she asked as she released him--or rather, he pried her arms down. "Off in the middle of the night and Jenna with her baby--you should not make it more difficult for her."

"I only took a walk. Forgot I'd been grounded." Tom's eyes perused the cabinet. "How about a brandy?"

Sandrine hesitated. "If I don't serve you, you'll go somewhere else?"

"Sounds about right," he replied and moved closer to choose a bottle.

The woman sighed and caught Jenna's gaze before heading over to the bar. "I would prefer to be the one to get him drunk. At least he will be here, where we can watch him."

"Maybe we shouldn't encourage it, though," Jenna suggested.

But Sandrine shook her head and placed her milky hand on Jenna's tawny arm. "We do not need to. He has already decided. If I serve him, he will not leave again so soon. Perhaps later, he will be better. But not tonight."

Jenna braced herself with a nod. Joining her friend at the bar, she gave him a smile. "No way in hell I'm gonna let you drink alone," she said.

Tom laughed shortly. "Have I ever told you you're a pest?"

Jenna grinned evilly. "You and I both know damn well who's the momma around here. --Sandrine, a glass of port, please."

"Thomas Paris?"

Tom glanced up from the pool table and hit his shot. "That's me," he muttered, then cursed a near miss. "This'd better be good, you made me screw up a game." He took a gulp from his glass and stared at the fresh-faced, neatly outfitted ensign who'd called his name. "Well? What the hell do you want?"

The man's stare widened. "You're Thomas Eugene Paris?"

Tom put down the cue and moved to face the younger--and shorter--man. "Yeah, I'm him. Are you having a problem with that?"

Watching from the side, Jenna didn't know who to feel more sorry for. Tom was well soused and not in a better mood for it, so she chose to pity the young officer. "Young man," she said, approaching the two, "perhaps it'd be best if you stated your business and went along your way?"

"Uh, yes ma'am." He looked back to Tom. "Mr. Paris, I regret to inform you that..."

Your mother, she had..." He stopped at that, for fear of Tom's impatient glare or for what he held in his hand, Jenna couldn't tell.

Tom looked down and grabbed the PADD from the ensign's fumbling fingers. He clicked the control and read the contents. With each new line, his face paled. For nearly a minute after reading it, he stood still, then dropped the PADD on the floor. Going back to his drink, he picked it up and finished it. For several seconds, he was still again, staring blankly at the wall. A blink, and his welling tears streaked down his cheeks.

The ensign cleared his throat to finish his duty. "Sir, I'm sor--"

Tom hurled the glass away, shattering it against the wall. Turning sharply for the entrance, he pushed the younger man down and nearly threw the door as he stormed out. Even before the door closed, a crash sounded on the street.

Jenna knelt down to help the young officer up. "What the hell was on that PADD?"

"Alaine Paris is dead," the young man told her, brushing himself off. "A domestic accident."

"My God," Jenna breathed, paling as her insides shrank and turned. She looked at Sandrine, whose eyes had already begun to well up.

"It was a great loss to the family." The ensign stopped, trying to handle his own displeasure of bearing that news. "Could you tell Mr. Paris that the funeral is scheduled for Thursday, twelve hundred hours?"

"I will tell him," Jenna promised, but then scowled as she thought again about what had happened there. "Tell me, Ensign, why none of his family came to tell him? Why send a stranger?"

"I'm only following orders, ma'am. Admiral Orlov sent me."

"Who the hell is Admiral Orlov? God, no wonder Thomas doesn't get on with his father!" But then she sighed, waved a hand at the officer. "Go, go, young man. You've done your duty." He gladly left with a nod, and Jenna turned a glare to Sandrine. "The shock's one thing, but the lack of simple respect--it just baffles me. Sending a strange boy, not even a cousin! His own mother, God rest the dear woman. Oh! how could they, Sandrine?"

Sandrine shrugged. "It has always been that way, Jenna. Even before any trouble, they did things like this."

"And now we've got to find him. God knows where the poor lad's gone again. Oh Tom! How could so much bad pile itself into one month?" Jenna paced around in a circle, drilling her mind for the likeliest escape route. "Damn, damn, damn," she muttered, turning uselessly.

"Come, and we will look together. He will not go far, I think." Sandrine went to the coat rack and picked a warm sweater. "But I don't know if it is a good thing, that he goes to the funeral."

"It'll be hard," Jenna agreed, gathering up Lizzie to get her own coat. "But he needs to

say goodbye. You can't not say goodbye to your parent. I know that's been a curse of mine. He's got to have some closure, or he'll truly go mad."

Sandrine nodded and gestured to the door.

She could barely hear the service from where she stood and was almost glad for it. Tom invited her to come with him all the way in, but this was not her family, not her business except to get him there and get him away after. Three and so years of active correspondence with the young man had made them close. They'd shared their wit, their highly tuned opinions and critiques of the system to which they belonged; they shared news of everyday life and everything else from there. They were pen pals, once met and good friends to follow.

Those still were not her people, though. But she did watch, examine the congregation, half-understanding and half-disbelieving.

Tom was more like his momma than I first thought, she surmised first, even if Alaine was right that his father's taught him one hell of a reserve. As that man's wife, she must have been stuck on one hell of a fence. As his son, Tom certainly was--is.

Jenna watched Admiral Paris' hands clench over and over behind his back, his fight to control himself. He was a well-set man of decent height, though not as tall or nearly as slim as his son. His steely eyes and small, firm mouth seemed strangely comfortable in its present position. One of the ladies near him, presumably the elder of Tom's sisters, took more after the admiral in both appearance and posture. The younger, a dark beauty with her mother's eyes, clasped her flowers tightly and let her tears fall, oblivious to anyone who saw it. Furthest from the admiral--and unintentionally most visible--Tom shifted his weight to one foot, breathing in shudders. His head dipped, but he pulled it back up for another breath to control himself. A woman among the mourners shook her head at Tom's changed posture. Another couple behind then whispered to each other. Tom blinked, took another breath.

He saw that, Jenna sighed to herself, relieved to see the simple service end and people begin to move to pay their final respects. Tom, in his dark, tailored suit, his face shaved and his hair combed neatly for the first time in days, knelt down by the family mausoleum stone dedicated to his mother and touched it.

His sisters, now clutched together, watched their younger brother. Their faces were set like sculptures, probably not knowing what they should do with him. His father, his chin up and eyes set on something else, stood farthest away, conspicuously waiting for his son to leave before taking his own time at the stone.

Jenna was barely close enough to hear, but she heard enough when Tom finally approached his father and the admiral commanded his son with a simple, baritone, "Please." Then he passed the young man by to make his visit.

Then she was certain her heart had broken, if it hadn't already.

Crestfallen but unwilling to expose himself any further, Tom embraced both his sisters, first the older, then the younger for a little longer, saying a few words before stepping onto the path that had taken him in. The stares of other family, other officers and family

friends followed him. All their looks were the same, their subsequent asides and shared glances on the same topic.

Yet Tom kept walking, damning himself if he showed the least sign that he had heard, seen or felt what their expressions betrayed. Only Jenna could interpret the pain in his face. It was an expression she had practiced once.

Somehow the sunset had softened Tom's features, which had already suffered for his situation. The orange light warmed his sallow skin, the wind liberated his neatly-trimmed hair, and the dimness hid the shadows under his eyes and beneath his cheekbones.

"Mom and I used to walk on the beach when I was a boy," he said quietly. "She'd hold my hand and we'd hop out the way of the waves coming in." Tom looked out on the Mediterranean water, far calmer the waters he knew growing up, but enough to make him stop and stare. "We didn't spend too much time together after I was about eight or nine. I would've stayed around the house more, but Dad got me out to be on the parishes squares team and then I got on the ski team... Well, whatever. Even she told me I should. I did like it, got pretty good at sports, I think. But I always wondered what Mom was doing. She always up to something, whether with her work or with her projects at home. She loved to be anything but bored. I guess I got that from her."

He took a deep breath, gazing out at the sea as it grew red with the sunset; thinking, perhaps, that it would be the last time he would see it. He became very still, listening to the waves as they trickled onto the shore, the cry of a gull, the wet creak of a nearby dock. There was volume in his silence, magnified as he took it all in, letting it envelop him one last time. Finally, he spoke again.

"I have to go," he told her, his voice hoarse, thick. "There's nothing left for me here. Mom was right. So are you. It's time for me to find something for myself."

Nodding as she blinked down the growing wet in her eyes, Jenna took his hand. It laid limp in her fingers. "Yes, Tom."

The breeze chilled as the shadows fell on the sea. The sounds on the water thinned.

"I can't feel, Jenna," Tom whispered. He turned his eyes down to his friend, trying to hold back his shaking breath. "I don't know how I...I just can't bear being near to anything or anyone, just like you said, but I want to, it just...It hurts so much when I let it, and now Mom...." He shook his head, as if trying to disbelieve it all. "I've lost everything. I have nothing."

"You still have me, sweetie."

Tom gazed at her, then dropped his stare. "Yes, I do." A pause. "But I want more." Another breath, a final look, and he started back for the pier. "Come on, I'll treat to the first round at Sandrine's."

"But we're to transport to the Andeshek in an hour!"

"That's right--and I want to be as far away from sober when we do."

"When I'd just started recognizing the boy I'd met again," Jenna sighed.

"That's gone, Jenna," Tom told her. His eyes turned down, looking at nothing. There, it welled again, and he clenched his teeth. "Damn."

Jenna had felt his arm tense, too. "What is it?"

"I just wish I'd talked to her again," he said. "I could've prevented it, or said I was sorry, or told her I loved her. I couldn't do any of that. If I hadn't been so wrapped up in myself, I might have seen what she was going through, too. If she hadn't been so upset, maybe things with her and Dad... Mom just couldn't be angry enough with me, or maybe she was and I just didn't see it..."

46311 (about four weeks ago)

"Actually, it's nice to have some time to myself for a change." Tom poured himself another drink and offered one with a gesture to his mother, who politely shook her head. She was watching him closely, but he ignored it. "I think I'll go to Canton."

"Tom, we need to talk."

"About what?"

Alaine stared at him. "About what? About everything. About what happened to you, what you're doing now."

Tom didn't meet her gaze, but he was pleasant nonetheless. "What I'm doing now is having a drink. Then, I'll be packing for Canton. I need to get away, to think. I don't think any more needs to be said, do you?"

"If this has to do with your father--"

"I couldn't give a damn about him. Not everything in the universe revolves around what he does or thinks. This is all mine."

"I know he wasn't there this week, but you know how he can get wrapped up--"

"Don't make excuses for him, Mom," Tom cut in. "He wasn't there because he was ashamed of me. And he had every right to be. I'd be surprised if he ever let me in the house again; I wouldn't blame him for that, either. Now can we talk about something else?"

Alaine's heart sank. She had never heard her child speak to her without any warmth, nor even an attempt at lightness. It frightened and dismayed her more than anything else in the past couple weeks had, mainly because she simply didn't know what to do with it. She did, however, try to soften him, first with a little grin, some show of support, then with her gentlest voice. "Tom, I thought... I believed that you could tell me anything. I thought you could. I know we didn't get to spend as much time together as we did when you were little, but I always tried to take care of you when you needed it. You didn't mind so much then."

"I was just a boy, Mom. Things aren't that easy anymore."

"How aren't they easy, Tom?" Both her voice and expression begged him. "Tell me, sweetheart."

He shrugged, turned away to the window as he sipped at his glass. "A hypospray and a bowl of soup won't do it. I need to go away, think things out."

"But you've already been so alone. I want to he--"

"I wonder what I should pack for Canton at this time of year? I think it'll still be cold." He knew he'd cut her off again, and he turned to look at her so she would know he did it on purpose, that the topic was finished. It had haunted him enough; now free of his lie, having confessed it, he never wanted to relive it again. He had enough trouble doing so without talking.

Once more, Alaine felt the chill of her son's stare. Not even Owen in his worst state could have reproduced the hard look in her son's eyes, or the blankness of his expression. Through some gift of strength or repression--she wasn't sure which--she held back her tears and her anger.

"Dress warm, Tom," she said quietly. "It should be early spring."

Alaine Paris came noiselessly into the front of her house. She put her transport pass down on the entry table. She removed her cloak, hung it on the coat rack. She ran a hand across her windswept wheat-blond hair, neatening it the best she could with her fingers. She looked in the oval mirror, moved another strand aside.

She walked noiselessly down the center hall. Her footsteps softened when she reached the old runner with fringe. It had been her grandmother's. She looked at the patterns in the rug, how they matched the blue-cushioned high back chair she'd picked up on Betazed. She ran her hand over her great-aunt's antique mahogany table, straightened an empty candy dish. She looked to the other side of the hall. She let her gaze run over her neatly arranged pictures.

She stopped.

Some of the pictures were missing. They had been there when she left the house, and now they were gone. The paint had faded around those pictures.

The spaces once displayed her son.

For nearly a minute, she stared at those empty spaces, hardly breathing, blinking maybe once or twice. In that moment, all of Alynna's counseling and calming advice, all of her own trying to forgive the causes of their tragedy, already pinpointed, all her rationalizations and second thoughts for the family's sake, every ounce of her forced optimism: All of it became a vain effort. Alaine's heart began to flutter, her jaw tremble, her hands clench. She took a long, conscious breath.

"Owen?" she called, her voice betraying the tension that continued to build. "Owen?"

"You're home already?" came his voice from the den. He sounded normal.

With deadly patience, Alaine waited for him to show himself. She waited in the

painful silence. When he did appear from the den, she caught in the corner of her eye his smile. But she did not look at him. "Where are Tom's pictures?" she asked quietly. "What have you done with them?"

"I put them away," he replied. "I couldn't look at them."

"Because you're ashamed of him?"

He nodded, drawing a sigh as he slowly approached her. "I should take a good deal of the blame too," he said sadly. "I should have said this before, but...I should have been able to prevent this somehow. I should have taught him better, been there for him more--"

"He'd have been better off if you hadn't been there at all," she interrupted, feeling its truth all the more to say it. Her stare did not leave the wall. "You made this happen."

Owen was stunned. "How can you say that? I did everything I could for Tom, gave him everything he needed and wanted, just so he could throw it all away? I'm suffering, too, Alaine, knowing that my son lied, in front of me, in front of everyone, about the deaths he caused, his own friends. I would have done everything in my power to prevent that from happening to him."

"You don't give a damn about *him*," Alaine said, her voice calm above her shaking breath. "You only care about how it's affected you. You haven't seen his pain--you wouldn't recognize it. Don't you think losing them like he did killed him inside? That being stripped of everything he'd earned destroyed more than his reputation? How will he feel when he comes into this house and sees his pictures gone?"

Owen's eyes narrowed. "He will never enter this house again. I will not permit it."

"The hell you won't," Alaine returned. "This is my house, too, and Tom is my son." Feeling her release approaching, she allowed the tears that suddenly welled in her eyes, let them fall freely down her cheeks. She did not wipe them away. "My son, whom you stole from my side to live out your perverted family tradition--at Tom's expense. You brainwashed my son into believing it was his only option in life, to live up to the Paris legacy."

She turned her eyes to her husband's stolid expression, displaying her tears like trophies, while her tone and grin boasted that bitter victory. "Nothing could have pleased me more than to know that you and your legacy no longer has a grip around his neck. I'm glad of his dishonor and I'm thrilled with your shame! And I *will* have pictures of my son displayed on these walls--or *none at all!*"

Owen Paris visibly paled. He had never--never--seen his wife in such a state. "Alaine," he said, employing the most calm he could in his voice, "I know you're upset, but I think you might be--"

"Overreacting?" She spat a bitter laugh. "No, Owen, I'm *reacting*, I'm feeling, I'm accepting, I'm facing the reality of this. Damn it, I'm *crying!*" She pushed him back with both her hands. "I'm crying for my son's pain! Crying, Owen! And you won't even touch me! You won't even comfort me! You take my baby's pictures away and beg for forgiveness you've already given yourself!"

"Alaine, please, calm down. Dear, you're--."

"I won't calm down!"

"You're overexcited," Owen said more firmly, doing his best to placate her with arms held out in a gesture of peace. "You're not handling this rationally."

"RATIONALLY!" she shrieked. Her eyes grew bright with fury, her lips pale to her flushed face. "You want rational? *Tough!* Think I'm overreacting?! *THIS* is overreacting!" With a sweep of her hand, she tore a picture off the wall, then ripped another down and smashed it to the floor. Then more crashed down as she cried aloud: "All of this! All this false, useless life! Tom's not the only liar in the family! We're *all* liars! We've lied every day we thought we were happy and normal!"

She ripped yet another frame off the hook and threw it at him. "You bastard! How dare you! *How DARE* you! You killed my boy! You took him away from me! Ripped him from my own arms and killed him! YOU made him what he is, you son of a bitch! YOU MURDERED MY SON!!!"

There were no monuments left on the wall when Alaine Paris, wailing wildly, crumbled down into the sea of glass and paper, quartered frames and wall hooks. As she convulsed the remainder of her pent up frustration, she pounded her fist against the wall she leaned on. She struck it again, then again, and then, wearing down, once more.

Slowly, her sobbing subsided, its ebbs and flows less and less extreme, her shuddering gasps less and less severe. Finally, she was left to stare blankly at the leg of an antique credenza. Her eye only twitched when one last hook clinked to the floor.

She saw nothing, though, when she whispered, "He can't even talk to me anymore. Because of you. It's your fault, Owen. You know it is. If you hadn't interfered in his life, he would have been fine. If you had looked at him for what he wanted to be, weren't so hard on him--as if he wasn't hard enough on himself--he wouldn't be a drunk. He wouldn't be turning away from his own family because we're too stressful to be near. You never listened to him, you never really thought about him, only how good you felt when he managed to meet your expectations. Now you dig for pity and excuses and treat him as if he's not worth your presence. But deep down, Owen, you know it's your fault he's given up on life--and I know it's your fault."

"You know that isn't fair, Alaine," Owen muttered, looking down at her in the mess.

She choked on her tears, gasped for breath. "My son is lost. His heart is dead and you killed it." She took another breath, filling her lungs completely and letting it go; her voice, though raw from exertion, resumed the calm and care in wording of only minutes before. "I want you to pack your things and leave. You can claim whatever furniture and pieces you want later, but I want you out of my house. I don't want to see you again. Ever."

He nodded. "Yes, you are upset," he said, wondering how he could cross to the stairs safely. The glass was everywhere and her legs were sprawled amongst it. He thought to warn her, then thought better. He instead gathered back his posture. "I'll go back to Headquarters for tonight. But I do want to talk to you once...once perhaps you're back to yourself."

She breathed a bitter laugh, examining a finger that had been cut by the glass, turning it before her swollen eyes. The blood flowed freely, trickling down her wrist. She didn't feel it. She stared at that, not to the solid, unmoving form to her side.

"Don't count on it."

Owen exhaled, stopping again before trying to cross the hall. "Would you kindly tell me what brought on this on? At least tell me that?"

Alaine dropped her hand, relaxed against the wall. "Of course," she grinned ironically, "how could you know? You weren't even there. Too embarrassing to watch your own son face the hardest time in his life, isn't it? You could be there when you thought he was innocent. But guilty? Oh no, you'd never be strong enough to handle that, would you?" She closed her eyes. "You really want to know?" she asked quietly. "I'll tell you what..."

46290 (seven days ago)

"Thomas Eugene Paris, you have confessed to the following..."

Alynn Nechayev closed her eyes. Even from their distance, looking down from the observation room, she could not bear to see that ashen face any longer. *He knew, when he confessed, that this would happen. He knew.*

For the first time in her life, she did not to face that reality. She didn't want to see how he faced it, either. She knew if she opened her eyes, her seasoned heart would break.

"...that you are guilty of perjury, a crime of..."

"I hate him," came a cold whisper to Alynn's left, and she looked to see Alaine Paris' equally ashen, blank expression. "I hate him, and may I burn in whatever hellfire there may be that I ever gave him any say in Tom's life." Alaine's eyes were full of water even as she spoke, dangerously near to flowing over as she stared at her son. "I didn't see what would come of it. I resisted Owen's suggestions, but only at first. I trusted him. I should have seen then what that son of a bitch would do to my son. My son, Alynn. Tom is mine."

"...there is no sentence associated with this crime..."

"I know him better than anyone. He's like me, poor thing. And what did I do? I tried to balance Owen's desires with my laid back ways. I told Tom to respect his father, to give his suggestions a try, even when he wasn't sure of them. I had no idea at the time that Owen was telling him that giving up on those things was being a quitter."

"...cannot express my extreme disappointment..."

Alaine's jaw tightened, and her whisper, though equally quiet, grew intense. "My son is no quitter. Tom needed a little more attention than the girls, so maybe I spoiled him a little. I let Owen enjoy his time with Tom when he was home, too, let him conjure up what he wanted to believe about Tom when he was away. I thought nothing about it. I just didn't know."

Tears streamed down Alaine's face as her son stepped forward and accepted his charges. "When Tom was eight, Owen started making changes. I should have fought him to the death for treating his own son like one of his cadets, to be lectured and dismissed and ignored at his will. Oh, he loved our boy, but he ruled him, too. How could I have allowed that? How could I have allowed my son to become so afraid of his father, so good at hiding his feelings, that he would end up here?"

"Alynnna, I hate that man so much I would kill him were he here. Of course, he's not. He's too ashamed to see the result of his rotten work. He never liked picking up the pieces of failures, never could deal with the deficient. Well, his work is done. I'm not playing along anymore."

She watched the JAG sign off on his PADD and call a brief recess. She drew a breath. "I want a divorce." With that, she breezed out of the overlook room to go to her son.

Flushed with the shock of Alaine's statement, Alynnna spun and followed her friend out, catching up to her side once in the hall. "Alaine," she said immediately, "I know you're upset, but think about this. I know you love Owen, and you've got thirty years invested in your marriage. Are you sure you want to end it?"

"Oh, yes, I love him--but I hate him too, and will more, I'm sure, soon enough." Alaine stopped to glare with wet, swollen eyes at the woman beside her. "When I go home, Owen's going to be quiet for a while, and maybe he'll blame himself, but only until he's let everyone convince him, 'Oh, it's not your fault.' I give it a month and Tom will be the bad seed, because Owen will have convinced himself that it's true. He's not strong enough to bear anything like this, Alynnna. In time Owen will try to make everything like it was before all this happened--except that Tom won't be there. Well, I can't accept that. I can't!"

Alynnna almost spoke, but Alaine continued, "Did you ever wonder why Owen only accepted the best and the brightest and got rid of the failing? Did it ever occur to you that he was too weak himself to handle other people's weaknesses? Oh, sure, he could hone abilities, but he couldn't build them up. If they failed, he would discard them like garbage not worth his time. Now he's discarded Tom. If Owen had any hope for Tom, he'd be here, fighting the sentence, standing by his boy, like he had been after the accident. He gave up--on *my* child, Alynnna. He gave up on him."

Alaine shook her head; her jaw began to tremble. "My God, how could I have let him make decisions in Tom's life? Why couldn't I see it then? What have I done?"

Alaine Paris finally gave way to her tears and cried aloud when Alynnna grabbed her into an embrace. "It'll be all right," Alynnna soothed, stroking her old friend's heaving back. "Shhh, it'll be all right. Tom's a lot stronger than people give him credit for. You'll see. It'll take time, but he'll come through this. He's got too much of you in him not to. Give it some time. He'll get over this and he'll move on."

"Move on?" Alaine sobbed. "How can he move on when everything Owen placed importance on was being in Starfleet and achieving command? What will Tom do? Where will he go?"

Alynnna gave her friend a look at arm's distance, offering a kind, half-humorous grin. "Well, I might be able to pull a few strings and get him a ship in the trade route I've been

working on."

Alaine almost laughed, though the tears still flowed freely from her bright blue eyes. The smile quickly turned sour, however, and she said, "If only being a pilot alone were enough to complete him. Tom needs to figure out what he wants, and frankly, he doesn't have much experience in that. I have to reach him again, Alynna, but he'll barely talk to me or anyone anymore." There, the bitterness resurfaced; her eyes darkened. "His father trained him not to talk about feelings. I have to reverse that. He needs to believe in himself again, to figure out he's worth more than a couple of pips and his father's approval."

At Alynna's sigh and nod of agreement, Alaine turned slowly away. Straightening herself, she made her way down to the floor to stand by her son for the formal hearing and dismissal. When she got there, she found him surprised to see her, and she noted how his sunken eyes darted across her face. *He knows I've been crying--but I am here. That will have to do.*

"Maybe the Marseilles weather will do you well for a while, Tom," she suggested gently. "Get away a while while this blows over."

He could hardly speak, but seeing her supportive, pretty smile despite her swollen eyes, he made the effort. "Maybe," he muttered.

"You always were anxious to get there, especially when you wanted to avoid those awful functions." He didn't respond, and so Alaine bent closer to him, her grin gentler still as she touched his cool hand. "Even after being there a year, you'd clamored to get back. Why, I recall..."

42798 (3.5 years ago)

"Marseilles has weather to San Francisco any day of the week, anyway."

"But Tom, it's the year end mixer! You should be with your friends at the Academy, not out at some wild pub." Alaine Paris put her hands on her hips and leaned towards her boy, trying desperately to be serious. This was her son, after all. She knew his whims well.

"Your father is not going to like this at all." A rumble of thunder reinforced her words and she giggled at the irony of its timing. "Thank you," she said, giving a nod to the storm outside the window. "See, I've even got the voice of God backing me up. Now what do you say?"

Tom regarded his mother, noting the crack of a grin she tried so hard to suppress and remembering all over again how pretty she was when she was in that mood. He gave her a shrug and an equally crooked grin. "Then he can come, too. Dad could use a drink."

"Tom!" she laughed aloud. "I won't let you talk about him like that! Now, really, think seriously on this. Are you sure you want to miss your friends tonight? That party's for you too. For that matter, you're done with exo-philosophy. I say that's something to celebrate! No more homework, no more books..."

"No more teachers' dirty looks," Tom finished and did give it a thought. He knew his mother didn't mind either way, but the idea of having to deal with his father the next day--at yet another stuffy luncheon he didn't want to go to--almost made him decide to wait to go to Sandrine's. After all, he knew Odile wouldn't be there that night, nor any of his favorite pool buddies.

Then again, the miserable weather didn't suit Tom's mood at all, and Marseilles was as clear as a bell. He felt like being out in the air as well as in the bar, seeing the stars, walking on the beach. Even in winter, Tom enjoyed the view from the Marseilles docks better than any other he knew....

"I'll just be a while. I'll miss all the boring speeches and formalities and show up for the real festivities later."

"That sounds like a perfect compromise," Alaine said and kissed her son's cheek. "I'll even smooth down your father so you won't have to listen to it." She grinned at his reaction. "Do you think I don't notice how your eye twitches every time he lectures you? I love your father, but I know he needs to step down from his platform every now and again. So, get yourself going, since it's much later there. I'll take care of it on this end." She straightened his collar affectionately, brushed off his shoulder. "Have a good time--but not *too* good. I do need you to get started on that workroom of ours, repair those anti-grav shelves, since you've been so insistent on it."

Tom smiled brightly. "Thanks Mom." Sweeping his fingers through his sandy hair, he stood to get his jacket, then returned just long enough to give her a peck on the cheek and a hug.

Seconds later, he was outside only to find himself rethinking his decision yet again. His father would be ticked, and if he was too late, the lecture would be unbearably long. He could already feel his back aching from the posture he'd have to hold steady throughout it all. But as another cloud darkened the avenue and a spray of mist cooled his face, he let out a breath and grinned. It wouldn't be too long, he promised himself, just a game or two and one drink. That wouldn't be more than an hour. So, finally, instead of turning left to go to the Academy, he turned right to go to the transport.

"How I miss Marseilles already!" Tom laughed as he returned Sandrine's warm embrace.

"But of course! You are a very wise young man," Sandrine returned. "And where is your lady, Odile? Did she not come with you tonight?"

"She's at her parents." Tom saw Sandrine's eyes flash at that. He held up a finger to her. "Oh no, I'm young but I'm not crazy. We're not going to that doghouse again."

"A very wise young man," Sandrine grinned, then returned to the bar for a bottle and a fine crystal glass. "Let me get you some wine, mon cher. I have something hand delivered from Chez Harlowe."

"Chez who?"

"They live on the Federation colony of Tinalat-4. They have vineyards magnifique, and

the Harlowes sometimes bring their port here." She found a bottle of the wine and poured him a glass. "You tell me, is it not good?"

Taking a sip, Tom rose his brows and nod at the taste. "It's excellent."

"Since you think so, then I will introduce you to the lady of the vineyard. --Madame Harlowe! Come meet Tom, the one I told you about."

Tom stared at her. "What've you said about me?"

"But I always talk about you, Tom," she said and leaned towards him with mock seductiveness. "You're my favorite, you know."

Tom rolled his eyes, only to let them fall upon a pixyish, albeit very pregnant, woman waddling quickly towards him. "Madame Harlowe," he said, trying not to look surprised. Her belly was bigger than she was.

Seeing the path of his attention, the bright-eyed woman put her hands on the protrusion. "And company," she quipped and stuck out her hand. "Jenna Harlowe, at your service." Giving the young man's fingers a firm squeeze, she let him help her up onto a chair before asking Sandrine for another glass of lemon water.

It was amazing to Tom how two people could so simply connect wits like he and Jenna Harlowe has that night. Talking to her, Tom completely forgot about the time and wouldn't have cared if he hadn't.

The idea of the sterile luncheon room and all those people, holding their drinks in both hands while they chatted and agreed and hob-nobbed with those professors and officers that scared the hell out of them repelled Tom from the moment he got the invitation. There, in the amber light of the ancient pub, with its earthy occupants and guitar tango ambient music, he'd always felt a sense of belonging and comfort.

And what was going on in that French pub with that odd but intriguing woman was far more real, far more honest than any official function could be.

The more they talked, the more he couldn't help but grin. They came from totally different backgrounds, lived absolutely different lifestyles and had eleven years between them. And yet, the cadet from a famous family and the mother of three--going on four--might as well have known each other all their lives. Their humor was sharp and full of mischief; their amused view of the world converged without disagreement. He was fascinated by twentieth century popular culture and dabbled in cars, while she had a vast collection of small appliances and toys from the same century; they both loved that era's movies. They both had a little medical training but had to cease that schooling for other priorities. They both had a parent they adamantly disagreed with and tried to differentiate themselves from.

On that last note, Jenna made herself free to offer her own explanation of how to recover from "parental expectation syndrome." Tom listened to her side of it with great interest, but shook his head when she turned the conversation around to advise him.

"You don't know what it's like to be an admiral's son," he told her.

"Oh bullshit," she said. When she met his blink of surprise, she said it again, grinning. "You can do anything you want if you want it badly enough. You're just afraid you won't break free, even if you try, and use your father as an excuse not to act."

"Maybe. But--"

"No buts," she plowed on. "You've got to learn to trust yourself, Thomas--and I don't mean trust what you're able to do, but to trust who you are, what you really are. That's what's really important and necessary. You've got to make your own decisions, decisions for Thomas Paris, not Admiral Paris' son." She shrugged, ending her rant as suddenly as she'd started it. "One of these days, you'll know what I mean. You're young yet. You've got plenty of time to figure it all out."

Tom gave her a look askance. "And you're so sure you're right?"

"I was right for myself," she replied in a beat. "And maybe you need to do something different. But you say you're bothered and feeling confined in your father's ideas and expectations. Well, you know my side of it. I can only advise you from personal experience, after all. Of course, I'm certain I've not said anything you haven't told yourself already and didn't listen to, right?"

Without warning, he grinned, a warm, endearing smile that managed to touch her heart. Under that gaze, she felt a little bashful and giggled nervously. "What?"

Tom couldn't have stopped his smile if he'd tried. "I was thinking how glad I am for deciding to come here tonight. I could've been at the senior mixer. I didn't really want to go in the first place--a bunch of cadets walking around trying to look like they know something, boring speeches and polite chatter."

"Yech," Jenna said, finding no better word for it. "I'd say your decision was sound, too. Instead of a bureaucratic ball, you get a wildwoman telling you how to run your life."

Tom laughed. "I've had people run my life, Jenna, and you're not one of them--so far." He paused, his smile fading a bit. "It's too bad you have to leave so soon. I was enjoying getting to know you."

"I've got to get back to my little ones, Tom, my husband included. I've also got to drop this load," she added, putting her hands on her belly. "But that doesn't mean we can't write. If you think I'm bad now, you ought to see what I can do when nobody's there to interrupt me."

"I'll meet you, word for word," he challenged. "Besides, what better to do with my time when I'm not pining after my girlfriend? Flirting with married pregnant women is *first* on my list."

"You little monster!" Jenna's laugh might have lit the room, and her eyes sparkled with what Tom might have only called pure joy. She put out her weathered hand to pat his. "You've got yourself a deal, Thomas. It's not often I find a one who's not only like me, but doesn't mind it."

"It's a first for me," Tom replied lightly. "Usually, the reaction's just the opposite."

Jenna turned her head from side to side, her smile as bright, her hand still holding his.

"Oh, Thomas, you've no idea, do you?"

"No idea about what?"

"What the future has in store for you. I mean, if it can turn an insecure, obnoxious Raggedy Ann like myself into a happy momma with a damn good wine business in the colonies, then I can only imagine where you'll end up."

"I'm almost afraid to find out," Tom said, only half-humorously.

Jenna caught the dual meaning, but ironically, her gaiety increased. "Thomas Eugene, you think you'll always have your own private little world while living in one you don't much like, having to kowtow as a secret cynic--but I know better. Oh, I can see you now!"

Tom chuckled and poured more of the fine rose wine into his glass. "And what do you see, Jenna?"

Jenna leaned her elbows on the table and spread her fingers through the air like a fortune teller, much to Tom's amusement. "Ah, you doubt me, boy, but I know the way of things, you see. I see a faraway place and a life that you could only dream about today. For you see, Tom, I see you with your own life, and it'll be a heaven to you, I promise it."

"Une vie bénie!" Sandrine chimed in, refilling Jenna's water glass. "For Tom that would certainly be so, don't you think?"

"I wouldn't mind it," Tom admitted. "But it's not like I hate everything here. I just want my father to realize I don't want everything he does. If that's freedom, then I'll take it."

"Of course you would," Jenna said, all-knowingly, leaning back into her seat to regard the boy before her. "But freedom isn't getting all you want and doing all you wish. Freedom is living in the way you make for yourself. It doesn't just come to you, you have to build it, take advantage of the little things as they come. From little things, you can build and diversify, add details and particularities that could never come with big chunks of this and that. And you've got to be brave enough to take those chances. You might not be ready yet, but someday you'll have to stop giving a damn what your father thinks and start living for you--if he doesn't like it, that'll be his problem. It's hard, and you should never give up on loving the man, but you've got to let him go. And that's what I see, not now, not soon, even. But it will come."

Seeing his noncommittal grin, she giggled and waved her fingers through the air again. "Yes, Thomas, your future is but a memory to me now! I see myself, too--making you eat your doubtful looks and all those grins. --Don't you laugh at me, you little brat! I know what I know! I'm reminding you of it!"

"Reminding me of a life I haven't lived yet?" Tom said, suddenly unable to suppress his chuckling at her dramatics.

"Yes! I remember--yes, I remember the lessons you learned, all the pain you bore, the life you discovered and the love you've got--and the product of it. Oh! you hardly recognize yourself, Thomas Eugene, but you're looking back with a queer little smile, and you remember..."

48746-48955 (almost six years later)

"...une vie bénie," he whispered.

Sitting on the biobed behind his wife, his eyes glistening with tears inspired by that most incredible day, he reached out to the life he had helped create as he remembered aloud the blessing that had become his. He kissed his wife's moist hairline, pressed his cheek against her temple, touching the hand of what he called a miracle.

B'Elanna smiled tiredly, equally amazed at what they had done. She had counted the fingers and toes five times or more since the bundle had been placed in her arms; she too was nearly overcome as she bent her head down enough to kiss their infant daughter. A bunch of her hair fell down her shoulder, and Tom's gentle hands pulled it back for her. Her view unobstructed, B'Elanna saw the pink, perfect newborn as if for the first time--again.

"How could this have come out of me?"

"Do I have to remind you how she got there?" Tom gently chided and kissed her again. "She's beautiful *because* she came from you. Look at that face, the shape of her eyes, even that little scowl, like yours when you're sleeping--and those sprigs of hair are definitely not mine." With a finger, he stroked the chocolate brown tufts that were already starting to curl against her little head, which was etched with ridges also all too familiar to him. "She's her mother's daughter."

"But Jenna says her eyes will be blue," B'Elanna softly countered. "I even think she's got that grin of yours already."

Jenna approached with a small scanner she breezed over the newborn. "Poor thing's going to get you both in a good deal of trouble for that alone," she quipped, then cut a look at Tom. "Well?"

He furrowed his brow, but did not take his eyes away from the infant. "Well, what?"

Jenna eyed him wisely as she took a neural reading. "Now's the time I make you eat your doubts."

"What are you talking about?" Tom asked, unmoved.

The older woman shook her head. "Ask me later. You're too busy to listen to my gloating just now." She gave the Doctor a wink. "No cross-racial chemical imbalances or anomalies, Doctor. But you might like to check Tom's hippocampus."

The Doctor gave her a look, the corners of his mouth twisting inward. "I've wanted to run a neural diagnostic on Mister Paris for some time now."

True enough, Tom was deaf to their words as he and B'Elanna continued to gaze upon their little survivor, whom they had almost lost, could have lost many times for all their adventures on Voyager, but didn't. Engaged in her every move and breath, B'Elanna moved only to quietly tell the Doctor, "Go away," when he suggested she rest, and Tom to

reinforce her words with a distracted wave of his hand before the Doctor could think to argue.

After a minute or so entranced, however, Tom finally closed his eyes and grinned, and B'Elanna turned to look at him.

"What is it?" she asked.

"When she made all those predictions," he told her, "she said she'd be here to tell me she was right." He shook his head. "I couldn't believe six years ago that I'd be here, with you, with our daughter. Jenna was sure of it, that long ago."

B'Elanna gave the lady an impressed look. "Good guess, Jenna."

"I think so," Jenna replied and patted the new mother's leg as she moved away. "I'll get your robe. You are needing your rest, as the Doctor said, and you'd might as well be comfortable at it."

B'Elanna nodded her thanks and glanced back at her husband. When Tom met her gaze, she felt a beat in her heart for all the love he communicated in that look. He didn't need to say anything. Nor did she, as she reached up to place her fingers on his cheek and press her lips to his. Parting, she looked to him again. "Will you take Alaine while I get my robe on, Tom?" She shrugged at his changed expression. "Well, I'm sure you'll pick something just as good the next time around."

"You can bet on it," he whispered and rubbed his nose against hers. "I'll be thinking up a good one in the meantime."

"I don't doubt that."

The young couple didn't hear the sickbay doors hiss open. The captain entered, pausing only to look back. "Harry, are you coming?" A moment later, Kim was with her, and they joined Chakotay before making their intended visit. "How is she?"

Chakotay smiled. "Just fine. All three of them are. I thought I'd give them a little time, though. They're hypnotized. They won't even listen to Jenna."

Jenna wandered over. "It's their first and it wasn't quite the quiet pregnancy, what with those first few months."

Janeway nodded, remembering all too well the looks on their faces when she came into sickbay that day. "They did have a good scare, didn't they?"

"B'Elanna and Tom have a good deal of strength between them in more ways than one," Jenna shrugged. "It's no surprise their baby'd have the same. That little lady wasn't coming out 'till she was good and done."

Nodding again, the captain watched the new father take his daughter into his arms for the first time. The new mother, understandably exhausted and disheveled from the day of childbearing, watched both with pride and happiness as her husband's eyes shone with the little act. His laugh was surprisingly shy, but he seemed to handle the newness well, commenting on how light their daughter was, how she squirmed at first but settled right into his arms, how much he loved his wife. When she returned his sentiment, he leaned

over to her and kissed her reverently.

Is this the same man I set off to capture not six months ago? Janeway pondered, then suddenly realized that the admiral could not be proud of Tom that day, for he couldn't know he was a grandfather. *He would have to be proud, if he saw his son as I do right now. It would be impossible not to be.* Her smile grew resolute, and she decided she would be proud in the admiral's place.

Looking up to find Chakotay also grinning at the young family with knowing eyes, she knew they all could be.

Jenna returned to B'Elanna with her robe; once she was wrapped in it, Tom gave their visitors a nod of welcome. "Chakotay, Captain, Harry," he said, easing the infant back into her mother's arms, then placing his arm around B'Elanna's shoulder, "allow us the honor of introducing you to Alaine Paris."

Janeway was the first to step forward and, with a warm smile, welcome the little girl aboard.

Neelix was still a little confused, particularly in that he could find no texts to explain what little the Parises had told him about their daughter's "family baptism," as they called it. But it wasn't a baptism, according to what he'd read, nor a ritual either Human or Klingon. The Betazoid did plant flowers for their children, he learned. But according to Mr. Suder, that was traditional for children of nine or ten years, not an infant just ten weeks old.

Perplexed, still holding onto Kes' hand, he leaned closer to the captain, having been unsuccessful at catching up to her side. "Exactly what are we going to do? I thought everybody had met Alaine, and they've already named her. What sort of ritual is this?"

Janeway was patient, as usual, with the curious man. "This is more of a symbolic introduction--I think. Don't worry, Neelix, you don't have to do anything."

Chakotay grinned. "What I'm curious to know is what they've been programming."

"There's been a wager on it in engineering," Kim said and looked over at Neelix. "They started working on it only about a week after Alaine was born."

"Knowing how those two think," Chakotay replied, "it should be interesting. Have any guesses Kes?"

"I tried to get Tom to say," she told him, "but all he did was tease me." Her small smile grew hopeful. "I am anxious to see it, too."

"Well," Janeway said, "we will in just a moment." They turned the corner and got a glimpse of Tuvok, who had just entered. With a look to her first officer, she followed suit--then stopped. They all did, in fact, except Chakotay, who beamed at the view before them. "What is this?" she asked him.

Chakotay regarded her, his companions, and even Tuvok, who seemed to have the same question in his expression. "Home," he told them, drawing his eyes out again to the mountainside path, dotted with scrub grass and scarlet wildflowers waving in the gentle

breeze of a sunny day. "This is their home."

Kes also turned to the view, the russet rock and bright blue sky. "It's beautiful. It even smells sweet in a way."

Neelix similarly took in the air. "This is Earth?"

"No," Janeway said quietly, realizing. "This is Avalar."

"Come on," Chakotay said as he started off, "I know the way down. We're at the mouth of the cavern, where they kept the Marseilles during their time here. --Right over there."

Kim turned and saw exactly that--a cavern with the scout ship parked inside. When he turned back, he started off to catch up with them. "Tom and B'Elanna told me they moved here after it was burned to the ground. But I didn't think it would have grown back so quickly."

"Trust me, Ensign, everything grows quickly where Tom and B'Elanna are involved," the commander quipped.

He hopped down the hill, noticing that the path was different from the last time he'd seen it. It had been completely cleared, and lined neatly with rocks. Soon, he crossed the hillside where he and Tom had talked, really talked, for the first time. After that came the flat where, while they waited for Jenna, Tom and B'Elanna announced their impending parenthood. Then, beyond the scrub-dappled gorge and around the high slope, Chakotay saw the adobe house below on the step in the hill. Guests milled around the yard while Jenna circled them all, serving Tinalatian wine and throwing her usual barbs back to the Doctor.

He felt his grin press into his eyes at the the scene, different only in the presence of Starfleet uniforms.

Janeway herself was intrigued, having never seen the house, having not expected it to be so welcoming. It was a real home, a neat A-frame nestled on an oblong flat three quarters down the mountainside. Just aside the entrance to the yard, a wide garden took up about a quarter of the flat, then stretched into steps on a long, rolling hill. Well below laid a grassy plain on either side of a wide river. Above, long-stemmed wildflowers dotted the rocky hill they now descended. Light green moss could be seen around the house, in the process of becoming a carpet for the yard. There were benches, obviously homemade, by another flower patch, a thin but recovering willow-like tree on the far side of the house, and a table with a lantern set upon it. Next to the front door stood a small pile of logs and a shoe box.

This was their first home, Janeway realized as she continued down the steep stepped path and into the yard. It was the place they thought of when anyone spoke of returning to the Alpha Quadrant, longed for home. This was the Avalar Tom had spoken of when he showed her the picture and didn't expect her to understand. For the first time, she knew she hadn't. Theirs was a life, a real life, that was not hers, nor Starfleet's, nor the admiral's. It had little to do with his reputation or his doings, or the politics of his affiliations. As much as she hated to accept it, she finally knew that Tom was right after all. Seeing their house and planet for the first time, she knew she still had a lot to learn

about them both.

Searching through the crowd for Tom and B'Elanna, Harry spotted them first and Janeway turned to see the pair with their daughter, making their way down another path. They looked like any young couple from the colonies to her. Perhaps his hair was still a bit unkempt, but his clothing, including that coat of his, was impeccable, as was B'Elanna in her practical but attractive tunic suit and boots.

His watchful arm steadied her agile frame along the path, as the baby she held blocked her view of the rocks; she didn't blink at the assistance. A breeze started up again, tossing the skirt of her suit aside, along with some of her hair. B'Elanna flipped away the strands without distraction. Tom grinned at the gesture and helped her down the final steps and the yard. Then he addressed their guests as they gathered nearer.

"Sorry we're late," he said, as though the crew were neighbors and daily visitors, waving them around to the edge of the garden with a couple turns of his long fingers and a jerk of his chin.

"We had to make sure the lake was right," B'Elanna explained as their friends and crewmates gathered. "We'd had trouble with it."

With a nod to Tom--she was not much of a public speaker--B'Elanna pulled a little box out of her pocket and waited for him to do as they had planned. Tom looked out upon his friends, old and new, grinned at Chakotay, gave Jenna a wink and Janeway a nod, then took a deep breath of the sweet Avalaran air.

"On Stardate 47998, a Cardassian patrol squadron picked up a massive weapons supply underneath Avalar's main city and destroyed it, along with much of the rest of the planet when the colonists tried to defend themselves. When they knew they were outgunned, the Maquis sect there abandoned their headquarters, evacuating as many as they could. In all, just over three thousand colonists and visiting tradespeople were killed in the attack. The colony was considered dead when it was left smoldering; only a few people remained.

"That's how B'Elanna and I found it, and from that we made our home on Avalar. We came to help, but, thanks to B'Elanna, we made it our own. It *is* our own.

"This place is important to us for a lot of reasons. But mostly, I guess it was our refuge. It was our proof that we could someday live a normal life, something at the time we wanted a lot." He looked at the house, then to the plain beyond it, grinning inwardly. "Of course, everyone said we were crazy to choose to live on this planet. At the time, I guess I can understand what they meant. It really was a mess."

B'Elanna snorted. "It was a coal heap."

"But you were right when you said it'd grow back," he returned.

"And you were willing to believe it."

He grinned at her point, then looked out to the others again. "We made Alaine on Avalar," Tom continued, then paused to glance at B'Elanna. She was giving Jenna a look that said, 'Keep your mouth shut.' Tom laughed lightly and began again. "She was created

while all of the land was still pretty bare, with only a hint that it'd come back. And we'd planned to have her born there, too. In a way, Avalar is her home, too, as well as Voyager.

"Looking back on it now, it's no surprise that something managed to come up to change our plans, but as long as we're together, we have something to hope for. I'm sure our homeworld is even more beautiful now, and it'll still be there when we get home. --I'm also sure that Schiller's already eating all our vegetables."

"I think he knows he can after house-sitting this long," B'Elanna laughed and gave Tom the little box.

Repositioning a squirming Alaine in her arms, B'Elanna looked to Jenna, who jumped at her signal and picked up a little planter box she and Chakotay had made for the occasion.

"Tom and I picked these seeds the day before we left home," B'Elanna told their audience. "We'd planned to take them to a friend at Macar, but we never got there. So, as most things do, they ended up in Tom's coat pocket and stayed there until I finally cleaned them out."

Before their friends, Tom and B'Elanna knelt in front of the planter Jenna brought to them, and Tom gently pushed holes into the soil. "Alaine was my mom's name," Tom said while he worked. "She was beautiful, gentle and strong; I want our daughter to remember her like that, like I do."

He paused as B'Elanna carefully placed a spear-shaped seed into each hole. "Mom loved her roses. She planted a bush for the three of us, my sisters and I. I thought we'd carry on the tradition and plant these for her namesake. They're wildflowers, but B'Elanna and I've always loved them. Mom would've loved them, too."

He spread the dirt over the holes. "I've grown a lot since the last time I saw her; so much has changed. My life is nothing like it was when she knew me. I think Mom would have been happy with the way things turned out, though." He looked into B'Elanna's eyes with a wistful smile she knew all too well. "I know I am."

B'Elanna reached for a cup of water--"For our daughter, Alaine,"--and trickled the water over the buried seeds.

"B'Elanna?" called the captain as she peeked into the kitchen.

"Yes, Captain? Come in, I'm just getting some more drinks."

Janeway entered and, coming in far enough, she saw her chief engineer bent over a large carafe, pouring a pitcher of lemonade into it. Even more than earlier that day, the young woman looked so devoid of Starfleet in her dress and manner, going about her entertaining tasks as if she belonged nowhere else. It was as strange to Janeway's eye as it was two hours ago.

Beyond B'Elanna, outside the picture window, the captain could see Tom Paris holding Alaine and talking to a few other people in the yard. There, his manner was like his wife's, as if he'd been there all his life, or at least had always planned it to be that way.

Janeway almost had to remind herself she was on the holodeck.

She gestured to the scene. "He's really taking fatherhood in stride."

B'Elanna glanced over. "To think he was scared of what kind of father he would be," she said. "I knew from the moment he told me I was pregnant that he'd be a good one."

"I think every father doubts himself just a little, whether or not he'll be good for his child."

The hint dropped was not lost on B'Elanna. Nevertheless, she finished filling the carafe and brought it to the counter to wipe the edges. With a quick look at the captain, she took up a cloth.

"Tom's a proud man," she told the captain, "and he's a lot more serious than people generally think." She moved the cloth around the bulb of the sweating glass, then briefly over the counter. "When I met him, I thought so. Then I got to know him. He had the same wit you know too well, and he'll always be impulsive. But I also found out that he'd been through a lot of pain and was just beginning to get his life in control. I was too. We understood each other, helped each other through it. We still do."

She looked out to her husband, who was gingerly handing Alaine to Kes and making Harry laugh with some sort of joke. Chakotay and Jenna were smiling, too, looking at each other with knowing eyes.

"He was there for me, Captain. He helped me let go, to get over myself, my parents, my own mistakes, and get on with life. He worked hard for the same things. I don't know what my life might have been like without him." She grinned. "I think he even convinced me I was pretty."

Janeway smiled, too. "It's no secret that he loves you very much."

"The feeling's mutual," B'Elanna told her.

"I'm sure you taught him a few things, too. He couldn't have picked it all up on his own."

B'Elanna laughed. "Well, I think I might have taught him how not to get on everyone's nerves. He really doesn't realize sometimes that he's being a pain in the ass, even if he can do it on purpose when he wants to." Then, more reflectively, she added, "And maybe I taught him that he could be accepted and trusted again, loved for everything, failings and all. The mistakes in his life had convinced him he couldn't. I think I've proved otherwise. He'd lost so much, Captain, including himself. He used to feel he needed to redeem that. Even now, he sometimes needs to distract himself from certain hard memories. At the same time, we've given each other a sense of security we didn't have before, so getting past those issues has been a little easier."

Having said perhaps more than she intended, she was a quiet for moment as her eyes diverted to the pitcher again. After that moment, however, B'Elanna caught her captain's full attention. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Of course."

"I thought, when we almost lost Alaine, that you and Tom might start talking more, but you didn't. I know Tom wants to give you as much time as you need to accept him. I was wondering--and you don't have to answer--why you haven't yet, or if you still haven't."

"I think I have," Janeway answered quietly.

"You still avoid him," B'Elanna pointed out.

"It's difficult to find something to say," she confessed. "I can't look at him without thinking of his father, or his past, but I have been working on it. Maybe I have some letting go to do, too. But even you have to admit that his reputation was not the most promising or trustworthy in the beginning."

B'Elanna's expression was not one agreement. Rather, an angry little flash shot from her eyes, reminding Janeway that her chief engineer was also a Maquis with no more promising a reputation. She had almost forgotten, and so she offered the lady at the counter an apologetic smile.

"These last few months have certainly changed my mind, however. Your husband has been an invaluable member of this crew. His work in sickbay and the hydroponics lab has made all the difference here. Still, B'Elanna, he's not the easiest person to get to know. Chakotay warned me about that, his natural congeniality and his off-handedness. And with me, as you know, it's been 'polite.'"

"He keeps people off their guard," B'Elanna confirmed, "and you won't get anywhere with him unless you show him a little trust. He needs that kind of investment."

"What about him? Doesn't he need to invest something as well?"

"He has, Captain," B'Elanna said, examining the older woman's expression, grinning ironically at it. "You really have no idea how much he's come to respect you, do you? Even if we've all had our disagreements, it never meant he didn't accept your position."

"Really?"

"When some of the Maquis crewmembers were grumbling about having to work by Starfleet rules and regulations, he defended your purposes, even when he turned down the commission. He even helped me adjust."

B'Elanna couldn't help but smile at that memory, the back and forth of arguments and rebuttals and several hard truths. Of course, she did take the post, and her husband's name, when Janeway asked her to her ready room and made the offer. B'Elanna had used her maiden name in the Maquis to avoid confusion and because she didn't feel a need to make the change. But when she was going to be an officer and Tom was not, she changed her mind. Only in afterthought did she think it would make a point. Even so, B'Elanna clearly recalled the stony look on Captain Janeway's face when she found out she'd be calling her new chief engineer 'Lieutenant Paris.' Months later, the captain still seemed a little uncomfortable with it.

"Of course, he knew how much it meant for me to finish what I started."

Janeway nodded, wondering at but not asking about the curious grin on her engineer's face. Instead, she leaned on the counter, facing her. "Tell me something," she started,

pausing to wait for B'Elanna's eyes to return to hers. "Why did Tom turn down the position I offered? I thought he would have wanted to reclaim his commission, after losing it like he did. I couldn't help but think he was still angry with me. We had argued, when we first met. But I wasn't offering it because of anything but because I knew he'd earned it."

B'Elanna considered that, gave a nod. "Maybe getting his commission back would have been a victory in some way. But Tom knew it wouldn't redeem anything, and it wouldn't have meant anything except to prove that Starfleet might trust him again. He doesn't need that kind of reassurance anymore. He knows who he is now."

Janeway gave her that one. "He does have an air of confidence about him that I didn't expect."

Pausing, B'Elanna folded the cloth that she'd been using. "As for how he feels about you, I can say that Tom doesn't need your approval, or even your acceptance, and he won't explain himself to you." B'Elanna said this suddenly, knew she was being blunt. Despite it, she went on. "But you are a part of something that hasn't been resolved with him. He never returned to Earth after his mother died, never had the chance to make any amends there. As a Maquis, that was impossible. Right now, you're the closest thing he has to settling it. He knows this, Captain, but he won't pressure you, he won't ask you to reconsider. He wants you to come to your own decisions."

B'Elanna placed her hand on the captain's arm, looked directly into her eyes. "Don't get me wrong. Just because Tom's decided to live the life he's chosen doesn't mean that he doesn't accept yours. It only means that he's learned how to be what he is without being afraid, without doubting himself on someone else's scale. It means he's forgiven himself, which has meant more to him than anything else. He's free. For that matter, so am I. We're definitely not perfect, but we're not scared of ourselves anymore. We've learned to trust ourselves and take control of our lives."

She looked outside again. Tom had taken Alaine back into his arms and held her up close to brush her forehead with a gentle kiss. B'Elanna smiled. "We healed."

Turning away, Janeway's chief engineer picked up the carafe and walked without hurry out of her kitchen. The captain was left to glance around at the neatly arranged ornaments of the room: A straw broom at the door, pots hung on the wall, a strange porcelain elf on the sandstone floor by an antiquated replicator, a vase of flowers on an old-fashioned dining board.

Her gaze returned to the window. B'Elanna appeared in the view, putting the lemonade on a table, moving into the warm orange light of a late Avalaran afternoon and to her husband's side. Without ceremony, Tom kissed her fully, nuzzled his nose against hers and said a word or two that made B'Elanna's eyes brighten. He gently pushed a lock of hair over her shoulder with his free hand after she leaned over to kiss Alaine. Jenna left the table where she'd been serving drinks and stretched out her hands to them. She said something that the captain couldn't guess; the couple looked as if they agreed. Taking Alaine into her experienced arms, the older woman's eyes turned wistfully down to regard the infant, her words now kind enough to draw an understanding look from the parents--

"Captain?"

She turned at the sudden sound and saw Chakotay, standing in the kitchen doorway, a curious look set on his face. "Yes, Commander?"

"You're being missed outside. Someone said you left, but B'Elanna said you'd found the kitchen."

Janeway nodded and drew her stare over her view once more. "They had a lovely little house. I heard you and Jenna Harlowe helped them restore it."

Chakotay chuckled. "I remember it well. Tom and B'Elanna slept in this kitchen for several weeks, when the bedroom was still in open air. When we visited, Jenna and I slept by the fireplace." He caught a rise of his captain's brow and shrugged slightly. "She and I were casually involved for a short time," was all he said. Janeway politely didn't ask for more. "We didn't have much in the way of equipment, so it took some time to bring it up to B'Elanna's specifications."

"Her specifications?"

"She was as particular with the house as any piece of equipment in engineering," Chakotay answered. "Anyway, I wanted to get it done. We had to leave in less than a week. I took a shortcut and I was nearly flattened by a slate section." He laughed again. "Once Tom pulled the section off of me and she was sure I was okay, B'Elanna swore she'd bury me under the slate if I tried it again."

Janeway laughed. "Now, that sounds like B'Elanna."

Chakotay took another look around the room, his eyes seeming in a recent past. "I'd forgotten how warm and comfortable it was, how the house reflected them, though nobody would've thought them the type. Sometimes I regret having called them away. But then, Tom says everything has a purpose, and somehow he and B'Elanna need to be here. I guess he's right."

She accepted that with another nod, letting her eyes fall on the window again, grinning slightly at the view. Tom was helping B'Elanna to sit as she prepared to nurse the baby.

Janeway drew a breath, collecting her decision.

"Mr. Neelix has informed me that we're approaching an area rich with food and minerals. I've been thinking that we might be able to cover more ground if we had all our resources working for us." She peered up to her first officer. "Perhaps Mr. Paris would like to help? It's a shame to have a good scout ship like the Marseilles on hand without using her to capacity, and he and Lieutenant Paris do know how to."

Chakotay smiled. "I thought you'd never ask. I'll run it by him."

"No," Janeway said, giving Chakotay's arm a pat on her way out of the kitchen, "I'll ask him. If I remember correctly, it's my turn." Seeing that he was following her out, she slowed her pace so that he could walk beside her. "I was wondering, Chakotay..."

"Yes?"

She let him open the door for her and, walking outside, she bent her head up for a

moment to feel the sun. Smiling at its dry but mild warmth, Janeway breathed the air again. It was a wonderful holoprogram, she decided. Every little detail had been programmed in. She swept her gaze around the exquisite view once more, the mossy plain and flat river down the slope from the garden, stretching out between the surrounding foothills and disappearing in the misty horizon--then looked at her first officer again. His eyes also perused the view, but his expression was less appreciative as it was contemplative. She remembered that look on his face, the last time he recommended Tom for the conn position. That look had stuck in her mind somehow, more than even their conversation had.

Janeway tried to see what he was looking at, but she couldn't pinpoint anything but the grassy ravine. "You said once I didn't see Tom on Avarar," she said. "Is this what you were talking about?"

Chakotay shook his head stiffly. "No. It was before then."

"I see," she said, surprised to see the color run from her first officer's face at the mere mention. "What happened? I'd like to know, if you'll tell me."

He looked at her, searching for something that might make him choose silence. There was none, aside from his not wanting to recall that day. Then again, he knew it wasn't about him. "Would you like to have a walk?"

The captain nodded once, noticing his eyes turn down and away, and followed him when he called for the arch.

Lest they wake the baby, B'Elanna tried to stifle an insane giggle when her husband flipped her onto her back and deftly moved himself above her.

"Tom!" she whispered through her teeth, then welcomed his means of silence with a soft moan and not a little retaliation. But then he pulled back and she caught the intense gaze above his devilish grin. "What?"

"What else did you tell her?" he asked teasingly, weaving his fingers with hers as he drew them up and held them on either side of her head.

She smiled warmly, felt his thumbs caressing her palms. She knew he knew how that little motion relaxed her. "I told her you were proud and impulsive, what a good father I knew you'd be." She watched his mischievous expression fade into warmth. Her fingers closed over his. "I told her how we'd made our own lives, and I might have mentioned how much I love you."

His eyes had softened as she spoke, and he kissed her waiting mouth when she finished. "The feeling's mutual," he told her. He released her hands to touch her face, kiss her again. "Thank you."

She pulled her chin up to accommodate him and purred softly when his lips touched her neck, then more as one of his hands began to caress her quickly warming body. Yet she warned him, "Alaine will be up soon."

"I know," he whispered, a little grin on his lips as he pulled back once more to regard

her smile. "Now what are you thinking?"

The corner of her lip twisted upwards. "If Chakotay's right and the captain asks, will you accept her offer?"

He considered for only a moment. "Only if I get to choose my co-pilot."

"Tom! As much as I would enjoy it, I can't always be flying with you. Why not take Harry with you? He's always wanted to check out the Marseilles."

"I haven't even been offered anything yet," Tom said.

"But she will," she returned with complete certainty. "Chakotay would never have hinted it otherwise. So start thinking about it."

Tom complied, then smiled. "It would be nice to fly again."

"How did I know you'd come around?" Satisfied with her victory, B'Elanna wrapped her arms around Tom's neck. "Just think, if you keep impressing the captain like you have, you'll be on the bridge in no time."

He laughed and brought his face very near to hers, noses almost touching. "Let's just be happy about a supply run for now, B'Elanna. The rest will come if it's meant to, okay?"

She let her fingers drift down his shoulders, her legs slip around his. "Okay--for now."

His lips touched hers, and then again...

The door chime sounded.

Tom chuckled lightly and bent his head down onto B'Elanna's chest. "God, I hate that."

Equally amused, she held his head in its place to place a kiss on his sandy hair. "As if Elaine's not enough every three hours, hmm? --I know the feeling."

"We would've had to get up anyway," Tom relented and moved himself to the side of the bed where, on the floor below, their bedclothes lay in a pile. He handed her her robe before dressing himself. "It can't be breakfast yet, can it?"

"It is early," she agreed, quickly wrapping herself in the warm cloth before crossing to the cradle on the other side of the bed.

Tom watched for a moment as B'Elanna bent over their daughter, grinned at the sight before leaving their room to open the door. When he did, a slightly pale but outwardly confident face met him.

In a flash, he wondered what could have kept the captain up all night, and in another he found himself impressed with how well she tried to hide it. But for all her effort, the woman's facade melted as soon as she noticed the pilot was wearing his lounging clothes.

"I'm sorry to disturb you," Janeway said with a start. "I thought B'Elanna was on the first shift, that you'd be up already."

"We're not disturbed," Tom told her, then reconsidered. "Well, not really. We were just getting up."

B'Elanna appeared with the baby, still sleeping and cradled in her arm, her robe neatly tied, her thick, dark brown curls not yet combed, but falling in piles around her small shoulders. Janeway flushed anew as the engineer moved to the door.

"I switched shifts with Lieutenant Carey," B'Elanna said as she wrapped her free arm around her husband's waist, her face set with concern over the misunderstanding. "I thought Tuvok would've told you by now."

"I haven't had time to look at the revised duty schedules," the captain admitted, then looked up to her engineer's husband. "I would like to talk with you, Mister Paris, but it can wait. I'll come back later."

Tom watched Janeway turn and almost let her go. But with a glance to B'Elanna, whose expression stiffened, and a mere moment to decide, he looked outside the door. "Captain," he said, and waited for her to stop, "we won't be around later."

Turning back to see the young couple standing in their door staring at her, she took a patient breath. "I see. When would be a convenient time?"

He grinned, outstretching his hand in a gesture of welcome. "Now," he told her. "Will you have some coffee and croissant with us, Captain?" He tipped his head, bowing it slightly while turning on the charm in his voice. "I'm good at breakfasts."

Janeway almost chose to decline, but with another look to his bright, friendly eyes, and the singular look of expectation on her engineer's face, she returned to the door. "Thank you, I think I will. --If you don't mind, B'Elanna."

B'Elanna smiled as happily as the captain had ever seen, and she gave Tom's waist a hug before stepping back to let their guest in the door. "It would be a pleasure, Captain, as long as you don't mind my going to get dressed."

"Not at all," she said and then felt a hand touch the back of her arm. She looked up to Tom, who was escorting her in. She hadn't expected such a gentle gesture, nor so welcoming a smile as he gave her then. "Thank you."

Tom nodded, his smile unchanged. "We'd better eat soon, though. Harry's always here on Monday, and he cleans the platter every time." He caught the captain's doubtful eye. "I'm serious. He's a growing boy and not afraid to prove it."

"That's the truth!" B'Elanna said, propping Alaine up against her shoulder. The baby was awake, her round, blue eyes intent on all the lights as her mother headed back to the bedroom.

Once fully inside the Parises' quarters, Janeway blinked and stared around. The four room lodgment had almost taken on the look of their Avalaran house, down to the plush sanguine furniture covers, busy but organized workspaces and ancient-looking dinette--which finally explained the couple's extensive business dealings when they were at Sikaris a few months ago. The planter used the day before sat near the back of their quarters, incubating under a spotlight alongside various selections from the hydroponics

bay.

Janeway gave an appraising nod to the revised living space. "You've really been busy in here."

B'Elanna looked back from the bedroom door with a laugh. "We like to call it nestmaking, Captain."

Tom grinned and pulled Kathryn's chair for her. "It is our home, after all."

Schiller found the PADD hanging on the door, and as he munched on a caltola bloom, he squinted at it, studied it, then activated it. Its display clearly read:

Stardate 48294

If you've finally come this near to the house, our friend, then we're either dead, captured, or terra incognita. In any of these cases, treat this house as you would your mother's grave: Leave it as our memorial, never entered and hopefully just waiting for us to come home someday. I.e., Keep it locked; we'll clean up the dust ourselves. Guess you know what that's all about--I hope.

This means a lot to us, Schiller, and don't bother to wonder why it does. We trust you'll respect our wishes.

In return for your favor and your friendship, feel free to use our land--and enjoy the caltola. It's all yours.

Sincerely,

Tom and B'Elanna Paris.

P.S.--Under the baseboard of the shoebox you'll find two more PADDs. Please send one to Admiral Owen Paris at Starfleet HQ on Earth and the other to Miral, Daughter of Torg, on the Klingon Homeworld. We've attached latinum and directions on how to do that.

Thanks, neighbor.

Schiller nodded with a chuckle--the Parises were an odd, but likable pair--and knelt to open the shoebox. He found the PADDs and their addendum, but accessed the PADDs first. Long letters that he respectfully didn't read were both preceded by the same portrait: The couple, leaning together on one of the rocks nearby. By the look of the land, the picture was likely taken the year before, not long after they set up housekeeping.

Missing his neighbors anew, Schiller grinned at their image, then decided to copy the portrait before sending their letters.

Closure

49137 (2.2 months later later)

He paced into the front door of his house and didn't look back to see if the door had closed. He had been numb for an hour on the walk home from headquarters, his eyes barely watching the way. The PADD hung in his thick fingers as he moved down the bare-walled hallway to his study.

"Dad, is that you? You're early! --I know, I should have told you I was coming, but...Dad are you all right?" Moira's eyes widened at the sight of her father as she moved slowly down the staircase. She couldn't remember seeing him so pale, even when her mother died. "Are you feeling all right?"

He continued walking without answering, feeling her on his heels until he was well within his office. There, he stopped at the desk for no particular reason but to stop. Left in the middle of the room, Moira hesitated at first, but then tried again to assess her father's unusual state.

"Dad, what's happened? It is Kathleen? Is she okay?"

"Kathleen's fine," he finally said. Without looking at her, he put the PADD down. "I got a letter from your brother."

"Tom?" Her breath almost caught, but she forced herself to finish her gasp before disbelieving what she'd so hoped, that her brother would reappear somehow, somewhere... "But I thought he was listed among the missing."

"It was written before they disappeared," he told her tonelessly.

She let that same breath out, oddly not effected by her moment of hope being taken away. Moira waited many seconds before asking the logical: "What does it say?"

Admiral Paris shook his head. "I don't know."

"You don't know? Didn't you read it?"

He seemed to falter then, but regained his posture and took a deep breath for strength. "I couldn't get past the first page. I couldn't bear to read his excuses."

"How could you know he was making excuses when you didn't even see it?" Moira moved forward to see her father's steely expression. "Dad, it's been almost three years since you last saw him, since Mom died. Don't you think it means something that he tried to reach out to you?"

She got no answer, not that she expected one. Her father didn't like to express himself, not with anyone. Even her mother had once mentioned that he wasn't one to wear his heart on his sleeve, nor anywhere else. Knowing her father wouldn't offer it, she reached out for the PADD. "I'll read it, then. If I see any excuses, I'll give you fair warning."

"Don't patronize me. You should know what I went through with that boy."

"Well, he's still my brother. I want to know what happened to him. When he did what he did, I was as angry as you were. But once I'd gotten over it, he was gone. I never got to tell him I was sorry. So, I want to know what he had to say. --Who's this?"

Taking a seat on a brown velvet chair by the window, Moira stared at the picture. It was a lovely, happy portrait that made a smile creep onto the younger of the Paris sisters' full mouth. "He looks good, Dad. He looks happy. But who's the woman with him?"

"I can't believe you're asking that, Moira. When that portrait was made, he had probably knocked off a ship full of equipment and endangered a crew of innocent people."

"I'm not forgetting that," Moira insisted. "But this is different, Dad." She smiled at the picture. "This reminds me so much how much he looks like Mom. He's got that grin of hers."

"Do not presume to--"

"Dad, please, I'm not saying anything but that he looks good. That's not a crime." She gave up with a shake of her head and accessed the letter. She smiled, seeing that her brother had written it on a writer's PADD. She always liked his penmanship, something she'd somehow never learned, but Tom had taken to without much effort. Glancing up to her clearly uncomfortable father, she drew a readying breath and quietly began to read aloud:

Stardate 48286

Dear Dad,

How do I begin? I've been sitting here for twenty minutes, trying to find the right words. But I've learned that sometimes you just have to start without thinking too much about how it'll be taken. So I'll start with what I'm thinking and take it from there.

I've learned a lot of things, Dad, since the last time we met. But considering where I am now and what I'm doing, I think it's right to let you know what's happened to me. You deserve the chance to understand.

I want you to know that I'm not the same scared, angry and--yes--drunk kid that left Earth two years ago. A lot of things have changed.

Moira felt a little lump in her throat. That had been the first page from which her father could not progress. Her father was unmoved. She looked down again and scrolled the page down:

I know you don't want to read this. I know it's hard to let go of my record and reputation for as long as it will take to tell you what I want to say. Please try to, anyway. I'm not asking you to think of me as some sort of Robin Hood for being in the Maquis. I'm not that at all. The rebellion is hard and many people, both innocent and involved, have been killed. There's nothing glamorous or fantastic about fighting for this cause. But if it means anything, I do believe in it and will continue to believe, even if we might be doomed.

It was for a little girl who never had the chance to grow up, who was put to death so brutally I nearly lost my mind looking at her, that I finally took the steps I needed to sort out my own life. This was just over a year ago. I can't begin to tell you how much longer it seems.

I was another person then. I'd given up, stopped caring about myself. I felt that I had let everybody--you and Mom, especially--down. All I had ever wanted was to make you proud of me. Suddenly, any possibility of that was gone. Having given everything to that lost cause, my life was over when I made that stupid mistake and tried to cover it up.

Why did I do it? I tried for the longest time to figure out what made those wrong words come out of my mouth. The truth is, I wasn't strong enough then to accept my mistake. I was afraid to admit that I'd killed my closest friends. I was also afraid of disappointing you. I wasn't thinking at the time that turning my back on my responsibility would disappoint you more. When I did lie, Dad, my conscience couldn't take it. I paid dearly for it. I couldn't live with it. It drove me down in every way possible and I did everything I could to try to bury it, until I was in that hearing room confessing my crime. Looking back on it now, I still think coming forward with the truth was the right thing to do. In spite of the pain it caused for all of us, I did the right thing in the end.

I might have eventually come to that conclusion while still at home if Mom hadn't died. She had been my sole support during the court martial, even if I pushed her away. Humiliation is not easy to share, even with someone you love. She kept up with me, though. She even came by my apartment when I got home to try and talk to me. But I wasn't ready to move past the self-hatred, or the guilt. She called Jenna to come after me--and thankfully Jenna is probably the most stubborn woman alive, because she kept me in an iron grip until I seemed safer, and then forced me to begin to deal with myself. In the beginning, I resented her help and Mom's interference. Then Mom was dead, and not only had I lost my mother, who understood and loved me more than anyone, but all my hopes for coming home somehow, someday, and any idea that I might be accepted or forgiven again--all of that was gone with her. So I left with Jenna.

Before and after I confessed, I turned my back on everyone and everything that might have gotten close to me. I knew all the while that I needed to change, that I wanted to change. Even when I tried to the first time to sort it out, on Tinalat, I knew I wanted to. But it was too easy, being drunk, avoiding it in one way or another, at the same time punishing myself by becoming as dead as my friends, as dead as my mother, who I pushed away and lost forever. Then I saw that little girl.

To this day, I have nightmares about her, I see and feel those moments all over again. But I let those memories come, now. Seeing her reminds me that I can't

Moira touched the corner of her eye, glanced up to see her father's head bent, his hand resting on the corner of the desk. He still hadn't turned around. Moira scrolled the page and read ahead with wide eyes, sucking in a breath as she took it in. Smiling, she went back to the top to read with a little more excitement:

The lady in the picture is B'Elanna Torres. She and I met not long after I recovered my senses and started over. She'd had her troubles, too, and somehow we found a way to grow together, to find support and trust in each other. I don't think I could have come this far without her. It happened almost overnight, our falling in love. Well, actually, I loved her the moment I laid eyes on her. (I know you don't believe in that kind of thing, so you'll have to take my word for it.)

The proudest day of my life was when we were married six months ago...

Moira saw the admiral's head come up at that and so she continued:

...until we learned that we're expecting our first child, which should arrive in about six months. This alone is proof of how far we've both come: A year ago, neither of us wanted to give ourselves to anyone, and now we're committed to each other and the family we've made together. We both know it's been a quick change for us, but we want it and plan to keep taking life one step at a time and be thankful for what we've got. I think that says something, doesn't it? I hope it does, Dad. It says a lot to me.

You might not be proud of me, you might not be able to accept me, but maybe it will give you some comfort to know that I'm happy, I'm better, and I have made as much peace with myself as it's possible to here. Don't get me wrong: I'm always working on it, every day. But B'Elanna and I are both far enough along to know that we overcame the worst, and are continuing to live in a better direction.

If you're reading this letter, then our neighbor, Eric Schiller, has followed our wishes and delivered our letters to the appropriate parents. We thought we should leave something behind us, just in case we couldn't get back home. Included at the end of this letter is another, for B'Elanna's father. We would greatly appreciate it if you'd pass it on to him. The last time B'Elanna heard about him, he was in Mexico. But since he works for Starfleet, we thought it'd be safest to send it through you.

But don't think that just because you've gotten this letter something terrible has happened to us. It's just as easy to say we're still away from home. But if we are dead, know that we died having achieved in our lives exactly what we wanted: Freedom and peace of mind. Know that we did learn to love, unselfishly, and how to be loved, and how to give ourselves to something other than ourselves that we truly believed in.

And Dad, I hope you know that I don't have any hard feelings for you. It took some time to accept the fact that I would never be what you had expected, and that I was wrong to try to be. Though you did interfere with what I wanted, I was wrong to take against you those things I might have changed myself but didn't have the courage to. I placed too much importance on your opinion of me, and I paid for it.

In spite of that, of what's passed between us, I still love you, Dad. I will always care about what happens to you. Know that if anything.

Your son, Tom.

Moira's smile had faded with the last part. Clicking off the PADD, she looked longingly to her father, waiting for him to suggest a fate different to what Tom had suggested. The mission of the Starship Voyager had, since its departure from DS9, been confidential, but Moira knew that the ship had been chasing her brother's before it, too, disappeared, with no evidence of destruction. That was the key to Moira's continued faith that her brother was still alive. Having read the letter, she hoped even harder, and hoped her father thought the same.

"Thanks for reading it to me," said the admiral, his voice painfully pleasant. "Do you want to keep it? Maybe Kathleen would like to read it."

Moira nodded with a sigh. "Yes, Dad, I will," she said. "Thanks. I'll bring it back to you when I'm done." Knowing she could go no further with him, swallowing her disappointment, she turned and left the room.

Finally alone in his study, he found his chair and sat silently for a time. Minutes passed. Numb, thoughtless minutes wasted as he watched an antique clock tick and tock, then chime with the quarter hour. His eyes found a portrait of Alaine on the wall. His mouth drew down. "You win."

With that, he opened his desktop access panel to start working again. Then a thought came to him, a pique of curiosity. With a curl of his brow, he accessed another databank.

"Computer," he said, his cultured baritone as unshaken as before, perhaps even stronger, "Open all Starfleet files pertaining to the Maquis and display the full personal record of B'Elanna Torres. Voice print authorization alpha-psi zero-one, Admiral Owen Jacob Paris." As the information appeared before him, the admiral straightened a picture of his daughters on the left side of his desk and muttered to himself, "Leave it to Tom to marry a Klingon and make babies in a war zone."

50812 (1.7 years later)

He stared down into her eyes, the most captivating eyes he had ever known, or would ever know. Dark yet bright and intent on all they found, her eyes alone could hold captive the very life within him.

He moved again and her eyes closed. Her small, strong fingers gripped his shoulder, a little smile crossing her mouth as she drew another trembling breath. Tom placed his lips to hers, brushing them lightly, feeling her response; soon, he pressed his kiss more deeply and ground a few short thrusts into her. They both had to part for breaths at that. He wove his fingers into the nape of her tousled hair to hold the back of her neck. His other hand wandered back, sliding down the smooth muscles of her thigh, stopping at her knee. His fingers fanned around and under it, and with his fingers alone, he guided her leg up before pressing himself into her again.

B'Elanna's eyes shot open, then closed again as she arched her neck over his strong fingers, baring her neck to him. His mouth caressed it, slowly, gently, progressing aside, warmer with each nibble and kiss. Beneath her ear, his teeth caught her skin. Gasping aloud, clutching his shoulder, she

locked her free ankle behind his knee and pressed inward to encourage him. She moaned softly, quivering as he massaged away the shock of the mark with tender kisses, counterpoint to his dominant motion, to which she kept tempo with urging fingers pressed into the small of his back.

A flicker of a smile drifted over B'Elanna's lips as she felt him building, felt herself approaching climax, too, and she nudged his temple to direct his mouth to hers once again. Tom barely glanced at where he was going as he complied. He knew the way well.

Even so, their contacts were short for need of breath, their equal and growing momentum; marked with murmurings, softly singing gasps and unfinished words barely answered. Yet they knew each others' meaning. Tom ran his hand from B'Elanna's neck and across her shoulder; threading it down her arm to grab her hand from his back. Fingers wove together, clutched and finally braced down into the mattress as a deep shudder enveloped them. Their eyes opened and locked.

B'Elanna held her robe warmly around her, luxuriating, as she always had, at the feeling of having her hair brushed, shivering a little every time Tom stopped long enough to give her neck a kiss. *Am I ever going to get over that?* she wondered and knew she probably wouldn't. A few seconds later, he put the brush into her hair and drew it down, careful for knots, over her slim shoulders, stretching the curls on her back. Then he began again with equal care.

She looked at the bed in the corner, all of rumpled blankets and tossed aside pillows. "Before they come through to unload the plasma canisters, we have to remember to make the bed this time," she said with a little grin.

Tom chuckled. "Yeah, that was a little embarrassing, wasn't it?"

"Embarrassing?" She turned incredulous stare back to him. "Having our captain come to inspect a ship full of galacite only to find out her envoys had been consummating their marriage along the way?"

There, Tom laughed. "And festively on top of it! I'll never forget the look on her face, either. She'd already had enough trouble with Vorik taking on T'Nar." He found a knot at the end of her hair and began to carefully untangle it. "I guess we do manage to remind her from time to time that we have sex. Maybe if she'd promote Chakotay back to captain, it'd be easier. Then she won't always be the outranking officer."

"Tom!" B'Elanna slapped his thigh. "You're really rotten, you know. You have to know it's difficult for her sometimes."

"I do," he admitted, "and I feel sorry for her sometimes. But she's the one who chooses to live as she does. Besides, and more to the point, she should understand that when she sends us out alone on the Marseilles for an overnight mission, we are going to sleep together. This is our ship and I am the chief engineer's husband--and thrall. She knows that." The knot dissolved, he ran his fingers through the depth of her soft curls, marveling as he did the first time at how thick it was, how pleasant to touch.

"Just let's not forget to clean up. It'll be less work later."

"I'll take care of it," he said, lightly suggestive as he pulled the weight of her hair up to press his lips to her nape again, to breathe in her scent as he kissed her neck. "But remind me one of these days to make a door for the cabin," he muttered as he nuzzled down the curve of her shoulder. With another taste of her warm, aromatic skin, he felt her touch his cheek.

"Tom, Voyager will be meeting us in only a couple more hours." Her voice was as desirous as it was knowing. "I wouldn't get us started again if I were you."

"I know," he whispered, and kissed once more before pulling her close. Placing his chin on her shoulder, he held her in that relaxed embrace, his hands atop hers. "Do you think it worked?"

"I hope so," she whispered, pressing her cheek to his. She smiled. "Probably. After all, the Marseilles has always been a lucky place."

"Yes it has," he affirmed and gave her a little squeeze, "in more ways than one."

B'Elanna closed her eyes, content with the warmth between them there, in that little compartment. They had learned about Alaine there, Tom had proposed to her there, Alaine had taken her first steps there--so many memories, and hopefully one more. "So, how long should we wait until we ask Kes for a second opinion?"

Tom did not move, but his brow furrowed bemusedly. "Kes? Why should we ask her?"

"The Doctor's a bigmouth," B'Elanna replied, "and Jenna's not much better. You could do it, but I'd like Kes to be in on it too." She felt his smile against her cheek. "So, when should we ask?"

Tom kissed her askance. "We should wait a few days," he suggested, "before we invite her for dinner. Then we can let her in on our ruse."

B'Elanna laughed. "We have been sneaking around like a couple of criminals to make this happen, haven't we?"

His voice was tender as he closed his eyes, his grin pure satisfaction. "It was worth it."

51375 (6.8 months later)

"What, don't you think it's worth our time to get involved?"

"It's not worth the time or resources."

"Come on, Owen, Starfleet has more than enough and you know it. Why not give up some of your precious ships?"

The admiral rose his brow to the bait. Jastik, he knew, loved a debate as much as he liked to string them along. "Because they're better utilized elsewhere."

"Where? In the Demilitarized Zone? That's over now, my friend."

Owen smiled and leaned back in his chair. "Jastik, I'd rather not discuss these issues at present, but I will say that we've got enough to worry about around the DMZ these days, more trouble than the Maquis could offer. Why should we involve ourselves in a conflict that has nothing to do with us, has no strategic importance, or for a people who has openly opposed Federation policy? Now, if there are issues of aid, to their population, for instance, that we can give them, I'm all for it. But to lend out weaponry? That's more trouble than it's worth, yes."

He almost got a reply--it was right on Jastik's open grin--but the man stopped before starting.

"Owen--Klenman."

The admiral turned, still smiling, to see the same lady staring at him, PADD in hand.

She seemed unusually uncomfortable. "Forgive me for interrupting your lunch, Admiral, but," she came forward and handed him the PADD, "Admiral Leese suggested I give this to you in person. I just got the communiqué from Starbase 173."

Owen's grin faded to a pleasant grin; his eyes were still locked on Klenman. "Bad news?"

"No sir."

She didn't elaborate, but the admiral knew by the look on her face it wasn't confidential, otherwise Leese wouldn't have sent her. He'd have been contacted, instead. "Well, then, what is it?"

"It's Voyager," Klenman said and drew another breath, finding a tiny, anticipant grin. "Kathryn Janeway's alive. So is Tom."

Owen's eyes flew down to the PADD and he gripped it. "Do my daughters know yet?"

"I took the liberty of sending them messages."

"Thank you."

Jastik had forgotten all about his debate by then. "Owen, congratulations! That's great news! Your son, Tom, right?" Owen nodded. "That's great news."

"Yes. Good news, indeed." Owen straightened, put aside his napkin. "Actually, I should check up on this, if you don't mind, Jastik."

"No, no! Go, Owen." He continued to smile even as his friend and the captain left the room. Jastik called out, "And tell me of what other news comes!"

The admiral did not turn back to acknowledge or agree to the request. Jastik would think perhaps he hadn't heard, he knew. He said nothing to Klenman, either, but kept his eyes only on where he was going, not knowing what he should feel. What disturbed him most was that despite his quickened pulse and he didn't know what he felt.

~

Her eyes were locked on the panel as the fluctuations began to stabilize into a regular pattern. "Wait, I'm getting something," she said quickly.

"The relay has been reactivated," was the confirmation.

B'Elanna held her posture straight despite the forward weight, standing turned aside so she could get close to the information she read. The readings were definitely coming back then. Translating the algorithms and astrometric calculations easily in her mind, flickers of expression swept over her lips. Her heart beat quickly, hoping it would happen, knowing it had to happen, had to be. When the Doctor finally came back through, she smiled brightly, feeling the relief they had all been waiting for.

"He's back," she breathed, and then her other concern caught up with her. "Seven, I'm going to tell Tom." Moving away from the panel, she turned a smirk behind her. "Try not to fry anybody else while

I'm gone." The Borg woman did not dignify her jibe with an answer and B'Elanna didn't care. She walked straight out of the lab without looking back.

"Computer, locate Tom Paris."

"Thomas Paris is in sickbay."

She smiled again and sped herself as best she could without either running or falling.

"Lieutenant Paris!"

She looked back and laughed lightly as Hogan approached her. "Yes, Frank, the Doctor's back," she said quickly, not stopping as he caught up to her, "and no, I don't know how successful he was. I'm going right now to see."

Hogan's eyes were bright with expectation. "But if the Doctor's back, then he must have completed his mission. He must have gotten our letters through."

B'Elanna nodded. "Hopefully," she said, but gave in as soon as she saw his face. She stopped in front of the turbolift and put a hand on her old comrade's arm. "Most likely." A last look at his happy face as the lift doors closed kept her smile fresh for the remainder of her trip to sickbay. Every step to her brought another level of excitement. She was barely contained when she entered and saw the Doctor, allowing Jenna to run a tricorder over him while he talked to Captain Janeway and Chakotay about his adventures in the Alpha Quadrant.

"I thought you'd be down next."

B'Elanna turned. Tom stood in the entrance of the doctor's office, in his customary gray coat, leaning against the doorframe with casually crossed arms and a smile that lit his eyes. Pushing himself off with an elbow, he moved to her and she embraced him warmly, if not a little awkwardly. "I had to see for myself," she breathed.

Tom kissed her, gave her belly a gentle caress as he did so again, then wove his fingers into hers as they looked back to their friends. "There's nothing like a shot of good news after such a long wait."

"How's the Doctor?"

"Just fine, Chief," Tom said. "And he was successful. He talked to HQ. They know. They got our letters."

B'Elanna shook her head in amazement. "After all this time, it's almost unreal," she said, walking with him to the Doctor's side. Together, they listened to the remainder of his report, losing interest as soon as he began to harp on his part in the effort.

Silently taking over Jenna's examination, B'Elanna examined the readings of the Doctor for herself, and shrugged when he looked to her curiously. "Your matrix is stable," she told him, "but I'd like to run a few diagnostics, just in case. You've come a long way and I don't want to find any anomalies a month from now."

The Doctor was impenetrably cheerful. "I assure you, Lieutenant Paris, I was not affected by my travels. In fact, I--"

"Doctor's orders," she cut in, giving him a firm stare. He grudgingly quieted. B'Elanna punched up a

diagnostic on the tricorder. "This won't take long," she told him, all business as she prepared the scan with deft fingers. "I'll run the others from Engin--" She stopped and sucked a breath when a muscle in her back cramped up and a pain shot under ribs. Her hand shot to her side and she instinctively steadied her breathing. When Tom came close and placed his hand atop hers, she glanced back and nodded. "Nothing unusual," she said and exhaled the pain. "Just a cramp."

Jenna snickered as B'Elanna went straight back to work. "You're going to drop that ball soon," she cautioned. "I'd take it easy were I you."

"I still have a couple weeks," B'Elanna said while reading the tricorder. She entered another parameter and caught Jenna's wise grin. "What?"

"Even your eyes say it, B'Elanna: You're going to drop that ball--soon." Her voice was perfectly certain.

The Doctor sniffed. "More wives tales, Nurse Harlowe?" he asked. "Last week, you insisted that Lieutenant Paris should use lavender oil to help her sleep."

"Lavender oil relaxes the nerves," Jenna responded with practiced obstinacy. "I thought you were programmed in alternative medicine. Moreover, you know well B'Elanna and Tom prefer natural cures to hyposprays--anything to keep them away from you, I'd think."

"The week before, you determined the exact length of labor by the way she was walking."

The Doctor's chipper sarcasm made a muscle jump in Jenna's neck and she squinted to lean into his face. "I predicted my own and all my neighbors on Tinalat--not to mention Alaine's birth, if you may remember."

"Coincidence," the Doctor snipped.

"Bullshit," Jenna shot back.

Janeway trained her face down before playing referee. This was especially hard with B'Elanna, Tom and Chakotay all chuckling over Jenna's fearless defense of her traditions. "Jenna, I think this is a very old debate that nobody's going to win."

Jenna wasn't deterred. "Well I'm not giving in to Dr. Jekyll. I know what I know."

Chakotay joined the captain, then, looking at Jenna's flushed face. Only she could get so angry over nothing. "But you have to admit the Doctor's right. You can't prove many of your assertions, like that B'Elanna's having a boy because of how she's carrying."

There, Jenna's eyes shot wide and a furious smile broke over her face. "YOU go out and get yourself knocked up five times with three boys and THEN come tell me how wrong I am! Really, Chakotay! I don't go on hazing you about the spider stuck on your head, so don't you come in here telling me how I'm to believe what you think! If you think you've got that right, you know where you can stick that rock, you lump!" She spun, kissed B'Elanna and Tom in turns--"See you at dinner," she said--and succinctly and strode out.

Tom burst out in laughter, B'Elanna not far behind, and hard enough that she had to hold onto the edge of the biobed lest she lose her balance. Classic, garrulous Jenna never failed to entertain them. Looking at her old friend, B'Elanna managed, "Thanks, Chakotay. I needed that."

"If only she weren't such an excellent nurse, Doc," Tom chuckled, "you'd have an excuse to reassign her."

"I'd love to see her reaction to *that*," B'Elanna added between giggles.

The Doctor shook his head, smirking with the lingering disbelief that he'd been stuck with the pert Maquis nurse for the duration of their journey. "I'm finding more and more that Nurse Harlowe belongs in a sanitarium--or a coven."

Tom's laughter faded at that. "Come on, Doc, you have to know it's hard for her."

"I would think it *would* be hard to try to defend oneself on so many levels."

"That's not what I mean," Tom said. "Her children are finding out right now that she's alive. She's been separated from them for almost five years now." His features grew bittersweet as he remembered, "Lizzie was Alaine's age the last time I saw her. She was just like her mother, too-- into everything and loud as hell." He looked at the Doctor again. "Her traditions can be silly, Doc, but they mean something to her."

B'Elanna nodded her agreement as she closed the tricorder. "She keeps those ways because it's what she can lean on. I can't imagine how hard it was for her to leave her children at Grinara with the other survivors of Tinalat. Frankly, to this day I don't know how she did it, for the best or not. She never talked about it, just kept flying around doing things her way. But now she's having to face the fact all over again they're growing up without her."

Tom looked at Chakotay, who looked as if he'd been slapped in the face with those reminders. "You should have seen her trying to write those letters so quickly. I didn't think she'd get it done."

"She almost didn't," B'Elanna said.

Janeway sighed, "I think it was hard for everyone to put all our lives and feelings down in just a few minutes, since none of us expected to be out here. Too many loose ends." She noticed the Parises shrug at her words. "I would have thought it was hard for the two of you as well."

Tom and B'Elanna looked at each other, then back to the captain. "We settled our affairs before we left Avalar," Tom told her. "We left letters for our parents, just in case."

B'Elanna grinned a little. "This time around, it was just saying we're still alive," she said and patted her well-rounded belly, "aside from a couple updates."

~

"Dad! Dad! Did you hear?!" Moira sped down the main corridor as he turned. She threw herself into her father's arms, not caring if he minded such a public display. "Oh, Dad, I'm so happy! Wait until Adam hears!"

The admiral smiled at his daughter and allowed her that moment by returning the embrace. "It's still going to take some time to develop a way to get them home, Moira," he reminded her, pulling her back to an arm's distance. "It's not as though they'll be back tomorrow."

"I know," she said, "but it's twice as good as hearing he was okay to begin with." She beamed up to him. "Though maybe it wasn't as good as hearing I was an aunt and that you were a grandfather and about to be twice over." She laughed aloud, still bursting with the excitement she'd dared not hope

for, but was indeed true. "After all this time, I thought I wouldn't know what to say, but I've written a tome already. Oh, Dad, I nearly burst when I got the news! Isn't it wonderful?"

"Yes, Moira. It's nice to know he's alive." He caught her look and nodded, insisting, "And yes, Moira, it's good to know he's safe. I'm certain you'll spoil him and his kids to death if we do find a way to get them back. Now, I have to get some rest. I have a breakfast to attend in the morning, and you have a home to get to as well. Tell Adam I expect his report before dinner."

"I will," Moira answered. "Don't forget to have your letter ready when they're done--and that could be soon, you know. Of course you know, but you know what I mean. I'll come and pick it up for you if you want. Oh, Dad, I'm so happy! Thank you!" She quickly kissed his cheek before hurrying off to meet her husband.

The admiral watched her go.

He turned to continue on his way.

He had seen the meeting. As an admiral with priority clearance, that alone gained him access to the file. He had watched it, listened carefully to the story of the necessary blending of the two crews, of their trials, their successes, of them themselves. He heard the EMH speak of his son. His son was alive.

Tom was alive. His wife was expecting their second child soon. Tom still captained his scout ship when occasion served, sometimes took Voyager's conn when his skills were needed. Tom was an excellent medic. Tom was still studying medicine. He was alive and well.

He'd sent another letter.

Owen's smile faded as soon as the view of his daughter did, though he truly did enjoy seeing Moira so happy about Tom's situation. Silently, he turned to continue on his way. His steps were slow, and though he realized it, he couldn't manage to pick up his pace as much as he couldn't make himself feel any better about hearing about his son. It was good, of course, to read Kathryn Janeway's appreciative appraisal of Tom. It was good to know he was alive. Tom was just fine.

His plodding pace made his exit from Headquarters slow, and he was sorry for it when he saw Nechayev approaching. Reflexively, he gritted his teeth.

"Owen," said the admiral, a satisfied smile crawling onto her mouth, "how are you?"

"I'm well, thank you."

"That's not what I meant. You did hear the news?"

"Of course I did."

"And what do you think? That was quite a surprise, even for me."

"It was. I think it's quite a relief for all the families. Moira is very excited. I'm certain she's told half of the continent already that she's an aunt." On that, he thought for a moment. "I should make sure Tom's wife's message, if she sent one, gets to the proper people. You know how the Klingons can be with message routing."

"I'll help you find them," Alynna said. "It would be a shame if her letters didn't get there."

"From what I've learned, she was estranged from her parents, too, when she joined the Maquis." His grin held no humor. "No wonder they got on so well. Well, maybe they've been good for each other. They both seemed to need that support."

Alyнна knew the tone, yet still rose her brow to Owen's last statement. "Then you've looked up her records?" she asked, not mentioning that she had done the same.

He gave a slow, single nod. "Might as well, seeing as she's family, now. She's the mother of my grandchildren, Tom's wife. Being here and having some connections, I should be the one to be the go-between."

She eyed him at that, all right right words and perfect civility. "Excuse me, Owen, but you don't seem particularly happy about it."

"Forgive me, Alyнна, but I don't think it's your place to question how I feel." With a breath, he bowed his head shortly. "Now, if you don't mind, I need to find out--"

"You're still angry with him," Nechayev told him as soon as she formulated the thought. "You're afraid that because he never reclaimed his commission, even though it was offered, he's still a Maquis. Owen, even for him, that was a long time ago."

He had to give her that point, and so he stopped himself again to answer her charge. "I loved my son, Alyнна," he told her, "but you can't ask me to drop everything and forgive him. He lied to them, to my face, threw his life away and never looked back, never considered how it had affected us until he didn't have to face it. Alaine was traumatized by the whole affair. Shows her strength that she still stood beside him, but it crushed her."

Alyнна said nothing. His gaze turned away.

"I can't imagine what he was thinking when he turned Kathryn down," he continued. "You're right, I don't trust him. He seems just as aimless as he did when he left and doubly determined to go his own way. I'm glad he's been accepted on Voyager and made a good family, but he's still on random pattern, which doesn't prove to me that, if they get back, he'll be any better off than before."

"Maybe," Alyнна allowed. "Considering Voyager's records, however, I don't think that he'd still be untrustworthy."

There, the admiral snorted humorlessly. "Work? According to Captain Janeway's logs, he's Everyman of Voyager--this after his education and for all his talents. All of it thrown away. For what? He could utilize his time developing Voyager's assets, researching a better propulsion source--doing what he was properly trained to do, not waste his time mucking in the dirt and making house calls for an EMH. Here he has an opportunity to find some straight direction in his life and..." He shook his head. "I can only wonder how he spends his time."

51388 (five days later)

"I'm getting tired of hearing this," Tom said, his tone rising in volume and frustration with every word. Beads of sweat had formed on his brow again as he quickly, yet carefully, attempted the manual manipulation he had only studied, never done. There was only one other choice open to them, and that, he and B'Elanna agreed, would be the last resort. He removed his hand only seconds before

the throes returned.

Harry cringed as a yell ricocheted through the small cabin, and he picked up the tricorder he'd dropped when the sound shocked it out of his hand. That was the end of the dose of pain inhibitors, he knew and looked, more pressingly then, at the woman in the door. "I know this might be unfamiliar to you, but B'Elanna and Tom need our help now, and you've got nothing else to do."

Seven of Nine perused the scene without blinking. "I would be of little use to...this."

"But Seven--"

"To hell with Seven! And to hell with you! I don't need your help! So *shut up or get the hell out!*" B'Elanna sucked a sharp breath and cried out again, boring her short nails deep into the mattress. "Goddamnit! --Tom, get them the hell out of here before I get up and KILL *THEM!*" She threw her head back, between crying and growling and hyperventilating as Tom caressed her belly.

Kim sighed. "I'm sorry if Seven doesn't underst--"

"*Neither* of you are helping here," Tom snapped, increasingly as agitated as B'Elanna had understandably become. Nothing was going easily: His wife was in labor and having complications, the rendezvous was still fifteen hours away, the nebula they were mining had crashed the sensors and communications, and Harry and Seven were acting like idiots.

Tom shot each a glare as he continued his work. "Harry, load 20cc's of imuline and give it to me. Seven, get your ass over here and hold her hand. No arguments. If I hear another word out of either of you, I'll personally kick you out the back hatch. Understood?"

Giving it one last thought and with a downward turn of her mouth, Seven lowered herself to sit behind B'Elanna and mechanically offer her hands. When B'Elanna grabbed them and clutched, the former Borg winced.

Meanwhile, Harry found and loaded the fresh hypospray. "Tom, I'm sor--"

"I mean it, Harry. Just shut up and let me concentrate." Tom took the instrument and gently administered the imuline into his wife's belly. His voice softened as quickly as the medicine began to do its job. "That's better. B'Elanna, you should feel a little less pain now, too."

True to his words, she did relax slightly, the most searing part of the pain having quickly diminished. "Yes," she gasped, struggling to collect her breath before the next contraction hit. "Is it okay?"

Tom checked the tricorder and grinned. "The baby's fine and you're doing great. But it has to come soon, B'Elanna. If it doesn't, we'll have to go to option number two. There's not much more either of us can do about that." He nodded after she did, knowing they both didn't like the idea. "But only if it's necessary." He tossed a cloth to Seven, who was flexing a hand that B'Elanna had released. "Wipe her brow--gently," he ordered. "Don't worry, you can get back to your more relevant verteron collecting soon."

"You said that sixteen hours ago," Seven informed him, yet did as she was told, dabbing the water away from the engineer's face. "It is interesting that the human race managed to replicate itself."

"Screw off!" B'Elanna lashed, feeling another throe come on. "You have no right to judge something you or your Borg bastards have never bothered to--DO! Oh *GOD!*" Her grip tightened on the

hand she still held and she heaved for air. A few of Seven's knuckles cracked. "Tom?!"

Tom had been at a little work during the break and he looked to his wife as soon as the contractions resumed. "No, B'Elanna, no more holding back. The imuline did the trick. Time to push, now. Look at me, B'Elanna. Okay? Okay, here we go. Start counting... One, two, three..."

"Captain to the bridge. Have you reestablished communications?"

"No, Captain, but Mister Paris seems to be heading in."

"All stop. Let him come in on his own. Janeway out." She moved to the control table and punched a few commands. *The one time I consider bringing Alaine to meet her parents and they have to put me on my toes again.* The bay doors slid open. "The nebula's ion field must have collapsed the communication grid," she said to Chakotay, quiet enough that Alaine wouldn't hear.

Chakotay nodded. "Maybe because it's Barolian. The comm grid still is, anyway."

Luckily, the girl, though an open-eyed two and a half, would not have been interested for all her anxiousness, even if she did know what the adults were talking about. To Alaine Paris' credit, she remained by the control panel as her parents' craft, more than thrice the length and breadth of a shuttle and sleek as a hawk, folded its maneuvering wings, passed through the annular forcefield and landed--not so gracefully--on the deck.

When the bay doors began to close, however, Alaine finally jumped forward, her blue eyes glimmering with her smile for her parents' return. "Mommy, Daddy!" she called. The hatch opened and two weary faces appeared. But they were not the ones the little girl expected. "Harry, Seven, where are Mommy an' Daddy?"

Harry smiled in spite of his exhaustion. They hadn't slept all night, trying to catch up after their unexpected adventure. "Why don't you go and find them? They have a surprise for you."

Janeway perked. "A surprise?" She looked to the commander, who was grinning already.

Seven gave a nod. "Lieutenant Paris gave birth fourteen hours ago."

"More than a week early!" the captain laughed. "They do find a way to keep us jumping."

"And Jenna raking it in on the ration pool," Chakotay added.

Ignoring the chatter behind her, Alaine scurried off to the hatch, expertly climbing up the barrel step under the opening. The familiar recesses of the Marseilles were a little disorganized, but it didn't bother the child enough to stop her from climbing to the upper deck corridor. Finding her mother's big uniform tunic and her father's coat thrown haphazardly on the floor, she furrowed her brow, but hurried forward to the sleeping cabin. There, she stopped abruptly and stared.

Her parents were in the bed. Propped against the pillows, he had his arm around her and she was laying on her side. She had on her dark blue robe, open just enough to let the baby reclined between them suckle as they doted over him.

When they saw her, they smiled and beckoned to her. Alaine happily crawled up onto the sea of rumpled blankets and into her father's outstretched arm.

Tom kissed his daughter's head as he pulled her close. "Boy, did we miss you."

"Me too." She looked a little more shyly at her mother, who looked pale and tired--an appearance foreign to Alaine. "Mommy, you okay?"

B'Elanna's voice was still weak, rather hoarse, but she smiled despite it. "I'm a little sleepy, but I'm just fine, sweetheart. Daddy fixed me all up. Come and meet your baby brother."

Alaine's small red pout curled up into a curious grin. Her parents had explained as best they could to a toddler about the baby in her mother's belly, that she would be a sister soon. Leaning over to see the infant as her mother uncovered him a little more, Alaine saw that it was true. "I'm a baby siser?" she asked, fidgeting her hair out of her eyes.

Tom met B'Elanna's bright eyes above their daughter's head. "You bet you are," he told the girl as he began to braid her hair back for her. Like her mother, Alaine was blessed with those dark, thick locks begging to be loose. Tom loved it, B'Elanna lightheartedly felt sorry for giving it to her. As he repaired the braid, Tom added, "I think he's a lucky little brother."

Alaine reached over and touched the warm, pink infant. "My baby broter," she said.

"Yes," B'Elanna said and swelled with a tired grin as she stared at her daughter. "We are so proud of you," she whispered, nodding when Alaine seemed to query that. "We were thinking about how how you came to us. It wasn't easy, either, but look at you now." B'Elanna reached out for her daughter's hand, caressed it. "You know your Daddy and I love you very much."

"Me too," Alaine chimed--her favorite phrase--and scooted carefully up to kiss her mother's cheek. In the corner of her eye, she saw people coming and brightened to see who it was. "Takotay, I gotta broter."

"So I see," answered Chakotay, who, joined by the captain, grinned at the sight of the family. "Congratulations, you three."

Janeway smiled. "I don't recall giving you permission to bring guests back from the nebula," she teased. "But I think he'll make welcome addition to Voyager." She drew closer to give the tiny boy a better look.

Like Alaine, his hair--though but a curl or two--certainly came from his mother's side, as did his gently arching brow ridges, which were about as prominent as his sister's had been at birth. But the face looked longer, the mouth smaller. Like Alaine, he was a toss up of both his parents and in great health considering what Harry had said about the trauma of his arrival.

"He's beautiful," she said with a wide smile. "Have you thought of a name, yet?"

B'Elanna snickered, nestling herself in the pillow and her husband's shoulder. "Tom had plenty of time to think one up this time."

Tom gave her a peck on the forehead and grinned at the captain. "His name is Kiarn Paris. Kiarn is for B'Elanna's cousin, K'Karn." He reached up and gently tickled Alaine's rosy cheek. "That's your brother's name: Kiarn. What do you think about that?"

The little girl looked in turns at both her parents. Then, regarding the infant again, she leaned down and gave the tiny boy a little kiss. "I like Kirn..."

51450 (three weeks later)

"We were fools. Yes, fools to have borne children so unlike us." Miral's eyes found a place beyond the viewscreen, uncharacteristically distant for a Klingon. "My nephew is a wiser man than I once thought. When I had learned she may have been gone forever, dead without honor, K'Karn found me and told me of her, made me see with open eyes that her honor was intact." Her stare found the man in the screen again.

"It was not for the lessons I gave, but what she gave herself. I tried to make her see wisdom, but she never listened. I tried to keep her from your academy. I knew she would not stay there. She left in spite of me, walked on her own path. Thus, she is no longer mine, as for the same reasons your son is no longer yours."

"Perhaps you feel that way, because of your sense of honor, but that's not enough for me."

Miral eyed the gray and sallow Starfleet admiral. His arrogant self-assuredness was more than evident even across subspace. But only one word crossed her: "Why?"

The admiral did not break his gaze. "I don't believe that he's no longer my son."

"You should. Perhaps then you would accept his truer heart."

"Accept him? But you said--"

"I repeat, again, B'Elanna was no longer mine," Miral said, her voice dripping with insolence. "She chose her own path. When I learned what she had made of it, what my nephew told me, what her letter told me, what your missing ship informed me, I came to see her choice as acceptable, a good balance. I cannot deny her achievements. As my daughter, she dissatisfied me greatly. But as a woman, I can admire her." Miral found his slightly wandering eyes an interesting reaction. "Tell me," she said bluntly, "why can you not come to such amends?"

"I have been trying."

"And you continue to fail, considering your approach."

"I have tried to know more about him."

"But you already know everything." She grinned with the wisdom she knew was all too true. "You are only too much a coward to see it."

A muscle in the admiral's wrinkled neck visibly flexed and his eyes hardened. "I don't have to listen to this. My son turned his back on his family, on Starfleet, on the Federation, on everything I believed in."

"Then why do you contact me to inform me of his mate?" She held up her hand to his reply. "Do not answer me. Answer yourself. I know the answer I give myself. But I will not tell you, either. It is not worth my time." Much to her pleasure, he did not speak, even if his facade had reddened. "You unwittingly have contacted me to try to find your own heart. I am complimented by a fool today. So all I will give you, Admiral, is that question. Nothing more."

Miral was pleased yet more by the man's good sense when he cut the connection without another

useless word, only a short nod as he reached for the control panel.

Once alone again, she turned her console down to continue her briefly disturbed work. Her fingers snatched up the geoscanner and the PADD she had been entering her data into only a moment later; she nodded to herself to see she had not missed any of the reactions she had been trying to cultivate. Despite her desire to continue, however, and as she reset another parameter, her eyes drifted to the rare piece of sentiment in her home, a piece she had proudly defended, having placed it in plain sight to all who entered her house.

If they asked about it, she always held her head a little higher when she told them, "Yes, their eyes show the fire within them. They are not Klingon, but their blood burns with duty and honor. They are mates, my daughter and son in-law, and proud warriors of Avalar...."

51475 (one week later)

Tom's eyes opened with a shot, and a silent gasp was his first full breath of the morning. But seeing the familiar ceiling, feeling the warmth beside him, he immediately relaxed, closing his eyes for a moment to completely divest himself of the dream.

He leaned his head over a little to kiss B'Elanna's head. She was cuddled up against him, her arm around his chest, her head nestled in the curve of his neck. She stirred when he exhaled and drew his fingers across her hair.

"Shhh," he breathed, pulling the blanket back up on her shoulder.

She had woken a little, however.. "What time is it?" she murmured. "Is it time for Neelix's breakfast yet?"

"It's still early, B'Elanna, and the baby's not even up yet," he whispered. "Go back to sleep."

Her eyelids closed and opened slowly. "Are you okay, Tom?"

He grinned. "I'm fine, Mommy," he told her, very softly. "Go back to sleep."

She did not fight that, though she growled lightly at his jibe, her fingers flexing a little into his chest. At the same time, though, she cozied up closer to his warm body, then sighed deeply. A moment later, she was completely asleep again.

Tom stroked her hair again, tracing a lock over the back of her shoulder. He looked down, watched her face as she slept. She was so still, aside from the occasional twitch or reach of her hand.

He glanced across to Kiarn's crib, where their son lay in equal repose to his mother. Tom smiled at the look of his fluffy brown hair and tiny fist, bent up aside his head. His little pout was also like B'Elanna's, especially then, so relaxed in his sleep.

From there, Tom's eyes drifted over to the pictures on the wall by the door. Pictures of the family, their family, hung in no particular order: Tom and B'Elanna at the holo-Sandrine's a month before Alaine was born; another of the family taken just after her birth; K'Karn walking through a courtyard at Oslon; Alaine running in the party dress Jenna made; the three of them at the holo-resort; the four of them in sickbay when they first brought Kiarn home to Voyager; Tom and B'Elanna on Avalar; Tom's mother working amongst her flowers; Alaine peeking over Kiarn's bassinet, taken only two days

before.

There were some pictures of their friends: Of Harry and Kes at the latter's second birthday party; Jenna and Chakotay and Neelix laughing over some joke nobody remembered; Tuvok taking a shot at the pool table with Chakotay and Kathryn looking on with the expectation of waiting; Neelix and Kes talking over a bowl of greens; Kathryn holding Alaine on her lap while Alaine, still an infant, reached up to grab the captain's nose.

A smile grew on Tom's face even as he sighed. The memory had faded. Settling himself back into the pillow, his cheek pressed against B'Elanna's hair, he soon fell back to sleep.

~

Admiral Nechayev had gotten out of the meeting early and found herself outside soon after, breathing the moist, cool air. It did a pretty good job of cleansing her of the muck she had left, the dampened noises, the mist on her heated skin. The trouble with the Dominion and the Founders clearly were making her former woes with the Maquis look like a trifle, and matters were going from bad to worse. The conferences over the last month were beginning to drain her, for good reason.

Yet at the same time, she found herself continuing to needle Owen Paris. *Why do I bother?* she wondered, staring up at the gray sky. *Do I really need this diversion? It's obvious he won't budge.*

Without wanting to, she remembered the last time she saw Alaine. Alaine had contacted Alynna to tell her about the fight, her destruction of the hall and forcing Owen out of the house. She seemed relieved to have all the neutrality over with, to feel free again after too many years of being and doing what she really hadn't wanted and keeping the peace. "If I'd had any sense then, I would have let it all go to hell a long time ago and let the pieces fall where they may. But I suppose we can't be wise before the fact." She ended their conversation by explaining what gardening she would be doing that day. She wanted to pull the white roses, the ones Owen didn't like, up to the front of the garden, then plant some more sea grass around the fence.

She was proud of her rebellion--vengeful for her child. Alaine was so like she had been when they were schoolgirls together, Alynna thought, with her giddy laugh and sharp blue eyes, while she happily chatted about boys and fashions instead of thinking about her classes. Then again, Alaine had always been one of those sorts who somehow didn't need to study. It had annoyed Alynna to no end at the time, having studied into the late hours while her friend was on a date; Alaine would breeze into class, sit down, glance through her random notes before the test, and take home full marks. She didn't even think much about that, either, but shrugged and hopped over to tell Alynna about the party coming up that weekend.

Another wave of fog drew in off the bay, pouring mist over the spotless, manicured lawn and shaped bushes like icing on a cake. How strange that Alaine had ended up in the situation she had.

It was through Alynna that she had met Lieutenant Owen Paris, whose family had long been friends with her own. Handsome with that dark hair and hazel blue eyes, the willing heir to a long, proud history--regal almost, the way he held himself, like a prince--he had stayed behind after a seminar to catch up with Cadet Nechayev when Alaine hurried in to meet her for lunch and boldly took Alynna away. But Alynna hadn't mistaken how his eyes had followed her friend as they left. Meeting her a few more times during his leave, that prince proceeded steal flighty, flirty Alaine Marin's heart. In less than two years, they were married; two years after that, Kathleen was born. A couple years later, Moira arrived, and Tom not four years after that. Alaine could not have seemed happier, more fulfilled until later, until Tom started to grow and Owen grew increasingly set in his ways and then was

stationed on Earth. She plugged through life seemingly unbothered by her husband's doings, her head always high, always busy with her children, her hundred hobbies or her instructing, always chatting with Alynna about her garden, or the new color scheme she'd come up with whenever they could contact each other. Then Tom got in trouble, and all sorts of demons came out of the closet.

Or maybe it wasn't so strange after all, considering.

Alynna sighed to think that Alaine had finished that last job they'd talked about, even removing the roses from their pots and planting them in the ground. But she died not long after, was killed when the old anti-grav shelf with her gauging tools and several containers of bacillus malfunctioned and fell unceremoniously on her, breaking her neck. Her neighbor found her there, seemingly asleep beside the mess, but cold with death.

A stupid, useless, preventable death. Too soon.

Alynna couldn't even make it to the funeral. By the time she paid her respects, Tom was long gone.

Tears cropped up in the admiral's eyes, but she forced them down with much skill. It was a long time ago, she knew, and she couldn't afford to dwell on the past, on that past. She was making up as best she could for hunting Alaine's son, for doing her job. As an officer, as a Fleet Admiral, it had been her guilty duty to pursue with a vengeance her best friend's beloved child. But that was over now, Tom was away and making his life with his own family, and the Maquis was no more. She no longer had to think of Tom as the enemy.

As if her loyalties had never been challenged, she'd felt a need to help Alaine in what ways she could, particularly while she was still on Earth. Thus, Alynna diverted herself for Tom's sake and Alaine's memory and would continue to.

It was the least she could do.

Alynna breathed the wet air once more, blinked some mist away from her eyelashes. Pulling her coat collar close around her neck, she began to move across the nearly obscured mall to the office building. She still had four appointments that afternoon.

~

"I can't decide who's prouder: The mother, the father, or the sister," Captain Janeway commented above the chatter of the room and the whisk behind her. Without meaning to, little Alaine was stealing the show, telling Jenna in no uncertain terms how to hold the baby. Jenna played along, of course, sharing amused looks with Tom and B'Elanna as their friends and crew mates gathered and congratulated, then made room for others.

Neelix cheerfully continued stirring up breakfast--omelets and tomatoes with no special anything, per Tom's orders--as he glanced to the family in question. "I'd say that's a good question, Captain," he said. "They were all anxious to get their little addition."

Janeway grinned. "It's too bad Kiarn wasn't born when we got our messages through."

Neelix shrugged, his good mood unspoiled by the thought. "Well, with any luck, Captain, we'll get to send some more if Seven can configure another relay."

She nodded, grateful, as always, for the man's optimism. Yet as she watched the young family

introduce their son to their friends, the same thought tugged at her. She felt close to them, saw them not as younger siblings or children--as she did in a way with much of the crew--but more like a niece and nephew or, better, neighbors, for the Parises maintained a certain distance, a decided independence. For what precise reason, Janeway felt she could guess with some accuracy.

Though invaluable members of her crew, their duties came after their family without excuse or question. To that purpose, both had become expert teachers--he of pilots and medics, she of engineers and expert ship's technicians--so that they could delegate their duties when necessary. Chakotay told the captain how they had done the same in the *Maquis* when they were planning to leave.

Of all the crew, they had remained the most true to their old ideals. Janeway still grinned to remember when Tuvok informed B'Elanna that her wedding ring was not a permissible accessory to Starfleet uniforms. The young woman hurled her communicator, insignia and several Klingon curses at him while her husband gave the security chief a chilling glare Janeway would never forget. Well, at least she could grin about it in retrospect. To that day, the two, though eminently respectful, shirked no less from their opinions.

In essence, they were still that couple from Avarar, the young colonists in the portrait. She had come to accept that, even like that about them. They had become good friends to her when such closeness and confidence was a difficult thing for her to come by.

Knowing this, Janeway couldn't help but wonder still if his father had forgiven Tom. She hadn't even given it much thought until she met the Parises at their quarters that morning. While waiting for Tom to get Alaine dressed and as Kiarn nursed, B'Elanna mentioned how she and Tom had wondered about their families, hoped that they would at least see the good they had done with themselves, with each other and the children. Kathryn told her she was sure they would. It was hard not to say that, looking at them then, in their home with their babies, stuffed animals sitting on the couch and floor, juice and coffee at the dining table, Alaine in the next room insisting to her father she wanted to wear her "baa-boo dress" and pink slippers. Then, Janeway began to think about it. Would their parents see what she did?

She couldn't predict B'Elanna's mother, she being Klingon and Klingons being so strange and particular in their assessments. She could, like B'Elanna, only hope. However, she did know Admiral Paris, and calling up her memories of him, she tried hard to convince herself that he had forgiven Tom by then. She had her doubts, though. She had come to admire Tom Paris immensely. She trusted his skills at the conn whenever she called him there, respected his judgment. True, he was irrepressible and passionate, unafraid to debate anyone, especially herself and Tuvok. But he was a good man she had come to depend on and wouldn't be there without. Would her logs convince the Admiral of that? She didn't know.

"You look a few parsecs off the port."

She snapped back as soon as she heard Chakotay's voice, and she smiled at his observation. "I was thinking about Admiral Paris," she confessed.

"Admiral Paris?"

"I'm wondering how he's reacting to the news."

Chakotay looked over at Tom, who held B'Elanna in his arm. They both smiled as Tuvok placed a Vulcan blessing on the baby, as he had with Alaine after she was born. The first officer then returned

his gaze to the captain, whose expression was almost unreadable. "I wouldn't worry about it," he finally said. "Tom might be interested in knowing what his father thinks, but it's not a priority in his life. He has his own family to be concerned about."

Janeway nodded, but became more disturbed as she did. "It's more than that, Chakotay."

He stared down at her. "What, then, Kathryn?"

She allowed herself a sigh and another confession. "If Admiral Paris doesn't forgive his son after all this time, after everything Tom's been through and done, I don't think I could respect him. He was my mentor, my first captain; I looked up to him like a father when I was missing my own." She looked up to him with regretful grin. "It's hard to learn that your paragon isn't everything you thought and expected."

Chakotay nodded. "I'd feel the same. But you don't have to give up on your mentor because he doesn't meet your expectations. All you have to learn is that he's human, that he can make mistakes, too."

Again, she sighed. "I'd have preferred to keep him unblemished," she said with a pat on his arm, moving away to approach the Parises in her own turn.

51498 (one week later)

"P'tahk!"

Nechayev blinked, suddenly alert to the door before her. Having come to pay her old friend a friendly visit, the familiar Klingon epitaph stopped her in her tracks. Then, a large, heavily decorated Klingon appeared as he stormed out of the office and into the lobby, his face contorted with rage, his eyes like cauldrons.

"He is a fool," he growled, stalking around and past Alynna. "He sees nothing, *hears* nothing. He is no good among the living. How he has attained such prestige is incomprehensible!"

The admiral watched him stomp out of the lobby, the sweep of his robe counterpoint to his step as he swung around the corner. She sighed, hoping that her planned conversation hadn't been dashed. Then again, it was Admiral Paris she was thinking about. He was always at least *seemingly* impervious. So, she returned to her former path and pressed the door alert. When she got no answer, she pressed it again. It opened.

Admiral Paris was at work, or seemed to be with his PADD and a monitor busily collecting and compiling data. He offered a smile--though weak--when he looked up and saw her. "Alynna, what a surprise. You usually call before coming."

She moved to a chair and took it. "I saw Ambassador Githlor on his way out," she commented. "He looked pretty upset. Did you cook his blood worms?"

"Another satisfied client," Owen replied, briefly sharing her cynical grin. "That Tom married a Klingon is beyond me." He shook his head, collecting his PADDs to review that night. "I was lead to believe he didn't have a taste for overbearing sorts."

"His wife is only half-Klingon," Alynna corrected. "And in fact, I met her at a seminar at the

Academy when she was there. I found her to be a nice young lady. Excitable, a little uptight, but intelligent and polite, at least to me. But she was young, then."

"Yes," Owen said, perusing another PADD, "read all about her. So to what do I owe the honor of this visit?"

Alyna nodded, seeing that he had already evaded the entire meeting with Githlor and anything having to do with Tom as well. Not that she expected anything less. "I came by, Owen," she said, trying to be as casual as he seemed to be, "to invite you to the Academy grounds for a picnic tomorrow. I know you've been busy, so you might not have heard about it."

Owen raised his brow. "I might be a workaholic, but I'm not immune to Academy news."

"Will you come, then?" Alyna asked, as nicely as she could. "I've been hard on you lately. Let me make up for that." She retained her most charming smile, one he would remember from years past, one she wore knowing she was playing a ruse on a man who she indeed pitied, but still wanted that damn letter from. "Everybody will be there, wondering where you are."

Owen laughed. "Oh, they will, will they? You really are a conniving--"

--Admiral," she interjected with a clever grin, "just like you."

He finally relented with a nod. "Very well," he said, his smile twisting slightly. "After all, it's not often that I get a full yard of cadets to scare the hell out of."

"Well, your reputation is well-earned," Alyna said, "and don't try to tell me you don't enjoy it. You've always had a knack for it."

His grin flickered, though in the end the smile won as he glanced at Alyna's perfectly neutral expression. "I suppose I do enjoy making them a little nervous," he admitted and accessed his daily planner.

~

"Do you want to go back?"

"If you do."

"That's not an answer. Now tell m--"

"I know--I know! We're only a deck away. But what if--"

"God, what's wrong with us?"

"We're parents, that's what's wrong."

"Alaine was the same age when Jenna kicked us out the first time."

"I think we had this conversation too."

"Okay, then, we'll just stay here. Everything's fine. Right?"

"Right. What if something happens?"

"We'll be contacted."

"What if the COMM--"

"God, B'Elanna!" Tom moaned. "You know, we're wasting time just arguing about this." He looked down to her as she acknowledged him with a quick nod. At the same time, her lips pressed together and her arms crossed. "B'Elanna, I won't mind if we go back. Frankly, I was a little uncomfortable leaving this soon, too."

"I know," she said.

"How long did it take us to go?"

"As long as it took Jenna to get fed up with us."

He grinned. "And if we go back now, she'll kill us."

B'Elanna snorted at the thought, then sighed. "We do need to get away, I guess." Staring up into her husband's searching expression, B'Elanna shrugged. "It's only a couple hours."

Tom gave a nod. "Right. The kids are asleep. Kiarn will hardly miss us and Alaine won't even know we'd gone anywhere."

It took another few seconds for them both to nod at that, but less time to become amused with themselves: The serious looks on each other's faces made them both laugh. Shaking his head, Tom embraced his wife, kissed the side of her head.

"We're rotten and we know it."

"We should be committed," she agreed.

"To a nursery," he added as they continued to walk through their yard. They did not head toward the front door, however. Instead, they headed to the path behind.

"When did we get so domesticated?" B'Elanna wondered as she grabbed Tom's offered hand on the sandstone incline.

"What do you mean when?" Tom replied. "We've always been domesticated. We practically lived on the Marseilles, then on Avalor, now here."

"I guess you're right."

He guided her around a steep turn in the path, then moved to her side again once it straightened again. "I wouldn't call it domesticated, though. I'd call it normal. We're not fighting a war anymore, we have children who keep us busy..."

"We have a regular positions and duties." They had reached the top of the hill when B'Elanna stopped and looked up to him. "We're older and more settled than we were," she stated. "We've changed, settled down."

Tom chuckled and took her around the waist. "We're boring as hell as you know it," he said and pinched her. B'Elanna squeaked and grabbed his hand.

"I might be boring but I can still give you something to shake about Tom Par-IS!" His firm smack on her behind made her jump and swing around. Her eyes narrowed to find him again. "You're asking for it if you try that again, hotshot."

Tom nodded to himself. "That's better." He turned an eye down to her, grinning at her agitation. He hadn't seen her that riled in a while. "The best way to keep things lively is to get in trouble."

"Trouble with me isn't something you should hope for," she returned.

"You never heard me complain about my punishments."

B'Elanna drew a slow breath, smiling evily but saying nothing. She knew nothing could abate him then, only make him jauntier. She likewise knew if she continued it, they'd spend the whole evening going back and forth--and there were other things on her mind for that evening. So, she continued walking, holding back her hand for him to reclaim it. He did.

Around a small corridor of rock sat the pool of water, shimmering with the triple moons far above it. They had finally perfected the lake during their time on Voyager, having tinkered with it on and off every time they used it. Somehow a current wasn't right, or the temperature varied too much. Of all the programs they had created, Avarar was the one they wanted to be perfect. They'd made it originally for Alaine. They still called Avarar her homeworld, and already planned for Kiarn to know it well before he ever saw the real thing. They still called it their home.

Sitting on the bank of the lake, they removed their shoes. Then, looking at each other, they slipped their feet into the deliciously warm water. Both sighed. "Ahh, heaven," Tom breathed.

"Incredible," B'Elanna agreed and began to untie her dress. "Last one in's a stinking targ," she teased and slid off her clothes. Slipping off the bank of the lake and into the water, she turned a grin upon her husband, who had more to remove and was doing so quickly. Her mouth opened.

But he quickly said, "Don't even say it."

"Did I say anything?" B'Elanna giggled and pushed herself away from the bank, setting herself to sail in the currents. "We did do a great job on this."

Tom quickly caught up with her, gliding quickly to her side. "It took a while, but I'm glad we kept at it." With that he went under and gupped back up again, shaking the water from his hair. B'Elanna held a hand up against the spray. "Perfect," he said and collected her into his embrace. "Come on, time to go under, finish off your hair." He laughed. "Good thing you can't see it now."

"You should talk," B'Elanna returned. "You're the stinking targ--not me." She squirmed out of his arms to submerge herself on her own. But when she came up again, she caught a wave of water in her face. She shrieked and splashed back at him only to catch another assault. She was the better swimmer, but he was far more experienced at water games. Still, she battled back, kicking herself towards him and deftly meeting his veering attacks, keeping track only by the sound of his wicked laughter.

She managed a couple good buckets on him, but was laughing so hard and striking so quickly that she hadn't noticed that he had been maneuvering himself closer. When he lunged and slipped his arms around her and pressed his mouth to hers, the shock of diversion sent a warm jolt through her body. As suddenly as he had kissed her, she slid her arms around his shoulders and responded in kind, letting him guide them back towards the shore. As their kisses deepened, both sighed in relief and

anticipation. They knew well they hadn't gone to the holodeck for the swimming, after all.

Even so, B'Elanna couldn't resist commenting as they briefly broke apart, "Thank God. I thought you'd forgotten."

"If I were dead, I might have," he replied, bending slightly to nibble her sweet neck.

"Or if you'd...ahh...rather see who wins the water tossing contest?"

He nuzzled his way back up to her lips. "We'll be tossing enough water around soon enough," he whispered with a little grin and a caress between her thighs.

~

He collected his PADDs, as he always did at the end of the day and said good night to Klenman at the end of the corridor, where she turned the other way to leave. He gave nods or salutations or shared a few words with people along his route down the old avenue. It had long been his choice to walk home, rather than transport, even in bad weather. It was an hour and a bit he made up for in sitting behind a desk for much of the day.

It didn't use to be an oceanside road until a century ago, when four blocks and a highway sat between the row of antique houses and restaurants that now looked over the sea. Earthquakes and the rising Pacific Ocean had seen to the revised coastline. Geo-stabilizers and environmental correction saved the structures that existed that day, including the Paris house, left to Owen by his great-uncle a year before he married Alaine. Now, a healthy beach dominated the view from the avenue between the houses and restaurants, glowing in the warm sunset. The sound of the water was mere white noise off to the side.

He interrupted his trip to stop in at a cafe in the middle of the way. There, he would sit a while to the side of the busy street and watch the people go about their way or mill around at random, finishing off their work, starting out for the evening. Sometimes, he would be greeted, sometime joined. Since his wife's death, he'd made the brief pause a habit. If he felt particularly unoccupied, as he did that day, he'd start the work he had always brought home with him and stayed through dinner. He made sure never to finish his work there, though.

"You're looking a bit tired tonight, Admiral," said the waitress as she refilled his cup. The admiral always had one refill. "Lot of meetings today?"

"A few," he answered without looking up from his PADD.

She smiled at him, brows raising curiously, as they always did when she'd move not so gracefully to the next topic. "Any rumors I should know about?"

"Not today, Pauline. Been slow lately."

She looked at him another moment. He never gave her information--nor did she ask, as it was more a game than a practice to wheedle in his business. For that matter, the gossip she had come from much more open sources. But at least most of the time the man did have the grace to play along. Considering it again, she took a seat next to him, set the coffee pot on the table. "Admiral, is something wrong? You really look tired."

"Nothing. Just a tiring day."

"It is because of Voyager?"

Owen's eyes pulled up, but his words were unaffected. "It's good to hear from them, but that'd be far from tiring."

"Even if your son's on board?" she asked and laughed when his face lit with surprise. "Do you think I didn't know he was there? I knew about your family well before we ever met--and we've been talking for years."

"Well, no, it's not confidential, for the most part."

"I always thought it strange, though, that you never mentioned him." He stiffened; Pauline sighed. "Forgive me if I seem like I'm prying, but I know things between you and your son must have been tense. Still, that really should be in the past, considering."

Owen smiled graciously with effort. "Pauline, aside from the fact that this doesn't concern you, I don't think you understand the implications involved."

Her returning grin was equally generous. "Oh? He was a high ranking member of the Maquis, I heard. That alone isn't much for you to brag about." Realizing she'd said more than she'd meant to at first, she apologized with a shrug. "But I suppose since you're an admiral from a long line of admirals, it must have been a great embarrassment on your part."

He stiffened. "It is."

Pauline touched his arm. "He's sixty years away from all of that, now. The Maquis is gone, no more. They're all caught or killed, and thankfully, your son wasn't among the poor souls who caught the worst of it. I guess that was my point--that you were probably relieved to know for certain he's alive. In spite of the fact that he'd sided with the good fight, it should have been a lot of weight off your shoulders."

"Are you a sympathizer?" Owen asked, surprised at her description of the conflict.

Pauline smiled sadly, shaking her head. "Oh, Admiral, I think everybody sympathizes with the Maquis, or at least with those colonists. If somebody tried to take my home away from me, I think I'd fight, too. Having everything that's important and dear to you ripped away because of other people's plans, well, I'd think that'd make me feel so useless and helpless that I'd want to take up phasers, if only to know I tried. That doesn't mean that I agree with the violence in the Demilitarized Zone. But I understand why it started, why they would want to fight. You can't sit here and tell me the Cardassians haven't committed atrocities that Starfleet was powerless to prevent because of the treaty." She patted his arm. "Your son had been living out there for a while. I wouldn't be surprised if he'd seen some things to upset him, as if he hadn't been unstable before."

Owen eyed her, remembering Tom's initial letter. Pauline had guessed well, but he'd be damned if he'd tell her so. "Then how can you say it wasn't the previous incident that caused him to become what he did, hmm?"

"He came from far too good a family for that, Owen," she replied. "He had loving parents, a fine upbringing, every opportunity and a peaceful world to achieve on. Now, there was trouble, but he did do right in the end, yes? He cleared up his testimony, accepted his punishment, painful as it was to do so. That's not the action of a man without conscience."

"Perhaps. But--"

"How can you say his conscience didn't stay with him after he joined the Maquis? Do you think he joined only to spite you?"

Owen's eyes flickered. Turning away, he drew a breath. "Sometimes. Sometimes I wonder about that."

"Now why would he want to risk his life, live so hard and give up everything just to make you suffer?" She stood, fixing her stare on his firm profile. "Not everything centers around you, Admiral, though I can see why you'd think that. I really doubt your son was being cruel. But you've been hurt, and sometimes when you're hurt, it's easier to pass the blame than see it for what it is."

Owen looked up at her, emotionless as he examined her kind smile. "And what do you suppose it is, Pauline?"

"I think you're angry because, like those poor colonists out there, you had no control over what happened with your boy. Powerlessness is a terrible feeling, Admiral, especially when you're not used to it." She patted his arm again. "I'll get the dinner menu for you. Chad's got some new specials I think you'll like."

As she turned away, his eyes turned down. With a slow breath, he reached for his coffee, sipped it as he had before, then continued to read his reports. That time, they barely registered.

~

Their hair was still moist when they slipped into their quarters and stopped to look at Jenna, reclining on the couch with Kiarn sleeping against her breast. Nanny and infant looked utterly at peace in their repose.

Tom and B'Elanna gave each other a grin and moved silently to their bedroom. Wrapping themselves warm within robes before crawling into bed, into each other's embrace, they kissed, nestled close, content. Without thinking to, Tom threaded his fingers through her damp hair, which had stubbornly tightened into plaited curls upon leaving the water. B'Elanna unconsciously circled her fingers against his skin beneath the collar of his robe.

"I wonder what time Jenna got Kiarn down," she whispered.

Tom gave that some thought. "It couldn't have been too long ago. He's still on the three-hour rotation."

A pause. "He'll probably be up earlier. He didn't take much to the bottle the first time."

"I don't blame him," Tom grinned, that growing into a quiet chuckle when he felt her smile. "But Jenna has her way with children. He probably had enough to carry him over."

"She is good at it," B'Elanna agreed. Her smile faded. "I feel sorry for her sometimes." She shook her head. "Jenna doesn't say anything, but I know she can't be happy."

Tom sighed, shrugged. "Yeah. It's probably why we let her baby-sit whenever she decides we need some time together."

B'Elanna watched her fingers as they moved the cloth of her husband's robe, comfortable but for where her mind was going back to. In the silence that filled their room, she started thinking.

Tom glanced down to her. "What is it?"

She'd expected him to notice. "Do you really think we're boring?"

"In comparison to what we were doing, maybe. But I'm not bored, if that's what you're asking. Are you?"

"No. But everything is so different now," she breathed, as if just realizing it. "This is what we were planning before, though, wasn't it? In a way? A normal life?"

"I guess it is, in its way. We're relatively safe, we have a family, friends, jobs. It's just what we'd been working on when we fixed up the old house. Except for being stuck out in the Delta Quadrant, for the most part, we got what we wanted."

"Yes." She smiled. "I'll always miss Avalar, but I'm glad we've managed to make something here."

"Me too."

"Even though things have calmed down so much?" she asked.

"Maybe even for that reason," he said. "Maybe we really did get the fighting out our systems and this was just what was supposed to come next. Sure, sometimes I think I'd like to get into a little mischief again--especially when things get slow at work. But we have more here than we'd expected to ever get. I'd never regret a moment for all we've got now."

"Neither would I. But sometimes, I can't help but think we need a little diversion, especially when we start arguing over something we agree on."

Tom snorted. "We were spoiling for a fight, all right. What was it about again?"

She shook her head a little. "I don't remember. Maybe we need more challenges, to keep us going."

He eyed her, crooking his head to peer down until she looked up. "B'Elanna, you're chief engineer of a Federation starship, a bridge officer, the mother of two and the wife of a pain in the ass pilot--and you want more challenges?"

She laughed lightly and snuggled back down on his chest. "I guess you have a point. Maybe different is the word I'm looking for. Maybe you were right before, that we should shake things up a little. It's so easy to get caught up in routine."

"Well, in that case, I wouldn't worry about it."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, because as soon as we get too comfortable, you know something'll come around to change it all again, just like when we ended up here, just like that first day, when I saw you on Tinalat." He drifted his fingers down her spine. "Besides, you know if we do get too anxious, we'll find our own way to throw a stick in the spoke. We always have before."

"That does sound like us," B'Elanna returned and pulled herself up to face him, toying with the lapels of his robe. "I guess we'll just keep taking it as it comes, then?"

Still grinning, he placed his hands on the small of her back, pressing her in to him. "I can live with that," he whispered suggestively.

She ran her hands under the robe and over his shoulders, purring as he kneaded her waist with his strong, tender fingers. "So," she whispered, sliding her leg over his hips, "how long do you think we've got now?"

He brushed his lips over her waiting mouth, rubbed his nose against hers to nudge another kiss as she moved herself completely over him. "Long enough, I hope," he murmured with a little grin, pulling away the sash of her robe.

~

His eyes opened, but he did not move. Feeling the restraints, feeling the pain, like slivers of ice down his spine, ricocheting around his midsection. But he couldn't move, couldn't ease it. It nagged him after the pain subsided.

But the worst of it, the thing that stuck with him the most, that terror he had never known possible was the powerlessness. Not knowing and not being able to do a thing about it. They could easily have been unwise and killed him. It was war, after all, and he was a trophy. They could have strung out the sessions for years if they'd wanted to, kept him alive and driven him to madness if they chose to--and he knew, without any doubt, that he could not have done anything about it.

They were in complete control.

That was terror. He finally knew what it was when he realized that and felt the cold slicing in his muscles, heard their trained composure fill his ears.

But that was long ago--two decades ago--and he'd overcome that. He had been released and had lived well beyond that, knowing that he'd won the fight in the end. He made himself know that he had won that fight.

He lay in his bed, under his sheets. The room was his. The furnishings, the windows, the lamps on the tables...

Owen still could not move, feeling the restraints that kept him from moving any part of his limbs or midsection. They left his head free to thrash, though.

He had tried to be neutral, not give in. The pain, actually, was more draining--distracting--as it was designed to be. The restraints, unable to move, twist with pain each time they administered it, so calmly, unable to look away, unable. Powerless.

Owen lay motionless for many minutes, staring at the wall, seeing the ceiling of the cell they'd held him in. Motionless. They did not acknowledge his pain. Asked with all politeness what they wanted to know. He told them nothing. Then another jolt was administered and they watched, impassive. He could do nothing but let it happen.

He had screamed, squeezing shut his eyes as he forgot that it was what they'd wanted to elicit from him. He didn't care. He just wanted to be able to arch his back--just a little--to make it stop. He wanted then to stop talking, strolling around him, so pleasantly. He had screamed to silence them--to stop hearing them, to know he could do that.

Eventually, he had cried.

He had given in.

Alaine never knew the details of his experience. He never told her. He did not want to relive it, particularly to her. She'd asked, tried to help. He evaded her. She would have wanted to talk about it.

Owen told himself to relax, that he needed to sleep, that he could clear his mind if he only tried. Mind over matter; think it into being. Glancing at the chronometer, he calculated only five hours until he would need to wake. He closed his eyes, breathed deeply, willing himself to a mental picture to replace the memory--forcing it there, the ocean, its rushes a constant hum in the house. He envisioned the waves on a dusky shore, rising, pausing, ebbing...

The frothy waves ebbed, revealing his son, strapped to a table in the sand.

Owen's eyes shot open.

He moved his legs off the bed and sat up, drawing a breath to quash the crush in his chest. He went to the sink and washed his face. Minutes later, he was in his den, reviewing the reports he'd barely read earlier.

It was a good enough time to do it as any. He was wide awake.

51499 (the next day)

"Good morning!" B'Elanna sang as she entered engineering, the skirt of her tunic adrift in her stride, cradling Kiarn securely at her side.

Lieutenant Carey grinned at the lady, all of swinging hair and a bright smile his way before she sauntered over to the console in question. Kiarn didn't seem to mind her gate, but hung loosely in the hammock of her arm, kicking a little, then stopping to gape in a sort of wonder when his mother mischievously snagged his bootie in her fingers and tickled his foot. Then his eyes found the lights in the big blue room. Consequently, he hardly noticed when B'Elanna released his foot to tap on the panel, still grinning to herself.

"Well, Lieutenant, you seem awfully chipper this morning," Carey said, insinuating good-naturedly the exact cause of her good mood. It was, after all, common knowledge that the Parises had holodeck time the night before. "It's good to see you back to your usual perkiness."

She ran her fingers over the diagnostic panel and her eyes over the displays. "My perkiness or the former lack thereof is none of your business," she replied, then turned an equally suggestive smile his way.

Carey stifled a chuckle and jumped back to business. "I'm sorry to have called you down, but we couldn't stabilize the flow regulators. We think the particles we collected might be contaminated."

B'Elanna nodded quickly. "We can clean it up. Tom and I had to do this on the Marseilles when we first got it. Barolian and Cardassian technology isn't exactly compatible, and we came by a lot of Cardassian parts. It looks like this region's verteron particles and Starfleet plasma conduits don't like each other, either." Her grin turned a bit inward as her fingers flew over the panel with well-practiced accuracy. "It's just a matter of translation, Joe, nothing more..."

~

Alyнна took one look at Owen in the door and lowered her chin to regard him. "Owen, you look like hell," she stated.

"Didn't sleep much last night," he told her. "Just a touch of insomnia." Stepping back, he gestured with a small sweep of his hand. "Please, come in. I'm just finishing."

She walked in a couple steps, and then a few steps further with a little more hesitation. "Thanks."

She had only visited the house a couple times since Alaine's death, for reasons she wasn't too proud to admit to herself. Though nothing had been moved around, it was completely different. It was still strange to not see Alaine there to greet her, as she always did, with a quick, warm hug and a kiss on the cheek as she laughed and thanked her so much for coming. No matter what they were doing, she always offered coffee, to sit and chat before heading out to a seminar or to the gymnasium, or the nursery for some new cuttings--or even to remain there, in the yard, on the beach.

But none of that warmth was there anymore. The house used to smell of wood oil and the roses she faithfully cut every other morning and placed in vases around the house. There was no music, no scurrying about. Even the sun came into the windows differently. Without Alaine, the house's emptiness was palpable, even those five years later.

Alyнна took a quick breath, keeping her eyes on Owen. "Are you're sure you're up for today?"

"Just some bad sleep," he repeated as he slid his tunic on. "Nothing more. I'll survive. Like some coffee?"

"Why don't we get that on the way? Maybe the air will do you good."

He looked at her, adjusting his collar. She was still at the foot of the entry and looked unnerved. "Perhaps it will. Let's go, then."

Alyнна gladly turned and led the way back out.

~

Alaine ran a random pattern around the corridor as she and her father headed towards engineering. Knowing the route well, she was not afraid to veer quickly into an adjoining hall and hide. She did this several times, jumping out to surprise her father, who would laugh and lunge forward to try to scoop her up. Before he could, she darted away, giggling infectiously as she tried to find another place to hide.

On her last stealth maneuver--for even Alaine got tired after a while--her father did not come. She waited another moment. She couldn't even hear him. Not liking the wait, she scowled and peeked around the corner.

"Gotcha!" Tom announced, scooping up his little girl, who laughed wildly as he got her in both of his arms and hung her upside down by her legs before sweeping her back up and into his arm. "What do you think of that, you little banshee?" he teased.

"Daddy's silly!" Alaine laughed and threw her little arms around his neck.

"Well, Alaine's a very good little hider. But I'm glad you came out."

"Me too."

Tom kissed her forehead before noticing the captain coming from the other direction. "Kathryn," he said in greeting. "Are you off to engineering too?"

"Yes," she said and patted Alaine's arm when she was close enough. "Hello, Alaine."

"Hi, Aunt Kat," giggled the girl, her round, blue eyes shining with mischief before she threw her curly head into her father's coat collar.

Tom chuckled and took to Janeway's side as they continued. "B'Elanna asked us to come and rescue her if they held her hostage for more than an hour."

"Yes, I just heard they'd called her," said the captain, looking none too pleased about it, "when I left the holodeck. I'm sorry about that."

"Don't worry about it," Tom said, lightly but meaning it. "Kiarn can still sleep anywhere at this point, and I needed to stop by sickbay. So it's not that bad. Besides, B'Elanna likes to know she hasn't neglected her bastard child."

Janeway grinned at his wry truth. "I can understand that. But I wish they would have called me first. I thought I had made it clear--"

"Kathryn," he cut in, a knowing stare hanging long above his crooked grin, "they had a choice between disturbing a half-Klingon engineer on maternity leave and interrupting their overworked captain taking some well-deserved R&R in the holodeck. Give them a little credit for making a very difficult decision."

"Tom, I would've come if they had called."

His expression was unchanged. "That's the problem, and the reason why they decided on B'Elanna and not you."

Janeway frowned. "How do you mean?"

"B'Elanna has other priorities and knows when to address them. You, however, push yourself to exhaustion. Even when you're relaxing, you're at work--and everybody knows that. When they heard you were on the holodeck, they probably looked like Easter Island wondering how they'd get around that one. So, they called B'Elanna and swore on bended knee that it wouldn't take long."

"That's how it happened, did it?" Janeway smiled.

"Most likely," Tom said and shrugged. "B'Elanna didn't really mind. We got some time to ourselves and, consequently, some great sleep last night."

"Yes, I heard you'd gotten in some holodeck time. Where did you go?" But suddenly she flushed, remembering what Jenna had brazenly told her before going off to baby-sit the night before. "Of course, you don't have to tell me."

Tom shrugged. "We just did a little swimming on Avalor," he said. "Nothing too unusual."

Janeway was nodding, but his bright eyes and quirky grin said it all. She cleared her throat and looked straight ahead. "I'm glad you enjoyed yourselves."

"We certainly did." Turning into engineering, Tom gently set Alaine to her feet. "Here we are, sweetheart," he told her and breezed ahead to grab Carey's arm. "Okay, Carey," he said with mock ferocity, "you'll release my mate now or eat my bat'leth. Choose now, coward."

Carey laughed. "I relinquish her to her rightful mate."

"Good choice," Tom said, releasing him, and smiled as B'Elanna approached him. "M'lady, I have come to challenge the dragon and rescue you from the tower."

"My hero," she quipped dourly and gave him a kiss. "What would I do without Sir Thomas of the Lake?" He opened his mouth for his comeback, and she rose her brow warningly, glancing to the captain. Understanding--"outside"--he held his tongue from further reply. B'Elanna repositioned Kiarn in her arm, then held her other hand out to Alaine, who hurried up to grab it. Looking to her husband again, she tried to be more serious. She knew that look on him. "Home, then, and get some lunch?"

"At your command," he said softly, extending his hand to her waist with a short bow. Only when near enough, he whispered into her ear.

B'Elanna laughed. "In your *dreams!*"

"I wasn't talking about sleep, Chief," he returned.

She almost shot back again, but stopped short at the sight of her captain's amused grin. Rolling her eyes, she gave the woman a nod as they passed. "Kathryn."

"B'Elanna," Janeway almost snorted, fighting to keep a straight face.

"I cleaned up our verteron supply," she continued, deciding to stop and explain. "Our initial conversions didn't--"

"B'Elanna, go home," Janeway cut in. "I'm sure Mr. Carey can fill me in on this. --You're on leave, Lieutenant. I expect you to stay that way while you are. I'll drop by later, if it's not..." and there, she pressed her lips together in jest, "...inconvenient for you."

B'Elanna nodded, then thought about that. "Just call before you come."

Janeway laughed, waving the two away. "Take her home, Tom."

When the doors to engineering closed behind them and Alaine pulled free to run ahead, B'Elanna's mouth pulled into a wicked smile. "Just wait until I get my hands on you, Tom Paris."

His laugh was equally evil. "I anxiously await it, Miss Torres."

~

"Sorry about that, sir!" said the young cadet cheerfully as he jumped back from the collision around the trunk of an old boxwood tree. "I didn't see you coming."

"Perhaps it would do you well to be more observant," Admiral Paris said, not angrily, though not cheerfully, either. He was still stifling yawns and the rich food that seemed particularly designed for the mass of twenty year-olds had done him no favors.

"Aye, sir," returned the cadet. He brushed aside a stray auburn curl, his eyes shining as he looked

over the man before him. His eyes crinkled with a squint. "Pardon, but are you Admiral Paris?"

Owen's brow rose. "Yes." He was a little surprised to see the young man simply nod and say nothing more, as if it didn't matter. The admiral couldn't resist, then. "Why do you ask?"

"I'd heard about you, is all. Just wanted to be sure you were you before supposing anything else. Nothing else important."

It took most of his strength to suppress his grin. The boy was truly guileless. "You might, Cadet, want to review the procedures and protocols in dealing with your superior officers."

"Oh, I'd done all that already," he replied. "I don't think I've treated you with any disrespect, as we're on a holiday today and it was only a question. For that matter, I've already apologized for *you* bumping into *me*." He shrugged. "No matter. I'll keep an eye out, anyway. You never know where they'll be coming from. Good day, sir."

For the young man's carefree daring alone, the admiral simply could not admonish him further. "Good day Cadet."

"Sirs," said the young man with a small, polite bow before he hopped away from them.

Alyнна Nechayev hardly silenced her chuckles as the bold cadet rejoined his awestruck friends. Obviously, the friends understood deference and the boy either didn't know or didn't care--probably a little of both. "Well, I like to think I see something new every day," she goaded, peeking around the tree to view the youngsters a moment longer. "A cadet that outranks you--nice concept." The ruddy-haired boy was staring at them, but turned quickly away once she caught his eyes. "They get younger every year."

Even Admiral Paris was amused. "He's a freshman, probably off a colony. They sometimes think they've got some leeway. He'll know better in a year."

Alyнна nodded, a little more subdued. Though she understood perfectly well the need for discipline--and hoped the young man would find some as he'd never have a career without it--she also found such innocence refreshing. Moreover, she had always enjoyed a little personality in her officers. They usually had the best outcome when they weren't afraid to be themselves and take a few risks here and there.

On that thought, she sighed; trying to relax, she finally decided to go to it. She'd been nice all day, mainly for seeing him so tired. But the day was almost over. "Have you finished your letter to Tom?"

He turned a narrow stare to her. "You're not going to ruin this fine day by harassing me again, are you?" The responsive look on her face proved that she was, and he blew a short sigh through his nostrils. "I'll get to it," he told her. "Does that satisfy you, Admiral?"

"Tom will be so pleased," Alyнна replied dourly.

He huffed again, shook his head. "For God's sake, Alyнна, what do you want from me?"

Then, she looked--glared--at him. "I want you to write a letter to your son that means something," she answered evenly, "to tell him the truth. You owe him that, Owen. You owe him a lot." She turned and put her hand on his arm. "If not for Tom, if not for you, then for Alaine. It's what she would have wanted."

Owen face stiffened at that. "How the hell would you know what Alaine wanted?" he growled.

"I know a lot more than you think," she said, but sucked the rest of her words back in when she saw his eyes reflect some dread. If she remembered anything that Alaine had told her about him, it was that he hurt like a Vulcan. Unfortunately, reality often went with along with the suppressed pain, whether of not he meant it to. So she rethought her approach.

"Owen, I was your wife's maid of honor, remember? Alaine and I went through school together. I introduced you to her, watched your children grow up, either in her letters or on my visits. Alaine told me everything, because she had nobody else to talk to. So yes, I know what's gone on in your family, and I care about what happens to it. As Alaine's friend--and your friend--I feel a little responsible for following through with what she would have wanted."

She moved to catch his gaze. "Owen, look at me," she commanded and stood strong in the glare he gave her. "Alaine wouldn't have given a damn if you'd hated Tom the rest of your life. What she wanted you to give him was the truth--not pleasantries, not politeness, not evasive blame, but the truth of how you feel, how you're coping, whether or not his achievements meant anything to you, even if you don't agree with where he took them. But most of all, she wanted you to let him go--and let him know you two had the right to be different. If that's too hard for you to do after thirty years--if you can't at least give him the time of day after what he's gone through to become his own man--then you really are as weak and pathetic as she knew you were."

He flushed visibly, but had no reply, even as she pushed his arm away and passed him to walk back towards the courtyard. Suddenly alone with her words ringing in his ears, in the shade of the tree, just fully bloomed, he felt disoriented, as if given a blow to the head. The other people in the Starfleet park seemed hollow in his ears, though watching Alynna move quickly away, he could somehow hear her steps, beating on the grass.

Slowly turning his eyes away from her angry stride, he continued on his previous route, back to the walkway that would lead him off the grounds, though that time in spite--in spite of Alynna, in spite of Tom, in spite of Alaine.

But his walk was aimless, barely cognizant of his destination. *How can she think I deserve this? Hadn't I tried? Tried to give him the best...the best of...*

"My son is lost. His heart is dead and you killed it."

He could hear echoes of the laughter and festivities behind him, those young cadets and their families, the music. *I tired to give him what I knew would be right for him, tried to steer, tried to mold...* Owen turned around. An older man was jostling with his son in the field, and the younger man was laughing loudly.

Suddenly he could see his son, standing before him, eyes forward, jaw tight, lips pressed hard together. *He wanted to take another semester of biochemistry...* Owen believed his time was better served in astrophysics. Tom argued, but soon agreed and went silent after, straightening his posture. At attention. Smile gone.

It was for the best, and I knew he'd see that soon enough. He was just being stubborn, got his mind set on something else, one of his whims. I knew it was the right thing... I loved him, tried to give him...

His steps slowed, sank in the grass.

"He'd have been better off if you hadn't been there at all. You made this happen."

A group of young people talked animatedly together as they walked past the father and son. *Tom lost them...watched them die.* Suddenly he could see his son again, crying in his arms after the accident. But he told him those things happened, to move on. *I went to work the next morning. Tom took the first commission he got after that, left. We never spoke again.*

"If you hadn't interfered in his life, he would have been fine..."

A little girl ran after her dog and tripped in the heavy grass. But she stumbled back into a run a moment later, laughing as she called the dog's name.

The commission was a good one, Owen knew. It was an excellent starting point, perfect for someone of Tom's background... But his grades were near perfect. He was an excellent student with a diverse mind. Then he remembered. Unwillingly, he saw the look on Tom's face again, that same look. Rigid. *He could have had the Enterprise if he'd wanted it without anyone thinking I'd gotten it for him... He did prefer the variety he'd have had there, deserved the honor. I was...I took that from him.*

Owen's feet stopped just short of the sidewalk. *He did the right thing, he came forward to own up to his mistakes. I disowned him for it. Why?*

He could see himself sealing the door to his office.

Alaine knew. She hated me for it.

He could see the pictures as he took them down from the wall.

"You killed my boy!"

Some blossoms fell from the tree when the wind shifted. Owen blinked.

She died, and Tom was gone.

He remembered the look on Tom's face when he turned him away at the funeral. Tom had said nothing, but the look in his eyes...It was the last time Owen saw his son. *Where did I know that look?*

The breeze stilled. The sounds around him faded.

The last time I saw Alaine...

"Don't count on it."

...It was loss.

He drew a slow breath. It rushed in his ears.

I took his commission, his courses, his interests, his mother, his home, his place in the family, his freedom...out of love.

Owen placed his hand on his ribs, feeling pressure shoot deep within him. He could feel his heart beating several times before it faded. He gasped for another lungful of air.

"My God, what have I done?" he whispered.

His head bent unconsciously, seeing it all. His chest constricted again, forcing him to breathe through it, close his eyes and see yet more.

"Oh God, Alaine..."

"Admiral, all you all right?"

Owen jerked his head up only to see the ruddy-haired cadet from earlier staring at him with genuine concern. Immediately, he straightened, shook his head tightly. "I'm fine, Cadet."

"With all due respect, you don't look it," the cadet replied. "Where are you off to? I'll take you."

"I don't need your assistance, thank you."

"They say in the medical sense that admirals are the only thing worse than captains," the young man quipped and put his hand on the admiral's arm. "You can go ahead and get me bumped off the squadron track, or even out of the Academy if you like," he continued, "but I'm going to help you. It's the right thing to do, considering you look like someone shot you."

Owen regarded the boy again. "You fly, hmm?" he asked.

"I do," he answered, leading the older man onto the walkway and starting them slowly down the path.

Owen almost grinned, but sighed instead, resigning to the assistance for the moment, if only for the young man's peace of mind. "Very well. I'm on my way home."

"Good. You should get some rest, then."

"You have no limit of impertinence, Cadet," he muttered. "Is this how you were taught to behave at home?"

The cadet laughed. "Oh, much worse, sir! We're a lunatic bunch. But I'm not sorry for it. I've mostly been happy."

Owen's mouth turned briefly up; with that, he let the silence take over for a while. Outside of the park and onto the street, the young man did not release his hold, but walked casually, even hummed a bit to himself as they strolled. Owen occasionally turned a glance to him, but forced himself to turn away each time. *Tom had that same air of casualness, he recalled, except not with me. No, with me, he was always careful, never himself. How could I have not known that?*

Before they came to the corner where they would turn south for home, the admiral eased his arm away. "You're kind to help me, Cadet. But I think I can make it from here."

He furrowed his brow. "You're sure? I wouldn't like anything to happen to you now."

Owen nodded, though he could feel the weight returning to his chest. He drew another breath to ease it, making a mental note to see the doctor some other time--later. In the mean time, he met the young man's eyes again. "What is your name, Cadet?"

"Thomas Harlowe, sir."

"Thomas?" Owen grinned humorlessly and offered his hand. The cadet shook it immediately. "Thank you for your help, Cadet Harlowe, but I'll make it from here."

"You're sure, sir?"

Owen nodded. "Yes."

The younger man eyed the older for a moment before deciding to relent. "Okay. Maybe we'll see each other soon, then, when we have to get our letters in."

"Our letters?"

"The ones to Voyager." He nodded to the admiral's raised brows. "My momma ended up there, too--and that's part of why I was asking after you earlier. I knew your Tom when he was on Tinalat. He stayed at our house for two seasons. He and my mother were old friends."

"Ah." He nodded again. "I see. Yes. Perhaps I will see you, then."

"I look forward to it, sir." Tommy gave the admiral one more look and a little grin, before leaving the man to himself. After that, he didn't turn back.

His mother was a Maquis? he thought, watching the boy go, wondering ...Then, Letters, a letter...

Owen turned and started off, no more quickly than before, but his thoughts finally turning forward again....

Revenge was gotten on her side, for the child he had claimed broke free despite all his best intentions. *My best intentions for whom?* He had no idea then that the child was his mother's. *How did I make myself believe he was free to mold?* He was ignorant of her deeper influence on their son. *Or had I simply denied it, as I had denied her?* As though her soul had broken free of death, Alaine Paris reclaimed what was hers all along, restoring her broken child's innate spirit, never to be restrained again.

I bore restraint for an hour. He bore restraint all his young life. Little wonder it killed him. Little wonder he turned away from me.

And just like his mother, the son had gotten the last word--now twice, three times, four, five six... Suddenly, it all was so clear to him as he stared out at the ocean. The regret swept through him, and for all his fighting it, he felt it.

The longing for his wife, for his beautiful Alaine--he exhaled sharply, but didn't cry for lack of practice--became so acute he felt it in his chest, in his throat, felt sick to his stomach. He turned away from the rush of the waves, back to the yard.

The roses had died away long ago, and he touched the stalks Alaine had so lovingly housed and tended, her favorite hobby. He remembered the side garden, once lush and fragrant with blooms in every season, but the roses had once been a landmark. Then she died, and so did they, withering quickly away in the pall that replaced her. She died, and so did their son: Tom died to be freed to live. Died in him.

He turned away from the garden and into his empty house, through the pictureless hall, into the

familiar confines of his office. For a moment he stared at the petrel on the mantle, the sea bird perched above the fire. Alaine had brought it from home when they married.

How many times had Tom stared at that bird while I talked to him? Stared as I once stared at the ceiling, damning myself for giving in?

He moved to his desk, sat in the large brown chair and leaned back. His eyes focused on the drawer, and his hand rose to open it. Slowly, he pulled out the letter; with a sigh, he accessed it. It took another minute to look down at the words, and a moment more to commit himself to read the letter his son had written him.

Stardate 51374

Dear Dad,

Here I am, once again, without a way to start to say all the things I should. Only now I don't have the time. The Doctor will be sent to you in only twenty minutes, as soon as the link is secured. The Federation ship will be out of range soon.

I hope this works, because I want you to know that the baby B'Elanna and I were expecting is our daughter, whom we named Alaine, for Mom. Mom would have adored her. She's beautiful, full of life, Dad, and just like her mother, in every expression and with her curly brown hair. B'Elanna insists she's got my smile, though it reminds me more of Mom's. We agree on her eyes. They're like B'Elanna's, but blue like Mom's were--and, trust me, they could charm a Ferengi out of his vault keys. She's got her mother's sharp wit, too: She's very quick and notices everything.

Well, I guess it goes without saying that B'Elanna and I worship Alaine, like we will our second child, who's due in a couple weeks. We worked hard to get number two, considering Alaine plus our duties constantly kept us running. We couldn't be prouder, or happier, than we are now.

I couldn't have hoped for the life I have here, Dad. B'Elanna and I were devastated to lose our home. We'd set our roots into Avalar, had loved it together. For missing it and all the plans we'd made, it took some time to accept being here. But we did. B'Elanna was--naturally, I think--promoted to chief engineer, which has given her more than a few opportunities to show off her brilliance. As for myself, I was hired to do some piloting on Voyager. I still work as a primary medic and down in the hydroponics bay, but half of my work still centers around piloting, which I do enjoy.

You might be disturbed to know that I haven't accepted a rank, though Kathryn offered it twice. Don't be. I'm happy with the freedom of being a civilian member of this crew. I have time for my other work and time for our family, which is more important to me than any honors or privileges. My wife and child(ren) are more than enough to make me content. There isn't a day that I'm not thankful for them and the life I have because of them.

B'Elanna's here, saying it's time, and Alaine has her arms wrapped around my legs. For her, it's time for all of us to go home for lunch. During and after, we'll be waiting to hear if the messages got through. Again, I hope they do. Love to Moira

and Kathleen.

Tom

Owen stared at the words, the hurried ending, the detailed middle. *He'd wanted to say more,* he noted, *more to me. He wanted to talk to me.* He scrolled the letter up and read it over again.

No rank, though he could've had it. No steady position, except that of husband and father. He's doing what he chooses, what makes him happy. This is what he chose for himself. This is Tom's life.

He turned and accessed his desk console. With a few instructions, he called up the portrait of his son and his wife on Avalar, stared at it. He examined their expressions, their position, their clothes, their surroundings. Tom's eyes shone fearlessly in the light of that world, his arms around that woman, his wife, who in smile and gesture alone was without a doubt in love with his son. Tom's grin was totally unaffected, his posture straight but relaxed. He was happy. He was grown up. Owen barely recognized him. Barely knew him.

Owen's gaze drifted up to the portrait of his wife on the opposite wall. The sea was behind her, a few gulls in the distance. She smiled, carefree, strands of her blonde hair caught in the breeze, her face expressing the purest, plainest love he had ever known. Owen suddenly remembered that Alaine had been holding Tom's hand when he'd taken that image. Afterwards, they ran off together to play in the waves.

Only a week later, he'd suggested Tom play parishes squares and other sports in the afternoons instead, learn some better coordination and teamwork skills. To Owen's memory, Tom and Alaine never played on the beach again. Tom was away with those other things by the time his mother got home. They spent less time together still when there came another sport, another activity, a harder curriculum or better program. Those things Owen remembered vigorously approving, seeing his boy so well challenged, befitting his sharp mind and good frame. At the same time, though always a rock of support, always his equal and partner, Alaine never again smiled at him like she had that day.

A sad smile found his fallen face as he gazed at her picture. "You win."

51508-51522 (four days later)

Thankfully the children were asleep when Chakotay found them eating lunch and discussing the messages. B'Elanna had insisted on helping retrieve them, as every little bit counted. They'd been excited, hopeful, wondering if they too had letters when they invited a somber Chakotay in. He sat, politely waved away the offer of tea and something to eat. When he told them, gently but directly, they could do nothing but stare at him while blood drained from their faces.

They somehow knew better than to go through denial.

B'Elanna stood from the table, her chest rising and falling with the shock she knew she couldn't vent. As soon as a scream came to her lips, she stifled it, thinking about waking the children. Impossibly, she held it in. Tom sat in numb silence another minute before moving to her. He touched her shoulder, she turned and they embraced, silent. Looking up from where he'd had his head buried in his wife's shoulder, Tom asked Chakotay if they could have some time. The commander left without

another word.

They'd had to be strong when the children woke up. Quiet but pleasantly enough, they got them dressed and fed, cleaned their quarters even as Alaine was dragging out her toys. All the while, their respective glances threatened them with breaking down. But neither could, not in front of Alaine, especially.

But eventually the little girl did notice and ask why they were sad. Sighing from her seat on the dinette chair, B'Elanna explained, "A bad thing's happened where we used to live and we can't help right now. Everything is all right here on Voyager, but Daddy and I need to be sad for a while, because some old friends of ours were hurt."

"Oh." Alaine paused, thinking. Looking around, she retrieved a stuffed animal and gave it to her mother. B'Elanna laughed mirthlessly and hugged her little girl close, thanking her, looking up to Tom, standing nearby. His eyes had misted, but he took deep breaths against it, returning her weak grin.

Soon, Alaine returned to her toys and B'Elanna picked up the PADD she'd been working on. She blinked. Then she set it down again.

Tom went to her and collected the PADDs in a hand, giving her his other. "Come sit down with me," he offered quietly, leading her to the couch. There they sat silently, working until Kiarn woke up again.

Finally, it became too much to bear and they had to leave the children with the Doctor and Jenna to find their way, hand in hand, to the shuttle bay, then into the Marseilles. Following his wife forward, Tom punched the ramp control without stopping.

In the solace of their ship, B'Elanna let loose, cursing the Federation, Starfleet, Cardassia, stalking circles on the small bridge while swearing revenge, demanding answers even as she knew her husband couldn't give her any. Though outwardly calmer, Tom seethed his own accusations. He hadn't felt so angry with the Federation in a while; it flew back to him as though it'd never abated. He realized all over again how Starfleet had neglected its own and punished when they should have listened to and used the Maquis. Instead, they'd wasted another resource to save their stilted pride and let the Cardassians get away with murder--again. Saying as much, he felt himself shaking for being unable to do a damn thing about it.

In indignation, B'Elanna cried out, spat on Starfleet as she had more than three years before, swore she'd never be seen in a uniform again. Thinking of how the DMZ occupation must have come about, Tom's jaw clenched and his head spun with horrors he knew all too well. Then he, too, considered vengeance before realizing it was useless.

He told his wife just that, which did little to placate either of them. Waves of frustration came and went, yet the shock and anger faded, soon to be replaced by that equal remorse for a tragedy they couldn't have prevented, even if they had been there.

All their friends, their comrades, far away but not forgotten, were dead or imprisoned. Avarar, quite possibly, was lost to them forever. Their cause, long neglected for their immediate lives, was defunct, snuffed out with a vengeance, as if they needn't have bothered.

They had lost, not only the fight, not only their past, but their hoped for future. They had nowhere to go home to and nobody to greet them.

For all of it, they had progressed from fury to lament.

They were left only to stare at each other on the Marseilles' suddenly soundless bridge, knowing they were powerless, knowing they had been all along. Without words, their tears brimming, they stepped closer.

Finally clutching to each other, they let themselves cry, burying their heads in each other's shoulders. They voiced nothing more. There was nothing left to curse that hadn't already been cursed and no one else to blame that deserved it. All that remained was the tragedy of their loss. All they could do was mourn.

Tom's eyes were still swollen when he was summoned to the bridge.

Feeling a need to be near her, he'd been helping B'Elanna collect the letters that came, piece by piece, once they were calmed down enough to leave the Marseilles. Alaine had stayed with Jenna. Kiarn slept in his carrybed near the door. Throughout the time, though spent from the emotions of that day, they talked, remembered, even smiled once or twice at times they'd all but forgotten. They yet held back the urge to break down again.

Then B'Elanna got a letter from her cousin K'Karn, which had cheered them both for a time. His words were proud and hopeful, full of news about the family--and her mother, who had become a well-respected metallurgist as well as geologist on the Homeworld. His explaining her mother's change of heart to her daughter, though, was probably the best news B'Elanna could not have expected. Tom embraced her in her shock and relief when she finished the letter, truly happy for his wife and telling her so.

Then the header of a letter to Tom arrived, and they discovered soon after that it was from his father. Unfortunately, it was taking longer to download. Tom and B'Elanna had to make the difficult decision to concentrate on the easier ones for the time being, for the sake of their friends. For in spite of K'Karn's good news and their curiosity about the admiral's letter, their eyes still bore the sadness of their tragedy, shared by all the Maquis on board.

Each new letter was a reminder of that. Each familiar Maquis name that appeared spurred again the reminder of their loss. Each scrap and sentence describing one nightmare after another refreshed their own mourning and distracted any selfishness they might have had. Thus, they determined themselves to collect the other letters first.

Their priority had to be for their friends, and it remained so until the captain called the pilot to the bridge.

Tom caught the look in Harry's eye and shook his head as he passed. "Not yet, Harry. Sorry."

"You okay, Tom?" Harry then asked.

Tom dug his hands into his coat pockets. "No. I will be. It'll take a while, but thanks." With that, he moved down to the conn, all business and utterly silent.

When the captain told him what he needed to do, he obeyed, maneuvering the ship with the grace and skill that had kept him and B'Elanna and the others alive during their time in the Maquis. But even the joy of flying couldn't chase the pain from his face. Nor did he try to hide it. Instead, he used it, honored their lost comrades, their lost homes, with the best he could offer. It was all he could do.

As soon as the captain rose to check on their disintegrated link to Alpha Quadrant, Tom was on her heels, excusing himself with but a nod to Chakotay, who nodded back.

"How are you holding up?" Janeway asked, seeing the remnants of an understandable sadness in his eyes. She touched his arm. "Chakotay told me what happened. I'm sorry for your loss."

"I know," he said quietly, reaching up to give her hand a squeeze. "Thank you. I guess it's no surprise that it'll take us a while to get over it, like everyone else."

"If there's anything I can do, Tom, just tell me."

"That's the problem, Kathryn. There's nothing any of us can do." Despite it, he offered a half-formed grin. "But thanks again. It's nice of you to offer."

Once returned to astrometrics, Tom listened as B'Elanna gave the captain her report. The link was, at least for the time being, disabled, and she couldn't retrieve all the letters. She'd gotten a few more and some scraps, but that was all.

When she handed the PADDs to the captain to give to Neelix, she retained one. Looking over to her husband, who had bent to pick Kiarn up to leave, her eyes shone with one victory in all her last minute efforts. "Let's go get Alaine and go home, Tom."

He straightened, easing his son to lay against his shoulder. Then he gazed into her brightened eyes. His own stare widened as he realized... "Really? You got it?"

"I don't even know what it says yet," B'Elanna said, moving close to look up at him, "but it should make interesting reading."

Tom glanced over to the captain. "My father wrote me."

"Well," she said, more pleased than Tom or B'Elanna could know, "you'd better go and see what it says."

They needed no further prodding than that.

Certainly, they both were curious, but when they got home, matters aplenty prevented them from reading it. Alaine was ablaze with questions and cranky for being overtired by all the excitement. Kiarn woke up screaming and kicking, not well rested himself. Refusing to nurse for being so worked up, he instead got hungry about a minute before B'Elanna was done with her shower. She fed her son on the side of the bed with unkempt locks in a hastily tied robe pulled open at the top.

Meanwhile, Tom got an increasingly petulant Alaine dressed for bed, set the table and made their late dinner. It was nearly another two hours before they had eaten, then set Kiarn, then and with more effort, Alaine, down for the night. They cleaned up the dining table and the toys Alaine scattered around the entire room. Finally, Tom thankfully, albeit quickly, showered and wrapped himself in a robe before joining an equally tired and curious B'Elanna on the couch.

She sat very still, but her eyes were wide with anticipation. The PADD had been sitting for several minutes on the table before her, waiting to be accessed. Coming around from the bedroom, Tom gave her a grin and claimed his seat by her. He leaned forward, took the PADD, then put his arm around B'Elanna to pull her close. She pulled her feet up, tucking them beside herself on the couch, draped her arm over him in a languid embrace, her head on his chest, but looked expectantly on. With a kiss

to her head and a simple click of his finger, he accessed the letter and read:

Stardate 51500

Dear Tom,

I have only just read your letter. Why I couldn't read it earlier is too hard to explain and doesn't matter as much as what I feel I should tell you. Recently, Alynna told me that all your mother wanted of me was that I tell you honestly how I feel for you. For your mother, then, I can say that I will never ignore your criminal actions, your willful treason while living as a Maquis. But I have come to know that there is more to my discomfort than political affiliations, though they do matter a great deal to me.

I suppose I'm discovering how you felt when you wrote me, both times, and you found it difficult to begin. Beginnings are difficult, as the mediators are taught to say when they are faced with bringing together two very different peoples. There is truth to that cliché, however.

We, too, are from separate worlds, far apart in belief and practice, with mediators on both sides, both purposefully and unwittingly trying to bring our disparate cultures together. I think sometimes now that our only thread of commonality was your mother, your ambassador, whom only now I know I should have listened to more often.

Peace would have been impossible if you hadn't had her strength, her simple courage when you offered the olive branch in your first letter. I admit, I pushed it away. Although your actions were criminal, your being a Maquis pilot was not all that prevented me from forgiving you enough to respond.

How can I put into words what it was like to lose your mother? How can I tell you how displeased I was with her before she died? She was a free spirit, truly her own person in so many ways. I loved her more than I could put into words, but I smothered that spirit I so admired. Why? Only now I'm asking myself this, and the only answer I can find is that I assumed because she didn't complain, there was nothing wrong. I didn't realize the extent of her gentleness, her sensitivity, or her wisdom. When I saw you inheriting those gifts, I saw it as weakness and tried to guide you otherwise. I zealously thought you needed my direction and experience. I had no idea I was crushing you, as well.

I did this unwittingly, and I now pay with my conscience the price for my ignorance. But even I could not kill the passion inborn in you both. Your mother dissolved our marriage and reasserted her freedom shortly before her death. You escaped, too, divorcing the life I had molded you into, divorcing me. For liberating yourselves, I despised you both. For six years, I openly dismissed you and made your mother over in a false memory, and though I sought reconciliation, I tried to find it on my own terms. I might have lived without guilt, been able to ignore what I had been told repeatedly. I might even have been able to rationalize your mother's last embittered words to me.

Did you really want a career in Starfleet? If I had listened to you, if I had let you go your own way, would you have chosen my family's path? I don't know. Perhaps. Your mother believed that I had manipulated you into thinking you weren't worthy, that you couldn't make your own decisions. There, she was a little

wrong, as you did win a few of our battles. Maybe not many, but some. Maybe not enough. Maybe I should not have made so many decisions for you.

Only now, looking back, I can see my part in it. I should not have interfered. If I had seen you for who and what you were, perhaps I could have given you the freedom you so needed and advised you better when you needed it most. I should have seen you for yourself, not my reflection of you.

Did I kill your spirit? I know I didn't, as it's decidedly there. For what it's worth, you have made good use of it. But did I misjudge you? Yes. You're your mother's son in many ways, and I did misinterpret that, which is none too complimentary to you both. I tried to make you into what I found good in myself, our family and in those I admired, and expected persistence would breed success. That was wrong. If it matters, son, I apologize.

I don't know where to go from here. I suppose you already understand that I am not particularly adept at this sort of explanation. I believe I have said enough, except for this: For the life you have made, Tom, your mother rests in peace. All she had wanted was for you to be free and happy. You have given her that. For having the strength to make that happen, in spite of everything that stood against you and the actions I cannot yet reconcile, I can be proud of you. You are my son, and I love you, too.

My regards to your wife and children, to whom I hope someday you will have the opportunity to introduce me. Your descriptions of them alone prove to me that you have every reason to be happy. That's a good thing. Continue to cherish that.

Be well, Tom.

There was no adieu, but Tom's solace could not have been disturbed for any postscript the admiral might have offered.

Putting down the PADD, he wiped his cheek and leaned into B'Elanna's embrace. He kissed her hair, then her forehead, before resting his cheek on her head. She smiled and hugged him again, knowing how much he once wanted to know his father's heart. She was also relieved that she could share a satisfaction similar to what she felt after reading K'Karn's letter, learning that her mother had likewise come to terms with the child that had abandoned her. It had been more than B'Elanna could have hoped for. Now they both had more than they had hoped for. It was relieving to have some good news that day.

He knew she didn't much seem like herself. Since hearing the news the first time, he hadn't much felt like himself, either. Though their families' letters were comforting, the weight of their loss was difficult to let go, despite their efforts. Tom knew they would get past it, but it would take time, it would also take closure.

But something peculiar was on her mind. She was pleasant, but quiet to him. He let the silence stand. He trusted she'd speak when she wanted to, even if he was curious. He could tell she needed to think, to brood a while on it. It was her way.

Harry came by, dropping off some of the Astrometrics data--the most disintegrated messages from

the Alpha Quadrant, which she had asked to help piece together--and she patiently let him stay until he got the hint she wasn't in the mood for company. Tom talked to him for a while, the whole time knowing Harry wasn't asking them what he wanted to. Harry finally made pretense to leave and did. By then, it was time for Alaine to go to bed. Soon after, it was time for Kiarn's feeding.

Tom smiled to watch, from his place in their bed, her nurse their son in the rocking chair he'd made before Alaine was born. It was a funny thing at the time. Though she admired its appearance, B'Elanna accused him of designing her to be a "marm," as it was such an old-fashioned piece of furniture. In fact, Tom was the first to rock Alaine to sleep in it, a few days after her birth. The gentle motion soothed the newborn immediately. Amazed, B'Elanna took the seat at Alaine's next feeding. Soon after, it was a common sight for Tom to watch B'Elanna rocking slowly, comfortably, in that chair with one of their children held near. Sometimes she took to the chair alone when waiting for Kiarn to awaken, reading a PADD or just watching him stir.

She still accused Tom of making her a marm, which never failed to make him laugh.

Then, as Tom watched her, their son suckling easily at his mother's breast, he yet knew something was on her mind. Her eyes had drifted outward, towards the floor but at nothing. She stroked her child's soft hair too distractedly, rocked the chair without a steady rhythm. She wasn't humming. She usually hummed something softly. Not that night.

Tom said nothing, even when Kiarn fell to sleep and she set him down. She disappeared into the bathroom for several minutes, then came back to slip off her robe and get into bed beside him. She smiled and kissed him, whispered good night. He returned the same. When she turned in his embrace, he pulled her close, nuzzling her head into his neck. She sighed as if to sleep.

He could feel her tightening. He held her warm, dry back to his chest and felt her smooth muscles stiffen. Her hair was crushed against him, and she didn't bother to pull it over her shoulder, His fingers were loosely entwined with hers, and she was completely still. She wasn't relaxed and he knew it.

Finally, he nuzzled his chin against her head. She got the message and took a slow, silent breath. More silence followed for nearly a minute before she decided to speak.

"I don't want to go back," she whispered.

"Back?" he muttered.

She stared at the bedcovers, glanced to the bed table, to Kiarn's crib, to the wall straight ahead. "I want to resign my commission." Her words were soft, certain.

Tom didn't move. She'd mentioned that the day they got the news. "Are you sure?"

B'Elanna breathed again, tried to clear her throat. Her voice was still thick. "They let our friends die, they put the rest in prison, as if they hadn't been through enough. They...We have nothing left there, Tom. They let our home be destroyed."

"Yes." Tom closed his eyes, pausing, then opened them again.

"I hate them for what they did."

"I know. I don't think I like them much right now, either. But they can't be blamed directly, not for the deaths, anyway. Only for not acting when they should have, for hunting the Maquis when they

should have helped." He sighed at that, grinded his teeth. "Damned diplomacy," he muttered, "stupid, useless treaty, and the sentences. They weren't directly responsible for the final outcome, but they weren't much help, were they? It'd be easier if they were responsible, I think. We'd have more to blame."

"Then we'd have something close to be angry at, something we could reach," she added.

Tom nodded. "I know." He ran his thumbs over her hands, relaxing them a little, willfully relaxing himself again, too. "B'Elanna, if you do this, you'll want to be sure. I don't want you to regret this one. As much as it occupies you and you complain about that, I know how much you love your work."

"I can't bear to think of wearing my uniform. I... I can't be a part of the system that was involved in what happened to our friends and our home. Not anymore." She squeezed his fingers gently, felt his response. Still he did not move. "I was so proud, Tom," she whispered, "proud to have finished what I started, to have earned the respect of this crew, their trust. You're right, I love being an officer, having that responsibility, working in engineering. But I can't stand to think of just moving on without some consequence. I just can't do that."

"I understand." He wrapped his arms close to her, then, embracing her. "It's your decision," he told her quietly. "I certainly won't fight it. But don't forget that you are needed here. You're the best damned engineer Kathryn could have hoped for and this ship needs that, the way we manage to stay in trouble."

"I know. If I wasn't needed, I would have resigned already."

Tom grinned. That was his B'Elanna, he knew. If she had ever been certain of anything, it would be of her abilities. "There might be repercussions with the other Maquis crew."

"That's another thing," she admitted. "I don't want to create a domino effect while I'm living up to my conscience." She sighed, turning over to face him, though her glassy stare fixed to a point just over his shoulder when she settled.

Encircling her in his arms again, Tom rolled onto his back, taking her with him. Her eyes yet diverted, caught in thought, caught on everything she couldn't vocalize. Finally she just shook her head. "I can't go back to the way things were, Tom. I can't just let this go; I don't think I want to. I can't be Starfleet again, even if the blame is partial."

She paused a moment, touching her chin to his chest, sighing. "I remember when Jenna accused me of first getting into the Maquis because I needed company I thought I could fit in with." B'Elanna grinned a little. "God, how I hated her for being right. But despite how I got there, I did become involved. I was loyal to the cause, I knew our fight mattered. But you know that." He nodded. "Then we made a home on Avalar--only to lose it. Jenna was right. It's hell to have everything you built taken away from you. Now we've lost it twice."

B'Elanna found Tom's eyes reflecting hers, darkened with the truth of their losses, wistful for missing it all the more. "I'll stay with engineering, but I can also spend more time researching more ways home, have more time with you and the children. I wonder how Joe's going to take this."

He cupped her cheek in his hand, staring tenderly up to her. "It can be worked out," he told her. "I'll help you make whatever arrangements or talk to whoever." She nodded. "Maybe we should work on the Maquis first." Again she nodded, more quickly then. Tom eyed her. "B'Elanna, this is a huge decision you're making. You're going to have to adjust to civilian life all over again, no matter to what

extent you continue working in engineering."

"I know," she said. "But I am sure about this, I know I am now. I just need to figure out what I'm going to do when it's done."

"You know they'll find something for you to do," he said lightly.

She shrugged at that, but then realized, "God, how am I going to tell Kathryn--or Chakotay?"

"They'll understand." He watched her smile, just slightly, in agreement, watched how her eyes tried hard to stay to his. She was still tense. "What's going on? This can't just be about Starfleet."

Reaching down to caress his cheek, B'Elanna swallowed hard. Her eyes misted and she tried to shake her head again to will it away. Tom stopped her, threading his hand into her hair, holding her. She found his knowing gaze again and held it. "How are we supposed to grow from this? How can we redeem this, Tom?"

Caressing away with his thumb the drop of water in the corner of her eye, he said, "I don't know," and put his arms around her.

"This is the only way I know how to fight back," she finally admitted. "It's the only stand I can make, for the Maquis, for Avarar. I have to make this stand, for my conscience, for all of them. I am a Maquis, just like you. I don't want to think they've killed us all, and I can't just go back on duty and pretend I can get over losing our homeworld. I don't want to live like that."

"Then you shouldn't," he agreed. "I'll help you plot things out tomorrow, okay? If you don't mind my making that stand with you?"

She smiled a little at that, pressed her lips to his. "Thank you."

When her arms wrapped around him, he kissed her cheek, guided her head into the curve of his neck. "We will build another nest, B'Elanna," he whispered.

She closed her eyes, relaxing in his embrace. "Yes, we will."

Squeezing her gently, feeling her response, he closed his eyes again.

51919 (about six months later)

Alyna had come to say goodbye. Recent activities had recalled her to Dominion matters again, back to Starbase 310. Making sure, as always, that her affairs were wrapped up before leaving on a potentially dangerous assignment, she came to the house to see how Owen was doing. She had not seen him since the picnic.

There was no answer at the front door. She wandered around, through the entryway--where she noticed the weeds had been recently pulled--to the back to knock on the side door. No answer again. Turning, Alyna looked at the side yard. Duffels of dirt were stacked by the garden shack; the fountain had been scrubbed. The path leading to the back had been repaired as well.

Following that path to the edge of the hill, she saw below Owen walking slowly along the beach. He was in uniform, but held his boots in a hand as he tentatively neared the ebbing water.

She smiled and moved down the old wooden steps, off the landing and across the dry sand to the grayish, damp shore. Without a greeting, she stepped beside her old friend, who quickly caught her eyes, then looked away.

"Yes, I heard you were recalled," he said as though they had been already in the middle of a conversation as he carefully steered them towards the dryer sand. "Did you get word this morning, too?"

"Last night, actually. I'll be transporting to the Gorkon in a few hours, when our supplies arrive."

"Hope it goes well for you," he nodded, "and do be careful. This situation with the Dominion has been tricky as best."

"Yes, and thank you, Owen. I will." She eyed his embarrassment at being caught with his feet dangerously close to getting wet. She was unable to suppress her responsive grin. "I don't ever remember you coming out to the water, Owen. I thought you didn't like the sea."

He grunted. "I don't, really. Got to try a new thing every once and a while, right?" He turned away from the water and started up the beach. Fruitlessly trying to shake the clinging sand from his toes, he cursed at losing his balance on the shifting surface. He sped his pace just to get onto the weather-beaten landing, reddening at his friend's amusement.

"I noticed you're having the garden straightened up," Alynna said, offering a diversion.

"Yes, I finally got around to hiring a landscaper," Owen said, huffing from the exertion of his walk. He glanced at her, then up the hill to their destination. "Tell me, Alynna: What was that rose that Alaine liked so much? The same one, I believe, her parents had in their yard at Dorset Corner?"

"Dame Chenue," Alynna promptly responded, the pleasant memory easy to recall.

Owen nodded briskly. "Very well. Thank you." Back on solid ground, he was able to regain his breath, then his dignity. Filling his lungs with the salty air, then exhaling it, he gestured to the house with his chin as he laid a hand on the stair rail. "Do you have time for a cup of tea before you transport up? See the pictures Tom sent with his last letter? If I recall correctly, you haven't had the opportunity to see my grandchildren."

Alynna smiled, regarding the man's face a moment. As usual, he revealed nothing. That time, she didn't mind. "I would love to have some tea, Owen." Taking her friend's arm before he could offer it, her expression was unchanged when he gave her a look of pleasant surprise. In that fashion, they continued up the stairs.

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B'Elanna finished securing the hook into the wall as Tom put the last braces in place and wiped away his fingerprints from the glass. "What do you think?" he asked her, quietly enough not to disturb their napping six month and three year old children in the other room.

She looked and smiled. "I like it."

"I'd hope so. It took long enough to unscramble the image."

B'Elanna took a seat on the edge of the bed and watched Tom set the picture on the wall by the door. They'd decided it should go next to a picture of her mother, which was one of but three that

existed in the database.

The admiral's picture was just as rare, but only because he was not in uniform, not at work. The image had been taken only months before it was sent: His sisters were chatting with their usual animation over the sunny breakfast table while Adam, Moira's husband, read a PADD and sipped on coffee. Behind them, their father was standing at the window in his blue Sunday suit, holding his hands behind him. He had been looking outside, but seemed to have been asked to turn around. He looked much like he always did when he noticed something, brows just slightly raised, mouth straight but pleasant. It seemed like a typical Sunday, save the presence of Tom's mother.

His father had sent the image with his letter. It had been nearly impossible to unscramble, it being more degraded than the rest of the message. Without his asking her to, B'Elanna kept working on it between her new position, senior engineering consultant--Tom's invention--her research and the seemingly endless effort on the degraded messages. She knew Tom would want it. When she presented it to him, he forgot all about the shuttle schematics they'd been fooling with. A minute later, they were making space on their picture wall.

They wondered why the admiral had chosen that image.

Having put the picture in its new home, Tom took a seat by B'Elanna to examine the addition. Like the coincidental picture of Miral at an outdoor conference, the Paris family's image seemed to fit within the other casually captured moments, the only necessity for their wall. The most formal portrait was the one Jenna took of them on Avalar. But Tom and B'Elanna just happened to be sitting together on that rock, and only looked at Jenna when the lady had stopped beating Chakotay up long enough to call out to them.

"We do have a good collection going," Tom appraised.

"Yes." She leaned into his arm when he offered it. Turning to touch his cheek, she kissed him. "We're going to need a new wall," she said wryly, "the way we keep managing to put more on it."

"Yeah," he said, touching his nose to hers, "we sure will."

"I guess it is one way to keep things lively."

"I'd say so."

She turned her gaze, regarding him. "It's not too soon?"

"I'm not complaining if you aren't."

"I'm not. I like adding to the wall."

He touched her nose again, kissed her softly. "Me too."

Finally, she laughed, shaking her head in disbelief. "We're crazy, you know."

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

"Yes, that must be it."

He drew a full breath before collecting her in his arms, chuckling lightly when he felt her teeth nip gently at his neck before she leaned back into the curve of his shoulder. He caressed the crown of her

hair with his cheek; her body quickly warmed his own. Her small foot dabbled against his calf, an unconscious habit. Feeling suddenly full in heart, he hugged her. She in turn pressed his arms in, purred softly. Weaving his fingers with hers, they continued to share the view of their picture wall.

"So, whose turn is it?"

(fin)

Le Talisman (Anonyme)

As read in "Remembrance"

(Note: I found this little story in one of my "library sale" books, "French Composition and Pronunciation Exercises," © 1925.)

Il y avait une fois un prince qui n'était pas heureux. Il alla consulter un vieux derviche. Le sage vieillard lui répondit que le bonheur était chose difficile à trouver en ce monde.
"Cependant," ajoute-t-il, "je connais un moyen infallible de vous procurer le bonheur."
"Quel est ce moyen?" demande le prince.
"C'est," répond le derviche, "de mettre la chemise d'un homme heureux."
Là-dessus, le prince a embrassé le vieillard et s'en va à la recherche de son talisman.
Il visite toutes les capitale de la terre. Il a essayé des chemises de rois, des chemises d'empereurs, des chemises de princes, des chemises de seigneurs. Paine inutile. Il n'en est pas plus heureux.
Il endosse alors des chemises d'artistes, des chemises de guerriers, des chemises de marchands, mais sans plus de succès. Il fait ainsi ainsi bien du chemin sans trouver le bonheur.
Enfin, désespéré d'avoir essayé tant de chemises, il revenait fort triste, un jour, au palais de son père, quand il vit dans un champ un brave laboureur, tout joyeux, qui chantait en poussant sa charrue.
"Voilà pourtant un homme qui possède le bonheur," se dit-il. Si est-ce qu'il a demandé, "Es-tu heureux?"
"Oui," dit l'autre.
"Tu ne désirez rien?"
"Non."
"Tu ne changerais pas ton sort pour celui d'un roi?"
"Jamais de la vie!"
"Eh bien! Vends-moi ta chemise."
"Ma chemise? Je n'en ai point!"

([Loose] Translation)

There once was a prince that was not happy. He went to consult an old sage. The wise old man told him that happiness was a difficult thing to find in the world.
"Nevertheless," said the old man, "I know one infallible way to procure happiness."
"What is that way?" asked the prince.
"It is," answered the sage, "to wear the shirt of a happy man."
There-over, the prince embraced the old person and left to search for the talisman.
He went to all the cities of the land. He tried on the shirts of kings, the shirts of emperors, the shirts

of princes, the shirts of lords. His effort was useless. He was no happier.

He then tries the shirts of artists, the shirts of warriors, the shirts of merchants, but with no more success. He travels a long way without finding happiness.

At last, despairing after having tried so many shirts, he sadly returned one day to his father's palace, he saw in a field a worthy laborer, very happy, who sang while pushing his plow. The prince says to himself,

"Now, there is a man who possesses happiness!" So he asks, "Are you happy?"

"Yes," says the other.

"You desire nothing?"

"No.

"You would not change your sort for that of a king?"

"Never in my life!"

"Well! Sell me your shirt."

"My shirt? But I haven't any!"

Author Notes

"Ire." So named because of the many, many times I had to edit that thing. Still new to Windows, I had no spell check, no printer and was unused to editing off the screen. Nightmare.

Irremission: n. The act of refusing or delaying to remit or pardon; the act of withholding remission or pardon.

On the front page of my website, I note a bit of what made me start writing fanfic: That one scene in Killing Game that sent me over the edge--and Braga hadn't even taken full control yet! But the UPN suits were in full gear and it was showing...and I started reacting. A month later, The Episode That Shall Not Be Named aired (Vis a WTFcrackwertheyon), and I finally crossed over to the Dark Side.

Once a stubbornly dedicated research essayist (had I played my cards right, I'd have done that for a living with portraiture as my main hobby), and despite embarrassingly teenaged forays into fiction, I had always shied away from fiction. I loved the structure and order of bringing up a point and proving it, meanwhile making the piece overall entertaining to read. My profs, depending of the topic, either goaded or praised me for my "conversational style" of narration. (In hindsight, I think I should have been goaded more. ;^)) But I started dallying with ideas, what TIIC could have done instead, and having seen some fanfic around and about, I started thinking that I wouldn't be total whackjob for trying some, myself. I was very inexperienced in creative writing, too, and I suddenly also saw a little fanfic as a fun challenge and a way to keep my brain alive post-Loyola, where I *wrote a lot*.

At the same time, a line got in my head and stuck there along with a growing desire to give Tom (and B'Elanna with him) everything *I* wanted him to have. Being an avid P/Ter, I wanted him and B'Elanna together by S4, I wanted them to have a child or two, and I wanted Tom to not be an officer, to be living outside the edge, where his character seemed to thrive. How to do that? How to make that happen?

That's when I saw a repeat of my beloved TNG's "Parallels"--written, most ironically, by my new canon/character nemesis, Braga. It featured Worf shifting through quantum realities. Each reality was created by Worf doing something different in some stage of his life. This did create the germ (*cough!*pun!*) of T/W, but it also gave me the route to all my A/Us: Change one thing about the character's path or decision in canon and see what happens to their lives because of it. All my A/Us have the "point of change."

In Ire, it's a funny little thing that sprung from my watching another TV repeat--the '78 TV movie, "Little Mo." LOL! But there's this line in the beginning, you see: "It's hard to imagine how Maureen's life would have been different if she'd turned left instead of right." Interesting thought, that. So, then, Tom turned left instead of right, going to Sandrine's instead of the boring function. There, he met Jenna, with whom he stayed after the court martial, thus giving him a taste of colony life, &c. Gosh,

this stuff was fun! I'd never realized how much.

"You didn't see him at Avalar," he said softly, running his thick, worn fingers around the middle of the nearly drained coffee cup. --That first sentence... I wrote it down out of the blue, not even knowing Chuckles was going to be saying it or what happened on Avalar, or even what Avalar was. It just sounded good and looked like a good place to start. (Though, it now starts the main of the story. The scene of Owen looking at the sea was once only that bit near the end of the fic, where the lines now repeat, "Even the misty sunset...") By that time on the show, mid 4th season, Chakotay's character was boring the hell out of me and Janeway was increasingly all over the map. So I decided to have fun with them, too, essentially reversing their roles, making Chakotay Tom's defender and advocate, and Janeway the hardass who'd rather not have anything to do with him--and I made her stick to that all the way through what would have been the first season. That means that Tom had to be in the Maquis. So...what if Tom hadn't been caught my Starfleet on that early mission? How could I make that happen, having changed his lot so far? He was using protective wine casks he'd hijacked from Jenna's farm to hide the explosive contents from sensor sweeps.... Fun, fun, fun. Not long after, B'Elanna is maneuvered into the Maquis. Love at first sight? You're damned right it can happen. *g*

It practically wrote itself from there, bit by bit, chunk by chunk; I bulked it up and finished it off after a bad hip injury that summer all but crippled me for the next year and a half and gave me tons of time in a chair with little better to do. (Waterskiing was the culprit, BTW; Tom Paris would be proud.)

Oh, and why did I write this thing backwards? Just to see if I could. I'm so silly.

All this said, I didn't plan on sharing the story with anyone until a buddy from the Coffee Nebula first encouraged me to join the PTF mail list, and then, after a series of conversations about fanfic and some creative doings on my part at the CN board, convinced me to let him archive it at the CN archive. Even that sloppy early incarnation had him telling me I *had* to post that one over at PTF. He had to bug me a few times before I actually did, though. Needless to say, that was the end of that. ;^)

So now, ten years later, I've gone through the bloody thing again and now am PDFing it--for more eccentric fun. There have been a *lot* of words written since then, and more to come if my sanity, back and fingers hold up. As for what's here already, what started the mess in the first place, I only look back and hope this story's given readers some pleasure, maybe made them think, or feel, or wonder about all the many chances and choices we face as we look at our own futures, and be thankful they're there.

Ta!

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Feedback, even after a decade, is lovely. swiftian@yahoo.com

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