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JUDGMENT

His eyes opened without complaint in the middle of the night. For no reason it seemed, though he waited several moments to feel something--a blast, commotion, the surge of a plasma field knocking the ship's inertial dampers offline for a moment.

There was nothing.

His eyes remained open, and he belatedly realized his heart was beating hard, though he felt cold. He slowly let his held breath go. Another night uselessly spent trying to sleep. Another night uselessly trying to escape his own spinning thoughts if but for a while.

Since he'd left Auckland, it had been like that. Hell, a lot longer than that, really, since well *before* Auckland. He wondered when he'd stop expecting it, when he'd just let it go and stop bothering until exhaustion simply took him. But then, his dreams probably wouldn't be good ones, either.

Pulling himself up from the couch where he'd tried and failed again--and accepted that failure so easily, much to his chagrin--he went to the sink in the corner of the small room he'd been issued. He did not take this for granted. After months at Auckland, it was a luxury to be able to use that sink without knowing surveillance loomed over him, or that he'd be checked on by the guards in the corridor, who seemed foolish enough to think that shaving was precarious enough to require a witness. For all the freedom in his work there, the cells were heavily guarded in spite of the mechanical means of keeping tabs on the inmates.

He knew what it really meant. Being in prison alone took away their liberty, standard rations eaten with ears all around them in the mess gave them little pleasure in their meal (not that many people talked to him once they knew what he was), progress hearings were an exercise in guilt, the live guards at night denied their privacy and forced them to sit, hour after hour, with nothing but their own contemplation for company--a frightening enough prospect in itself. Purposeful labor outside with some freedom was meant to be a relief from that.

He'd seen their tactic after only a month of that routine, and thought it very clever.

And effective.

He splashed the cool water over his face, threading a bit of the moisture through his hair. With another handful, he sipped, cleansing his dry mouth. Straightening, wiping the water away with his hands, he looked in the mirror.

He saw nothing there--nothing that held any interest to him, anyway, except perhaps the lines that had begun to mark the corners of his eyes, and maybe the tinge of darkness beneath them, too. He

was getting used to the shadows, though.

Some might have called those lines now finding his boyish, chiseled features those of laughter. In his mind, he could hear such sounds as he'd heard them before, though no images followed them. What laughter had he had in years that didn't express some kind of sarcasm, he wondered numbly, staring at his eyes to the point where the rest of his face blurred away. None of it was for any sort of happiness, a pure, real laugh that actually felt good...

He blinked. Focused.

He turned away from the sink, walked across the room. He could not remember in his already clouded recollection when last he laughed. Truly laughed.

His heart slowed. He felt slightly ill.

He came close to the wall, paced across in the other direction. Then he stopped.

It was the middle of the night.

There was nothing for him to do.

There was nowhere for him to go.

She didn't know whether to lash out at those arrogant bastards or throw up. Janeway, the oh-so-supreme captain, tried so hard to look like a scolding mother there--so patronizing, the younger woman had already thought up a hundred gruesome deaths for the bitch before the Federation's charges against them had been so smugly listed.

At the same time, she knew they'd won--Starfleet.

They would be convicted. She would be tried and convicted.

She would go to prison. Prison.

She wondered suddenly how the hell she'd gotten herself to that point. It was not what she'd dreamed, worse than what she'd ever feared. Her quick mind screamed continuously inside her: How could she have grown up on Kessik with all her youthful, lofty dreams to become a convict someday?

Worse than that, a half-Klingon convict. If not approved of before, she couldn't imagine her mother's reaction to her languishing in prison after getting herself caught...Caught trying to fight the good fight, an honorable fight, one she knew she believed in.

She knew well that her initial involvement had been accidental. Her remaining with the Maquis had nothing to do with honor in the beginning, but coming across a place for herself. Well, maybe a little longer than that, and maybe for being needed, too, for the work she could do...and perhaps not wanting to go it alone, even if essentially she still was...

But that didn't matter anymore. She was there, and those people were her friends. They'd been through hell and back together. She'd become convinced of their need to fight, to defend those innocent colonies against the Cardassian incursions. She knew it was necessary, their purpose.

That didn't matter now, either. They were out of it. Soon to be inmates. Locked away, forced to work under the careful eye of the Federation. Imprisoned.

Her heart lurched with the thought.

Her captain--she could kill him. He was taking it so well. While Chakotay was undoubtedly furious to be caught and betrayed as they had been, he warned them all not to try anything when they were shuffled into the cargo bay to hear their charges. When Voyager first commandeered their ship, he'd tried to placate them, telling them they'd figure something else out if possible. They quickly learned, however, that the Starfleet captain wasn't taking any chances with them, immediately rewriting the Liberty's command protocols, transporting every trace of weaponry and securing the crew. Soon after that, their Vulcan tactical operator revealed himself, and handed over every bit of information of the Liberty, its crew and sect connections. At that point, Chakotay ordered them not to anything. Better they get shorter sentences by cooperating, he said, than longer by trying something foolish.

He was looking out for them.

She both admired and hated him for it.

She'd considered the possibility of incarceration--some of her friends had gotten caught. She knew it could happen, just didn't think about it, was too busy to think about it. Like every other time in her stupid, confused and increasingly embittered life, reality was smacking her in the face and she could do nothing but let it happen.

Standing solidly on the cargo room deck, all she wanted to do was run--run fast and away, try again to make it work that time. In a moment a part of her deemed her greatest moment of cowardice, she suddenly, desperately wanted just one more chance to try again, anywhere, and would do anything to get something in her life right enough that it wouldn't turn against her again.

This time, the choice wasn't hers.

There was nowhere she could run.

If she could just clear her mind a little...

Deep in the Badlands, the space was not unpleasant. It was an irony Janeway couldn't quite get over at first after they settled into the "clearing" they'd found the Maquis ship floating in, heavily damaged. The shards of plasma radiation, not too far away but far enough, twisted up and around like irradiated trees in a wild storm. There they stayed for the time being, in that natural void. It was, in what way it could be, beautiful.

The plan was to repair the Maquis ship to enough of a capacity that it could be flown out by one of the Starfleet pilots, under the protective lead of Voyager. The Federation needed the ship not as

much as its memory banks--any information on Maquis systems and defenses. The old ship was rigged and difficult, though. They'd tried simply downloading the core with no success. Besides, it would not be easy to transport over fifty people on her small ship securely.

She would not go by her chief of security's suggestion to keep the Maquis in the cargo bay for the duration of the journey. That seemed...cruel, even if they truly did not deserve too much mercy from her. What earned it for them was their captain's wise calm. He had kept his people in line and with relative graciousness accepted his defeat. That had earned enough of her respect.

Janeway understood the man's embarrassment as well.

For such a proud man to be defeated in his purpose must have been hard, but that catching him was no great feat of skill for her should have been worse. Her determination and his bad luck won that battle.

The Maquis ship had been disabled after it hit a plasma stream, and drifted into that clearing as if lifeless. Voyager, having found nothing in either the Terikoff Belt nor around the other planets they found in the succeeding two weeks of searching, had finally turned around and tried another route. Only when they had run out of options, when it seemed like they might have to turn back, they picked up the slightest remnant of an ion trail.

At impulse speed, they came upon the Maquis ship and ran a scan to see their engines were indeed disabled but safe, all the systems were on emergency power, and the shields, deflector and weapons were offline as well. Drifting but alive. So Janeway ordered Stadi to stop above it, told Kim to lock on a tractor, and then opened a channel.

When he answered her hail, she could see the frustration and humiliation on Captain Chakotay's face, and yet heard in his tone the resignation of a full-throated leader. Voyager had found them madly trying to make repairs, but the captain surrendered it when he knew Starfleet's purpose, and knew there was nothing for him to do otherwise. He held no attitude that wasn't understandable, promised to keep his people under control.

It was the mark of a leader who knew when to quit. Even if it had served her purposes quite well, she honestly did admire that in him.

Better to lock them away on their own ship, confine them to quarters with security posted. Get their ship on its feet again. Go home. Chalk up their success and move on.

She smiled at the knowledge that they would be home soon.

Their mission had taken a while as it was.

If the Maquis captain continued to be cooperative, it wouldn't take much longer.

In his angry heart, he thought he was insane for capitulating as he had. Any other captain might well have just put the ship on self-destruct....Well, that might have been possible if any of their systems had been online.

He had lost, by a fluke. Bad luck. The souls of his people were telling him it was time to follow another...

A muscle in his jaw jumped as he clenched his teeth.

The spirits could go to hell just then for all he cared.

Glaring at the back of Ensign Rollins' head as he stepped from the access junction and onto Voyager's clean, carpeted deck, he couldn't give a damn about religion. He'd tried--tried and lost. That's all there was. Figuring out the meaning could come some other time. He'd have plenty of it soon enough.

Predictably, his resignation did nothing to calm him. The only thing that had really kept him in line, made him cooperate as Captain Janeway's crew overtook his ship station by station, was looking at his own crew. Their sallow, shocked and dirty faces, trying to comprehend the reality of what their captain had so proudly said they'd avoid at all costs, spun in his head. Some of them were still very young, more were one-timers he'd not expected to keep longer than that one trip.

They were scared and totally unprepared, well past wanting to go home again, such as their home might have been, or just go away. Chakotay knew this before they'd even hit that damned plasma steam that knocked his small ship to pieces. They weren't prepared for any of it.

That crew, colonists mostly, hadn't known conflict like that before the Cardassians betrayed that foolish treaty with the Federation, certainly nothing about fighting a war before coming aboard, and entertained the thought of a noble death more readily than capture--and mainly because their captain had, too. They didn't know the system as he did, either. Though Chakotay knew they would be treated well--certainly better than had they been captured by the Cardassians--he knew their lives as they knew them had ended, twice over.

Their purpose gone, the fight far from them, even the most seasoned of their colonists would feel the designation of "convict" soon enough. Their parole would keep them in a protected state for at least the same amount of time as their sentence. By the time that was served, whatever fight the Maquis had now would probably be over...much as he hated to think about that.

Worse, such a fate might be better for them.

As for his "outsider" crew...they seemed to be already feeling it too hard. Ayala had already been to Voyager's doctor after ramming his fist into a bulkhead, and hadn't unclenched his jaw since. Seska had sneered bitterly and publicly for their not destroying the ship, or fighting the Starfleet crew with small arms. Throughout Janeway's charges, he watched her mouth, poised on a word. His stare kept her quiet. Jonas grit his teeth at his captain's orders and snorted and mumbled at every other sentence Janeway mouthed. No stare stopped that attitude. Nearby and silent since extracted from her engineering station, Torres looked torn between murder and tears. She was young, arrogant but hard on herself. Considering how she acted, though, fight or flight would more likely be fight--unless he could make her feel guilty enough for considering taking any stupid risks. She'd taken them before, and guilt worked with her then.

All in all, every kind of reaction might have been expectable in their situation, and it was a bad one--definitely not the worst that could have happened, but nowhere near a success in their purpose, either.

So to give them all a chance at the least consequence--probably about six months in one of Starfleet's

penal colonies with one year of parole--the former Starfleet officer cooperated.

It wouldn't reflect badly at his own trial, either, he had to admit.

At least their deaths or tortures wouldn't haunt him.

He still wished he'd won, though.

He'd all but settled on just keeping his meals to his quarters and not setting himself up for any more stupidity for the duration of their journey. Every person on the ship now knew who and what he was, and all but Harry and Stadi had shunned him, contained their conversations to monosyllables, stared at him after he walked away, avoided his attention unless it was necessary.

Tom knew what it meant: Starfleet civil.

Among all that, Stadi had surprised him. Then again, Kim likely talked to her. Tom wouldn't have been surprised to know he had. They were bridge officers, were starting shifts together--they probably spoke on a daily basis, were getting to know each other...gossiping.

Still, Harry Kim was proving to be one of the good guys, communicating with him once and a while, inviting him out to breakfast or dinner, or to the holodeck. The best time they had on Voyager was the day Harry challenged him to a flight simulation. Kim was openly curious about the former pilot, had heard stories--some true, some interestingly glossed over--and finally needled him into a simulation, playing awkwardly with his ego until he finally gave in. He owed Harry that much, he figured, and he couldn't deny he wanted to fly again.

Through the Krillian Asteroid belt, they veered and zoomed in a Starfleet prototype shuttle (after Tom made some personal adjustments). For a moment--maybe one or two--he could feel himself swell with the adrenaline of the flight, that particular joy and rush, the true knowledge that he was in his element and acing it.

He banked and angled, throwing Harry off his feet as he got a feel for the generated controls. Speeding through another tight pattern of rocks, veering through with little care and a growing grin, the pilot became blind to his controls, eyes pinned to the viewscreen, flying on instinct. Nothing else was there. He could almost feel wind rushing past, his heart and soul unearthed as he darted through the obstacles all around him. It was heaven.

For a moment, he was free--totally freed.

He almost laughed. Really laughed.

But it wasn't real. It never would be real again. Never.

He slowed.

Never. What was done would never be undone. Ever.

He stopped.

An asteroid hit them. The simulation stopped. He stared at the collision, frozen before him. Dead, like the others. Done, like whatever career he might have had. Lost like his chances to ever, ever get it back again--his family, his friends, any life worth living--to redeem himself for his own stupid selfishness and arrogance. All of it. Gone.

His hands began to shake.

Silence. Then...

"I've never seen anybody maneuver through the Krillian Field like that," came Stadi's smooth alto from behind him. She'd snuck into the deck during the flight. Her tone was sympathetic.

He exhaled, bent his head slightly. His heart was still beating with the rush, soon after with panic.

...*Never, never...*

"That was incredible," Kim breathed. "You really do have a gift!"

"Not anymore, Harry," he replied, cursing himself even as he spoke. He stood from the conn and moved to leave, only to see the understanding gaze of a fellow pilot before him.

She knew. Damned Betazoids. He could tell she knew. He moved around her.

"I'm sorry," she said as he passed.

He nodded. "So am I. But that doesn't make much difference now, does it?"

He cursed those words too. Not that it mattered. Once Janeway gave up her search for her security officer, he'd be back on Earth and he'd never see them again. Nothing, not even his exposing what little he knew about the Maquis--screwing them over, too--really would affect anything in the long run. As if he'd made a difference even in his half-hearted betrayal. He knew he hadn't anything to give Starfleet, and Janeway knew it. He had nothing to lose by showing them some old breadcrumbs.

Nothing *more* to lose, as it were.

That night, Kim and Stadi dropped by to invite him to dinner. Grudgingly, he went. In their company, he was able to avoid the stares pointed at him, even when they burned into his back, stabbing him freshly with whatever they'd chosen to think about him. But he stopped caring about that. He even stopped caring about Kim stumbling around topics trying to get him to talk more about himself, and Stadi's simultaneous tactful attempts to keep the conversation away from flying.

They decently tried to make things better for him since. Nevertheless, he remained mostly alone, choosing to pace the corridors alone during the gamma shift, enjoy the view from the mess hall then, sip slowly at a mug of coffee and try not to think, look at the plasma fields and wonder what could have been...

Even so, he knew the uselessness of those thoughts. He was there, nobody, belonging to nothing but the penal facility for a while longer. They'd used him for what he was worth--not much if anything--and now just needed him to stay out of trouble until they could tuck him away again.

Then what? he'd ask himself over and over. *Get a job somewhere; roam around again until I find*

something, anything that wouldn't be nothing? Or just get drunk and stay that way until someone has the good sense to kill me? What the hell am I going to do now?

Starfleet surely wouldn't have him again. The Maquis--he laughed at the idea--would likely be those people with the good sense and a gun. Everywhere he went, people would somehow know about him sooner or later, and he knew already there was no redemption for both a liar and a traitor who had a penchant of repeating his mistakes, even when he didn't mean to.

Sooner or later, it'd go sour. Something would go wrong and he would be in the middle of it somehow.

So maybe it'd be best, he thought, to disappear, get away from Starfleet, who all of his life had been prevalent and powerful, which he had used to gain his end and had dumped him when he proved untidy and untrustworthy. He was already exiled from the Maquis--if not for being captured, then for helping Starfleet, he was surely damned. He'd gone to them in desperation in the first place, predictably made the worst of his month long sojourn, then screwed up his one moment of conscience there. Chakotay hadn't sought him out for his sunny personality, he knew, but it sometimes bothered him, knowing he'd made himself into a decoy for them, essentially gave himself up to protect the Liberty... *No good deed goes unpunished*, he reminded himself with a soft snort of resignation.

He turned another corner. Like Starfleet, the Maquis saw what they wanted, used it, threw it out when it wasn't what they'd expected.

Problem is, he'd earned it all. All of it.

Indeed, it'd be for the best, to get away from all those people who'd already decided on him, get away, start again and try like hell to get it right that time. He knew he might...maybe. He knew, deep down, he really wanted to. Or maybe he'd just make it worse by trying.

Still, what other choice did he have? Simply dying, getting it all over with, cutting short a bad thing...no. He couldn't go that far. For some reason, even when things were worse than they were now, dying by his own hand just never crossed his mind. Interesting, that.

So, for the time being, he walked, silently, slowly, down Voyager's wide, comfortable corridors, his best and only cure for yet another restless night's sleep. Though it was morning, he thankfully met no one there, preventing him any further inspiration for his nagging uncertainty. Not that anyone bothered to talk to him--even if the staring continued. But even that had ebbed after he'd made a few adjustments in his own right.

He'd long given up wearing the singlet he'd been issued, but replicated a couple simple, dull-colored trousers and shirt sets so better to just blend into the walls rather than parade around with the insulting, rankless uniform that he knew he did not even deserve to wear. People bothered him less, too. He never went back. That along with fewer--or, better, more carefully timed--public appearances had kept people generally out of his way.

Harry had been great, Stadi had been kind, but there were a hundred and fifty other people on board he didn't want to deal with. They certainly didn't want to deal with him, even if they talked behind his back and treated him like a pariah.

He wondered if he'd ever sleep well again outside the feeling of pure exhaustion. He forgot what that was like. Just...sleeping.

Barely thinking, half numb, Tom paced through the corridor and let his mind roam to what could be when someday he'd be left to his own devices again. He could just enjoy things around him maybe and live day to day, or maybe he'd find something to do that had some kind of purpose, something that would interest him, keep him straight. For the first time in days, he actually relaxed as his mind wove up scenarios and possibilities, even dreams. It didn't matter if they crashed soon after or turned ugly. They were never real to begin with.

Not much was anymore, anyway.

Then he turned, and spotted a shadow. Looked up.

Blinked.

"What are you doing here?" he blurted.

Captain Chakotay's eyes had already narrowed to deadly slits. His fists clenched.

"You!" he spat. Before the guard could stop him, Chakotay's fist flew into Tom's face--and the other swung around for a backup. "Traitor!" he bellowed, and shook off Rollins' hand to get another blow in.

The Maquis' victim was caught shamefully off guard, took the punches hard and straight: It happened so quickly he barely realized Chakotay had attacked him.

His bones cracked upon contact. He heard them pop like sticks inside his head.

Already he could feel the blood collecting in his septum and behind his eyes, swelling quickly and disrupting his vision--then whiplash in his neck when another fist hit his jaw, cracking a tooth, maybe two.

He was strangely numb to it. It was the most bizarre feeling...

The last thing he saw was the floor.

He felt himself hit it with a thud.

The last thing he thought was that he had it coming to him.

"That young man came aboard *my* ship, under my protection, Captain Chakotay. I expect you would show me at least the courtesy of not trying to kill a member of my crew."

"He's not a member of your crew," Chakotay replied curtly, unaffected by other captain's icy glare. "You said yourself, he's a convict looking for an easy out. --And you gave him one."

"He never made any requests," she returned, equally unmoved, "I did, and I made the deal that bought him whatever reprieve he gets. He told me what he knew wouldn't help us. I took the chance--and he was right. We didn't need him after all. But even if he *had* made the deal and *had* led

us to you, that gives you no right to attack him on *my* ship."

"He still sold us out--and in the Maquis, that's a death sentence."

"Obviously, your own treatment of him didn't earn his loyalty."

"Paris doesn't know the meaning of loyalty."

"And you're not Maquis anymore." Janeway watched her point flicker across his tight face. "Even if you do return to the DMZ once the Federation deems you safe again, the Maquis will never have you back. That life is over--just like it is for Mister Paris. The difference is, he's had enough time to realize that."

Soon, you will too, she added silently, seeing him blink for what seemed like the first time since he got there.

She turned away from the Maquis Captain and returned to her desk, to her coffee, her seat. She leaned back. "I would lock you personally in the brig, Captain, if I didn't need your help repairing your ship so we can all get safely out of here. We agreed that allowing your crew to maintain their quarters, where they would be more comfortable, would be easier for everyone involved. You also told me you did not see our deaths as an option for your defeat--which as you probably know I do appreciate."

"I don't see any victory in adding to the dead," he clarified.

"True. And I thought I could trust you, your being so rational and willing in more than that respect. But this..." She gestured aimlessly towards the door, shook her head. Finding the other man's small, angry eyes, she released her breath. "I want to make this as easy for you as it can be. I came to get my chief of security back, first and foremost..."

Chakotay visibly flushed at the reminder.

Traitors and spies... Even Janeway knew she'd be just as flustered in his position--wondering, perhaps, how many others were readying to betray them all. Who knew, with a rag-tag bunch such as the Maquis were? Though, to her knowledge, there'd only been Tuvok.

"But I know how this must be for you," she finished.

He looked at her again.

"I'm a captain, too, who looks after and protects my crew to the best of my ability, and works to get our mission done with the least consequence possible. It's a dangerous life, sometimes more than others, but we do choose it, don't we? You were an officer once, so you know that all we can hope for is to do what we feel is best, and move on. Were I in your position, I honestly don't know if I could have been as cooperative. I would still have done what I felt was best for my people, however difficult."

Chakotay let out his breath. "I believe you."

She nodded. "Then you'll believe me when I say I have no personal grudge against you, nor your crew, despite my rank and convictions?"

Chakotay swallowed the bile in his throat. "You have been fair," he admitted, "in all of this. More

than most captains I've known probably would have been."

Janeway took that point for what it was worth. "Thank you," she said. "Not many Maquis captains would say that, either. However," her tone returned to its firm line of gravel as her fingers flattened upon her desktop, "under these most recent circumstances, should you so much as *look* at another member of my crew--temporary or otherwise--the wrong way, I'll have you buried under the coldest prison the Federation has to offer. Am I clear in this, Captain?"

His eyes flickered, and his jaw twitched. Suppressing a smirk, he gave her an appreciative nod. "You're good."

"I mean it, Torres!" Chakotay snapped, glaring hard down to the fiercely lit young woman. "You'll do *nothing*. Starfleet's got this ship so rigged, I'm surprised we can turn on the lights!"

"I can get past all that!" she insisted. "You say I'm good at getting out of tight spaces, and I am. Just let me try!"

"No way. --That's an order!"

"What?" she sneered. "Janeway's got you under her thumb now, too? That's one hell of a way to go down with your ship, Chakotay."

"You want to spend the rest of your life in a Federation prison--do it on your own time," he returned coldly. "But don't make things worse for the rest of us because you can't deal with this! Janeway's fair, but she won't put up with any crap. Most of our people aren't prison material. Some are just kids. You know that. So give it up and deal with it. Issue closed."

"So we're just going to *give in* to them?" she demanded. "Let them just shuffle us away? Some concern you've got for them, when you'd walk them in there! Well, *I* can keep us out, and Seska told me--"

"Seska would have us all *dead* if I listened to her!" He grabbed Torres' shoulders, shook her sharply, like an overwrought child. "*Listen to me!* If you do anything stupid, I will *not* claim responsibility for you. You will be off my crew, out of my conscience and out of the Maquis for good. I've told you four times: No tricks, no violence, no sabotage. If you can't follow my orders, then you're finished here--for good. They can lock you in their brig and I won't stop them. I mean it."

He also knew that would do the trick, once she had a minute to think about it.

Predictably, she yanked herself away and glowered at him. "Funny how loyalty works both ways," she snarled. "You're pissed off because Paris screwed you over--and you'd do the same to me for trying to help, because you're too afraid to fight them from a corner. This is *your ship*, Chakotay!"

"Not anymore," he pointed out. "There's Starfleet at every post, and I will be leaving it when we're taken into custody."

"It doesn't have to be like that," she pressed.

"Don't you think I already considered everything already?" he countered. "Don't you think I tried when they first tractor us? Tried to prevent them coming on board? You know damn well we didn't have the shields much less enough systems power to prevent it. We were dead in the water--and right now, the best thing for the other people on board, who don't have as many options to think about, is to--"

She shook her head quickly. "No. --Please, just hear me out. If I just--"

"Torres, NO!" he yelled, feeling as if his head would explode. It was going nowhere--she was beyond registration. "You will do nothing. Do you hear me? If I have to lock you in a closet, you'll obey me! I don't want to see you get double time because you couldn't sit tight or keep your temper in check."

His concern flew over her head. Her breath was jerky, her shoulders heaving with each intake. Her face was white with indignation, fury, frustration.

The last time she had been that belligerent, he'd been simple and disappointed, telling her quietly that she was wrong, like a father tired by his disobedient child. He had been that time, too. Unfortunately, it wasn't working as quickly as he wanted it to. She was too nervous and full of her ideas. On a day already gone wrong, she was already proving to him an exercise in both uselessness and humiliation. Thus, she'd earned his darker temper.

But she hadn't even blinked at that, either. Instead, spinning, growling, "Bastard" behind her, she left him there in the corridor.

Chakotay saw her turn towards the crew quarters, and for a moment, breathed his relief. At least she'd take some time to think about it. She usually came around when she did.

A moment later, he closed his eyes.

The best for *all* his crew...even that bitter, brilliant, desperately scared young woman he'd saved a year before. Like so many others on his ship, he'd come across her by chance, and used her for what she had.

*I got her into this, the captain knew, suddenly without pride. I used her gifts and her temper to get us out of rough spots. I was the one who made her believe, who showed her what we were fighting for, *gave* her the cause. She was all too ready to use her wit and nerve to take out the Cardassians, to vent her demons...*

The captain heard a shuffle and her curses beyond the turn in the corridor. She'd pushed someone aside and ordered them out of her way, her growling reproaches reverberating down the metal deck.

Where would she be now if I'd simply taken her to safety and let her get on with her life...like I should have? Should have...

The deck faded to silence.

I got her into this, enlisted her, burned more hate into her when none of this was any of her business... Just like Janeway got Paris into...their sickbay. In a way, I got Paris--the useless waste--into all of it, too... Would either of them be here if I hadn't?

The captain still stared at the hole his engineer had disappeared into.

No. But there's no way to take that back now.

Chakotay turned and headed back into the middle of his ship--his ship, with his people, who he'd sworn to protect. Even her. Turning again, he returned to engineering, then to the station he needed to work on.

"Captain Janeway wanted me to work on the memory banks," he told the lieutenant standing there, soberly yet honestly, "and even I know they're a little difficult."

Planting himself at the panel, he did what he needed to do.

For them all.

Stalking inordinate paths around the bunkroom, she seethed in long, drawn breaths, feeling the tremor within her all but ignite her skin. She had considered everything, and he wouldn't even hear her.

B'Elanna was sure her plan was foolproof. She'd spent the first two nights after their capture plotting it out, making sure it would work, making sure it was something he would agree to.

She *had* to get them out of this. She couldn't let Starfleet win--and she knew he didn't want them to, either. She was sure of that. She knew it would work.

He'd told her to forget it.

She couldn't let them take her that easily. She wouldn't!

He was tucking tail, after everything he'd told them, everything they'd been through, all of his promises and pride and his confidence. Now that he was cornered by that Starfleet captain--so sure and pleased with herself when she lectured them like children. Janeway was probably just *loving* her win. Worse, now he was just *letting* them haul them off so nobody would be 'hurt.' For the crew's good?

In a way, he was right.

"Damn it!"

Six months--six years--what difference did it make? She'd still be an inmate, locked away and under Starfleet's thumb. She'd never be able to go back to the Maquis--that was another home gone. She certainly would never get back with her mother--even if she wanted to. Her father--if he didn't want her when she was growing up, he sure as hell wouldn't then. Starfleet--she spat a laugh at the very notion--as if she ever had a chance with them anyway.

So it made no difference what she did. She'd been going nowhere before she got in the Maquis, and there she was again. All over again.

She should have known nothing would change.

But in a way, Chakotay was right. *If* she was caught, it'd reflect badly on everyone.

But it would *work*, her mind played over and over, like a feedback loop, coming with more insistence with each rotation. A wide-beam transport wasn't a difficult thing for any of them, and she could get past the Starfleet codes, get them when they weren't expecting it. She'd done it a hundred times. It was always how they'd survived, with the element of surprise. She could get those Starfleet off their ship, lock them up, grab what they needed off Voyager--and their people would all be behind her.

It was a chance. They couldn't lose anything. Even Seska said it'd work, and she was the most pessimistic person B'Elanna knew.

She clutched to that hope, then, that shot of a chance in that otherwise impossible situation.

It could be done.

But Chakotay wouldn't even hear of it.

What's happened to him--in only two days? What the hell's wrong with him? Where's the person who told me that the risk was always worth it when it came to staying free and alive? The one who never gave up, even when his lousy ship was on its last legs, and managed to keep us one small step ahead of the game despite it all? --Where's the person who said to hell with Starfleet?!

She stopped in the center of the room, her chest rising and falling, more and more slowly, breathing through her mouth, swallowing. She choked as her breath started again.

Yet she knew he was trying to protect them all. That was his way. He was always looking out for "his people," no matter how hard it was on him.

But even that didn't matter anymore where she was concerned. He'd absolved himself of her.

She turned around, but went nowhere. Not that there was anywhere to go.

For his crew, the captain, being a captain, would let himself suffer the downright humiliation of having Starfleet drag him, his ship and crew, to one of their prisons. He'd be a martyr--at least to them--for looking out for them all. He'd told her before he'd probably get a couple years, maybe three; the rest, likely six to eighteen months, depending. Mostly six. But they'd be alive and free again someday.

So, whatever she did wouldn't reflect on him, either. He wouldn't claim responsibility.... But if she was successful, there'd be nothing for any of them to worry about. He'd be angry--"disappointed," most likely--but they'd all be free. If for some reason it didn't work--*But it will!*--she'd have some more time in prison...and totally alone, kicked off his crew, no longer Maquis for acting more like one... He looked like he meant it that time.

But she knew it would work. She could feel it in every bone, every nerve, all the instincts she'd both cursed and was thankful for. She'd predicted every contingency, especially Starfleet. Despite that, it was a coin flip.

She drew a long, deep breath; her eyes closed, opened again.

Her fists unclenched.

Thinking again on the possibilities, B'Elanna felt a wave of numbness pass over and through her.

A cold trembling like none she'd known followed it.

"Captain," Chakotay nodded as he continued to work on the panel at his fingers.

Janeway moved to look down at his work, and offered him a small grin. "Captain Chakotay."

He regarded her. Businesslike, but he could tell her salutation was sincere. So very Starfleet, what he remembered well from his own years there. Totally professional camaraderie. It was oddly comforting to him then.

They might have been enemies, she might have been subjecting him and his crew to prison without any mercy there, but she had been as equitable as she could be. Of course, she was being allowed to do her job, so she had the freedom to be generous. He understood that from his own experience, and knew he would probably do the same in her position.

"I've rerouted all the engine protocols to the systems your people installed," he told her. "You shouldn't have any more transfer blocks now."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome," he answered quietly, returning to complete his work.

"Captain," said Commander Cavit as he approached, handing Janeway a PADD. "We're about ready to reinitialize the warp drive. We've diverted all power but life support and navigation to the engines. We think that'll do the trick."

She smiled, nodded sharply. "Then the antimatter containment field is cooperating this time? Good work. Let's go to it, then. --Mister Nelson, bring the magnetic constrictors online..."

Chakotay knew in any other circumstance, that would be good news...and maybe it was then, too. He looked at some of his crew who'd agreed to help. They were tired, their eyes held no emotion.

"...and watch the plasma relays. We were having trouble realigning them. In fact..."

It would be good just to start getting it all over with. It'd be easier on everyone involved. They could start to end it, move on...

"Captain..."

He hated it, but it was all he could do.

"Captain?"

Chakotay's head came up when he felt a gentle touch on his arm. Janeway's stare, softened strangely, found his again. "Yes?"

"May I take your station for a moment? I'd like to watch the antimatter containment--just in case."

He assented, moving a step to the side. But no further. He wanted to watch it too--just in case.

With a few more orders from the Starfleet captain, the warp drive was brought back online. Suddenly, the cloud of misty blue and white filled the chamber before them.

"Warp drive is online," came an engineer's satisfied confirmation--

--And an alarm screamed out directly after. The blue mist within the core flashed and another system sounded its klaxon.

"What the hell was that?" Janeway demanded as she punched on the console. "I'm getting a massive energy disruption in the... Where is that coming from?!"

"Someone's brought the transporters online!" Nelson shouted over the alarms. "But those systems were realigned to stabilize the coil relays!"

"That's not right!" Chakotay felt his heart jump when he looked down--saw what was happening. The saboteur was trying to increase power to the transporters, ignorant of the reroutes--and he realized--

"Damn her!" he snapped and shoved Janeway aside.

"What--"

"Shut up!" Chakotay ordered and started overriding as fast as he could.

"Antimatter containment is failing!" called one man he didn't know.

His fingers flew over the keypad, locking out, shutting down--

"The core will breach in two minutes at this rate--"

"Take it offline!" Janeway commanded but went to do it herself.

Chakotay found the source--shut it down. Another lockout--he overrode it.

She's going to get us killed! his mind yelled inside the deck's sudden chaos--and he desperately wondered if she knew he was the one trying to stop her.

"Janeway!" he shouted, seeing the drive plasma begin to vent damningly into the engine room. "Tell one of your people to cut power to the coil assembly!"

Janeway shot a stare at one of her people, and they went to it. "You know what's happening?"

"Yes!" he snapped and punched the panel. Tapped in a few more commands. Found her...cut off her access...

Then it stopped.

The deck whined down, systems failing.

Plasma haze drifted over the deck, to the vents, clearing slowly from around their feet...

All but the emergency power remained on the deck...

...And the only thing he could think to do at that very moment was to smack that bright, young engineer that he'd brought aboard his ship. Punch her hard.

For a wild, furious moment, he knew she could take it. He knew more that she deserved it for nearly getting them killed, nearly killing another ship full of innocent officers as well, for betraying them, his trust, his orders, his resolutions, his acceptance of their fate. Everything he'd done for them. For what?

In her frightened, twisted mind, she was doing it for them. Doing what he might have done if he didn't know better--if he didn't have a bone of sense in him.

She'd disobeyed him outright. Not even an hour after he'd threatened her, warned her, tried to convince her.

I should have locked her in that closet.

She took her own risk--again. This time, he knew he had to follow through on his own risk, too.

For all of them--even her--he had to do what he said he would.

He looked down on the panel, sighing hard in his heavy chest, then glanced to Janeway. Several long seconds later, he unwillingly resolved himself to his decision.

"Tell your transporter chief to lock onto this signal and beam her in here," he told her quietly.

The Starfleet captain paused, her eyes on him, then tapped her comm badge.

Not a minute later, he was looking his former engineer in the eyes.

Materializing in the middle of the engine room she'd once claimed as her own, the young woman looked like an animal caught in a light beam, ready to bolt; frozen, then jerking her head when she spotted the phaser pointed at her side.

She almost spoke, but her words stuck to her open lips. Tears or murder--the former seemed more likely there, if only for her shock and humiliation.

Chakotay didn't bother trying to speak, only stared at her. He knew: She was desperate, she was upset, she wasn't really thinking, reacting on her instincts to free herself. Because of that, he also knew that with her wits, she was a danger to them all. In her frame of mind, she simply didn't see that. Wouldn't see that. Even if it was just starting to register, he knew, deep down, that he couldn't trust her again.

She was his friend, but she'd gone against him one too many times. She had to pay for that, learn the real consequences of being rebellious. They'd all have to, soon enough.

He was through with her. He had to be. He'd done enough. Too much.

She was all theirs.

Janeway almost didn't have to be told. What she was witnessing was as plain as it was pitiful. She looked at the two in turns--the tersely frightened young woman, the silently furious captain.

She broke his orders...Why? Janeway thought. Certainly we might have expected something to happen. But she looks so...surprised, like a headstrong child who gets caught with their finger in the pie, knowing they shouldn't ruin it, but convincing themselves that just one taste won't...

Again, Janeway was forced to reconsider Tuvok's suggestion, wonder if it was indeed the best thing to keep them on that ship. Obviously there was at least one--who knew how many more?--who was desperate and foolish enough to sabotage their own safety to escape. Their Maquis captain had assured her of his orders...

Or maybe this girl is simply trouble he honestly thought he'd averted? He did stop her after all. Maybe it's time I found out for myself what I'm dealing with. We have the time, thanks to her.

Looking around at the other Maquis, those who hadn't turned quickly away from the scene seemed to be waiting for something horrible, for one or the other to burst their tightly contained energy...

But no such explosion occurred.

Rather, Chakotay said, "Captain Janeway, you have my permission to take this woman to your brig--for her protection as well as ours." His face ghosted regret, frustration, embarrassment, disappointment, all in seconds, then steeled again as he turned away. "She's not a part of my crew anymore. Do with her as you see fit. I trust you'll take care of her. She's no longer my responsibility."

With that, he went back to work, beginning to assess the extent of the damage. The other Maquis crew barely met her eyes as they likewise tried to do something besides get involved in what had transpired. Moving to them, their captain quietly told them what to do to make their repairs--again. They obeyed without pause, if not with one last fleeting glance to their former superior, the engineer.

Nobody defended her.

He had given her up. Even that surprised the Starfleet captain.

Looking back again, Janeway watched the blood drain completely from the young woman's hardened face. She had not moved. Her small, still body stood in the midst of the world she seemed only then to be realizing was no longer hers.

She stood alone, open for all to see, a monument to a mistake.

Mercifully, Janeway motioned to Tuvok. "Please escort this young woman to the briefing room and post what security you deem appropriate," she told him. "I would like to speak with her myself."

The girl shot a glare at her, her first move since materializing in the room. It burned hatefully into the corner of Janeway's eye, accusing, demanding, insulted...

Finding something new to point at--aim at. Anything.

Janeway did not return it.

"Mister Paris."

The words floated through the air as if they tasted of sulfur.

"Mister Paris."

He opened his eyes. Saw the ceiling. Saw the Vulcan nurse. He blinked again. He looked at Dr. Fitzgerald.

"What...?" For a moment, he couldn't recall exactly...then in flashes--Dr. Fitzgerald seemed to be waiting--his head hurt like hell, and the older man seemed to know it...The flashes slowed into blinks, then images... "Captain Chakotay?"

Fitzgerald offered a slim smile, clinically satisfied. "Yes, Mister Paris, you're as popular as ever," he said and turned to put his instruments away. "I've treated your injuries, and you're well enough to return to your quarters. I suggest you rest."

Paris almost snorted at that--or he might have if a lance of pain didn't shoot through his skull. The doctor likely knew his injuries well enough to note his wince, too. He offered nothing, though--and the former pilot was too proud to ask for a painkiller from a man who clearly could care less.

Instead, he sat up. "Thanks, Doctor," he muttered and moved to stand.

"And try to stay out of trouble this time, if you will," Fitzgerald added and he pushed his tray table back into its hold, not looking back.

"What was last time?" the pilot wanted to know. "Here, I mean."

Fitzgerald turned, and actually had the nerve to meet his eyes.

Paris really felt the hurt that time. Suddenly, stupidly, he really wanted to know what he'd done to earn the idea that he was still nothing but their inconvenience.

He knew--in all honesty, he couldn't deny it--that he *had* earned their distrust, their ill regard, his own punishment. He'd known that long ago.

But he had not earned any disrespect *there*. Rather, he'd kept out of their way, tried to disappear... *Dumb idea, really, expecting that I'd ever be anything but a sore thumb on a nice, new starship, with all these people's lives just starting here, full of possibilities...*

He was a glaring reminder of why people discarded the old and started on bright new futures. It probably sickened the doctor to think people like him still existed in the backwash of his sparkling clean society. It likely chilled him to think how many others lurked within Starfleet hiding their crimes like he had.

It didn't give some self-righteous physician the right to persecute him, though, to play the godly defender of all things good, or to assign on him blame for things he *hadn't* done, had tried not to do again. Then again...

"You've made enough trouble for yourself to be playing catch up for a long time to come," Dr. Fitzgerald said, turning back to his instruments. "That's what parole is for, if I remember correctly. I'd use it wisely, if I were you."

"Your concern just turned my new leaf," he sneered, not bothering to reign in this tone, even if he'd expected the doctor's contempt.

*"*Cavit to sickbay.*"*

By the look on the doctor's face, the impassive glance from his nurse, too, Fitzgerald seemed to enjoy Cavit's timing.

Asshole.

"Fitzgerald here."

*"*Is our...visitor doing well?*"*

"I've released him to his quarters," Fitzgerald answered without offering to include 'the visitor' in their conversation. Instead, he motioned to his nurse to refill the hypospray canisters. "He was just leaving."

Yeah, don't mind me. I'm trying to be invisible, remember?

*"*Would he be well enough to pick up his travel orders?*"*

"Has the Maquis ship been repaired?"

Damn, Janeway did actually get them, then. Then he wondered why he cursed the captain's success. Maybe because he knew, if only briefly, he'd entertained the idea of the Maquis winning in the end. Who knew?

"...The captain is considering scuttling it after today's...incident.*"*

"I see. And the saboteur?"

*"*The Maquis prisoner has yet to be questioned by her.*"*

"I'll prepare another table," the doctor muttered, then asked, "Are you sure that's wise?"

*"*Captain Janeway knows what she's doing.*"*

Fitzgerald's lips tucked in at the corners. "Captains usually do."

*"*But just in case she does decide to destroy the Liberty, I thought Mister Paris would like to know where he's going. Ask him to...Ask him to meet me in the briefing room.*"*

"I'll inform hi--"

"On my way," Tom snapped, growling as he spun on his heel.

"He's on his way," he heard the doctor sardonically confirm as he turned the corner outside the door, not looking back. "Fitzgerald ou--."

The doors blessedly swished shut.

"Damn them, damn them, damn them," he hissed to himself as he made good speed to the turbolift. Prison was a paradise in comparison to the crap he had to take on Voyager.

I knew this'd be useless!

Of course, being nothing and being treated like nothing were two different things--or maybe it just hurt to know that the reality of that nothingness was starting to show itself outside of the penal colony, where being nobody was actually a blessing.

Get used to it, he told himself. This is what you've got coming, and you had it coming since the day you got on that shuttle...

"Deck one."

But damnit, I don't want it!

A couple months, maybe six weeks if the hearing went okay and he could get himself to a place where he could just not be bothered anymore, disappear somewhere and bitterly hope that something would change. Maybe an opportunity would arise later, or meet someone who by some miracle would get past his reputation long enough to...

To what? Who the hell wants to get past it with me? Even if they did, I'd take care of that real quick, knowing me.

His parole would likely be another year to eighteen months, maybe a little less with Janeway's good word if she bothered to give him one. Maybe she would, maybe not. For that time, he'd stay on Earth, find a place to pass the time and stay out of trouble long enough that he could...

Go where? Where?

Tom felt a numb thud in his heart, chilling the rest of him.

He had no answers.

He'd be cut loose, and he would just drift away. Not in the least the life he'd once been stupid enough to expect...Just thinking about that bold, impulsive, naive kid nearly brought tears to his harder, more cynical eyes.

There was nothing left for him...again.

"Hey, Tom." It was Kim, just off the bridge, on the other side of the turbolift.

Snapping his head up, Tom grinned briefly. "Hey, Harry."

"Looking for Commander Cavit, I guess?"

Tom nodded, crossing paths with the younger man, who stuck to the corridor and let the lift go. "He's got my itinerary."

Kim sighed, but then just nodded back. "I hope everything goes okay for you. --I mean that."

Tom grinned. His head still hurt, but he did feel good to smile and feel it, at least a little. "Thanks. You've been a good person, Harry. It's been a while since someone took the time to be a friend."

"There's more like me than you think," Harry told him.

"And maybe I'll get lucky enough to meet one sometime?"

Kim smiled, and Tom couldn't believe how young he was, how bright and sure he looked just then. He could barely recall the time when such an unaffected expression had lit his own face.

"I think you will."

"Maybe," Tom shrugged, trying to seem less dismissive than he felt. In the sudden silence that followed, he remembered... "Hey, what happened today? I heard there was some kind of incident, but Fitzgerald wasn't much for conversation."

"Oh, I guess you didn't hear," Harry realized. "How do you feel?"

"Good as new. What happened?" He really was curious, and for that matter, it was a good distraction from his musing for the moment.

"One of Maquis prisoners staged an escape," the ensign told him, "almost destroyed both ships trying. We're still repairing the damage."

Tom was surprised--and he wondered how long he was out to have missed it...Not that they would have kept him up to date. "Really?"

"Captain Chakotay stopped her--and dismissed her from his crew. Captain Janeway's going to question her after she's done preparing with Lieutenant Tuvok."

Tom blew a breath through his pursed lips, thinking about that. *Chakotay must be in a hell of a spot that'd he'd go that far.*

"Lieutenant Tuvok's not sure about it, though," Harry continued, a little more tentatively. "She might be dangerous. She's, well, half-Klingon."

Tom's wandering stare shot back to Harry's as his brain replayed the bloodlines, connected to his memory.... "B'Elanna Torres?"

**She* got booted off the Liberty?!*

"You know her?"

"I wasn't in very long, but I worked a little with her."

*Oh my god--Chakotay kicked *her* off his crew? Now I *know* anything's possible.*

"What was she like?"

"She was...dedicated." Tom took a step back, strangely uncomfortable with that gossip, now that he had it. "Look, I should pick my orders up before Cavit gets another reason to have a grudge with me. Hope you don't mind."

"No. Sorry. I was just getting off shift, anyway. You going to get some dinner?"

Tom shook his head. "Actually, I think I could use some rest. My head still hurts a little. Chakotay still packs a hell of a punch."

Harry seemed to understand. "I guess he does--I saw him on the bridge." He fumbled slightly, properly cued to Tom's own anxiousness to end the conversation. The kid wasn't blind--and was

growing uneasy for nothing to say to someone who wasn't much for talking about it.

Finally, he said, "Tomorrow, then. Well, sleep well. Maybe later, though? Before you go?"

Tom grinned, nodded. He turned away as Harry did.

For probably the umpteenth time since he'd seen the kid in that station bar a couple weeks before, he couldn't believe Harry Kim was just that nice a guy.

Tom hoped it'd stay that way for him. Hoped nothing would come along and kill that somehow, embitter or spoil that good nature or realness that had made Tom's stay there almost bearable. He hoped Kim would never have to deal with anything near to the hell that he had. Tom knew that, being as good a kid as he was, he probably wouldn't.

It'd make one less jerk in the universe, at least.

He'd be happy for that, if anything.

B'Elanna paced in circles in the clean, businesslike briefing room. They hadn't taken her to the brig right off, but brought her straight up to the briefing room and left her there to wait for Janeway to have her talk--"minus the forcefield," she'd added in afterthought.

If Janeway thinks she's going to get any information from me, she's dead wrong.

She still couldn't believe Chakotay backstabbed her. She knew she broke his orders, but he actually kicked her off his ship. Not one of the crew, her friends, stood up for her, either.

Worse, Chakotay was the one who stopped her.

I could've gotten around the damned warp breach, she told herself. If he hadn't been messing around with my protocols, I could've taken care of it...and if I wasn't able to, there wouldn't have been much to lose, anyway.

Even so, she knew she didn't want to kill anyone.

Sighing hard, she spun and went to the window, let her glassy eyes roam over the perimeter of plasma fields and swirling gasses, shooting up and around the Badlands. In the eye of the storm. For a minute, she stared at it, still as they were, watching the violence from a distance, safe in their little cache in space.

She turned her head from side to side, still unbelieving, wishing somehow she had the ability to just cry about all of it--all of her disappointing life of losses and useless, stupid dreams made even more futile.

But she was too angry to cry, even if she thought it'd do any good.

No matter what I do, it'll catch up with me, anyway. There's no sense in feeling for something that's

not even worth anything in the end.

She wondered what to do with that.

If it's all useless, what's the point in sticking around at all?

For a moment, she slouched a little, following her drifting stare in the panorama.

*Because it'd be more useless to just give up... There has to be something, somewhere, that won't crash down around me, and maybe *that's* what keeps me--*

She turned at the first sound of the door, melding her face again and instantly into one of proud defiance, chin up, if only to spite her pensiveness of only moments before.

Defiance melted into scorn.

"Paris."

His stare was more like an internal scan, as if making sure she was who she was. "Torres."

She could have laughed for want to spit on him. He actually looked concerned to see her there, when all along she knew...

Her back straightened even further. "Yeah, me--thanks to you."

Rolling his eyes, he crossed his arms and sighed hard, still looking at her. Thankfully, he did not move any further into the room. A smart choice, she thought.

"Has Cavit been here?" he asked.

"Does it look like it?"

Tom snorted. "So much for manners."

"Oh?"

"Cavit's the one who called me up here."

"Well, Janeway sent me here." She waved at one of the chairs as she turned away. "Have a seat and take a number." Closing her mouth, she drilled her eyes into the view again. She didn't feel like looking at that traitor.

Tom did not sit.

She hadn't changed, he noted to himself as he regarded her. It surprised him that he quickly found himself as intrigued by the woman, even when she was as bitter and self absorbed as she'd always been.

Snotty as hell is more like it, he thought, remembering his own offer, eons ago, of friendship, turned away brusquely for her own notions that he was just flirting with her. Perhaps it *was* that particular intensity that made him so curious.

Problem was, he couldn't even remember why he'd tried to offer any friendliness her way. He knew

he hadn't been flirting...for the most part.

Torres also still had a problem staying still when she wasn't in control. She moved to pass the width of the window in a ritual prow made inept by the restricted space. Determinedly, she was not looking at him.

Knowing she had really gotten herself in it. Wondering what she could do while knowing she couldn't do anything. Not knowing what would come next, but knowing she didn't have a choice but to go...

Tom knew the feeling. He'd felt like that when he made that necessary decision and evaded the Bradbury all of that hour, lead them away from the disabled Liberty, thus ending his known career, such as it was, in the Maquis, and sacrificing his freedom, if it could be called that. The looks on their faces when they transported him about that Starfleet ship, the tones of their voices when they committed him to their brig...Tom knew he'd forsaken all he had left. He knew it. He knew they knew it, too.

She was feeling it--or at least she would be soon, or had just started to.

Meanwhile, she seemed to be fighting it a lot better than he ever had. *Seemed*. For all he knew, she could be just as good at the game as he was. The fact that she was there meant he was probably right. That wouldn't have changed much, either.

Watching her turn again try to find something--anything--to concentrate on aside from him, he struck a more casual position, leaned against the wall, crossed his legs at the ankles. He'd have to wait there anyway, and Cavit probably made sure that he would. He had nothing else to do but watch her, after all, wonder when she'd just give it up and check to see if she'd lost his attention.

At the same time, he couldn't deny that her pacing was making him nervous, too. He could practically feel her mind racing.

He didn't blame her that, either.

"I feel like I've been sent to the administrator's office," he said. Some conversation at any level was better than none, he decided.

B'Elanna snorted, but still didn't look his way. "I guess you know what that's all about."

"Not from school, actually, no. I never got in trouble...then."

"Wonder what happened," she said, indicating that she didn't really care about the answer.

Tom's eyes turned down. *Guess I set myself up for that one...not like I haven't spent a while wondering the same thing.*

Of course, he could wonder the same for her.

She'd go to prison soon. He knew exactly what she was in for...

He knew it'd be useless, but... "I'm sorry you got caught."

"Right."

Her word faded as soon as it was voiced--fading in, dying out.

"I mean it. I never expected Janeway to find you."

Then, slowly, she turned from the window; her narrowed eyes pulled up his long frame, caught his eyes for but a second. "Right," she repeated.

He shrugged, more to himself. "Never mind."

B'Elanna shook her head slowly in indignant awe. "You really are a piece of work, Paris," she said. "You really think I'm about to believe you when you're the one that jumped onboard to come after us in the first place?"

"I didn't *jump* onboard. Trust me, it wasn't my idea, and they'd have come out here with or without me."

"Uh huh." She shook her head. "You'd sell out your own mother if you thought it'd get you ahead a step, wouldn't you?"

Tom scowled. "Damn, Torres, where did *that* come from?"

She spat a laugh. "Where did that *come* from? You really must think I'm an idiot! --You sold us out, ran off to the Federation to tell them everything--"

"The hell I did!"

"Right, I believe you."

Tom stopped, almost as soon as he'd started, realizing for the first time that he actually was defending himself to that woman. Why--he had no idea...

Though, looking into those deadly dark eyes, aimed at him as if wanting to rip his soul into shreds, he felt the sudden compulsion to. Do or die preservation against somebody... *Someone who likely *could* rip me apart...* He tipped his head, not breaking her stare. *...and vice versa.*

"You're not so holy yourself, B'Elanna," he said quietly, surely.

She blinked.

But just as quickly, she recovered. *No way*, she thought, *I'm not about to let this little bastard turn it back on me.*

"At least I know the meaning of loyalty," she replied.

"And that's why *you're* here, too, right?" he countered.

"I was doing what I could to save my ship!"

"Really? Get them killed is more like it, from what I heard."

She blew a breath. "It didn't go that far."

"Because Chakotay stopped you."

B'Elanna paused there. She had hoped he hadn't heard of any of it, but obviously, he'd gotten it all.

Even so, he still didn't know anything about why--as if he'd understand. "Chakotay was doing his duty--and so did I. For the Maquis."

Tom snorted at that one. "Oh come off it," he said. "You did it for yourself."

"What?"

"You did it because you couldn't handle having to face up to being caught. Prison's a scary idea, Torres. I know that one personally."

She growled, almost spoke. He was really trying hard, and she knew it.

But he was right. She knew he was.

"I know what it's like to think of yourself as a loser," he continued, taunting her with an indifferent shrug. "Facing up to the fact you couldn't stay a step ahead. Guess nobody can forever. It's just sometimes some people lose out sooner."

She felt her blood rise, wondered foolishly where the reaction had come from...and yet she knew exactly where. Thankfully, she was yet able to hold her face firm against his retaliation. She wasn't about to give in to trash like him.

"Little wonder you got there before me," she replied.

"It's not like I was looking for Starfleet to come and pick me up," he said. "It happens. --And it happened to you, too."

Her stare narrowed again. "What a load of shit," she snarled. "Your turn to face some facts, Paris: You were looking for the easy way out, and you found it running home to Starfleet. You never believed in the Maquis' purpose. You were just looking for something to do with your useless life, to make yourself feel like more than what you knew you were and earn a dime while you were at it. And you couldn't deal with Chakotay--"

"Obviously neither could you."

As much as her stare could fry him, he hoped his would freeze her.

It did. Her breath seethed, much as she tried to control it.

Damn!

His eyes refused to release hers.

Hell with this!

"Then why *are* you here?" she countered. "Through the generosity of your heart? What the hell kind of loyalty *do* you have that'd make you betray us *twice*?"

He felt that...knew why.

"I didn't do it purposefully," he said.

"Oh?" she said with mock consideration. "Then what were you trying to do, Paris? It sure as hell

doesn't look like charity."

"I hoped..." but his words cut off. He drew a breath, then another. Then he let it out.

What the hell.

"I hoped that maybe I could do... *something* right again." The words had nearly stuck back on his tongue, but he did manage them. "You don't know what it's like, B'Elanna, to have...all that time to think, think about your life, all your screw ups, everything that brought you to that point. They give you no choice but to think about it. When you're alone like that, you want nothing but to think of ways you can get away from it..."

Somehow hearing him, she stilled; her head drew back slightly. His words...honest, his facade had drained. Worse, she felt it, knew he was... But she couldn't dare show him, even as her stomach turned at the ideas he'd suddenly replanted in her...

"...and I don't know if I ever will." Against his will, his throat thickened. He knew, looking at her tough facade, he couldn't stop himself. The words just kept rolling out..."You haven't been there--yet--thinking about what you could've done to avoid getting to that point, knowing you never thought you'd end up like that, wishing like hell you'd done it all differently...and knowing you can't. When you're in that cell, and you realize it, and know you can't make it right, or turn it back again..."

She pressed her lips firmly together. She couldn't--wouldn't--let him see...

He shook his head of the rest. "I just wanted to try again. I needed someone to see I wasn't the piece of crap I'd made myself out to be. Okay?"

She fought it. She wouldn't go there, she couldn't go there. She didn't want to even let him make her think about it.

"But since it was useless, coming here, it's doesn't matter anymore, I guess," he finished.

He was preying on her...She felt the corners closing around her, cutting off her blood and breath. She wouldn't--she couldn't--let him...win.

She would be damned if he'd make her..."I'll cry for you some other time, *Tom*."

She put his name out so venomously; he might have slapped himself--or her--for the sting of it.

But a few seconds later, the poison sunk through him, permeating his veins, raising his blood.

*I'm sick of this--*sick* of this!*

"Whether or not you believe me is your prerogative," he said coldly. "Hell, just about everyone else wants to make their own judgment, so why not you, too? --Even if you're guilty for doing the same thing I did. It's just that everyone knows that B'Elanna Torres was doing the *good fight* on the wrong damn day and she's just too ignorant to realize she's gone too far. But I know what was really going on in there, *B'Elanna*, nearly blowing up your own ship. Better dead than captured? --Bullshit! I remember you better than you think."

"To hell with you, Paris! You don't--"

"You make yourself out to be so heroic and selfless. But the truth is, you were so wrapped up in your

own fear, there was no way you could see that you were being as selfish and stupid as I'd been--if not more. You got lucky, though: You didn't kill anyone-- *this* time."

She had the perfect rejoinder on her tongue, yet it froze there when he saw it and approached her suddenly, surely. Coming very close very quickly, his face tightening with a fury she'd never seen in him.

It actually shocked her. He'd been so adept at not showing anything, and then he was moving to her so swiftly she didn't know if she could...

She stepped back, held up her arm instinctively, ready to strike--to kill him. He'd definitely earned that. She could kill him...

But he stopped just short of her reach.

"You want the truth?" he queried shortly, finishing his move by leaning upon the corner of the table, staring down to her. "Because I'm a consummate screw-up, no matter what I do, nobody's going to give a shit except to think the worst of it. Nothing I do makes any difference, so why bother doing anything at all anymore?"

"So you're right--I don't give a damn about any of it. I'm not loyal because nobody's earned it in me. In return, I don't deserve their trust and I know it. So I was going nowhere before and I'm going nowhere now. --Now you get to have the same pleasure."

"You're a fool to compare yourself to me," she growled.

"Maybe. But you don't know everything about me, do you?"

"I know enough." She truly believed that much.

"Do you?" he said, knowing better. "It'd be nice if you could really say that, wouldn't it?"

"Don't screw around with my head," she told him, squinting up at him. "It won't work."

"I don't have to. You're doing a good enough job on your own time."

"You know nothing about who I am!" B'Elanna retorted. "Or *what* I am! How can you say I--"

"Welcome to the real world, Torres," Tom cut in, a sardonic knowingness overtaking his low tone as he glared straight into her poker hot glower. She had no idea...

"Have fun trying to prove *yourself* now," he continued, "with nobody left to fall on but your own screwed-up self--again. You'll have plenty of time, trust me, with the busywork they'll be tossing at you--part of the time. The rest of the time you'll have all to yourself, to think about everything you did to get yourself there. Have fun going nuts for things to do to distract yourself. I almost did. Knowing you, you might just go over the edge."

What the hell does he know about me? she screamed behind her tight, enraged face. The bastard actually had the nerve to...be right.

He was disloyal and selfish and didn't care about anything but himself...But damnit, he was right--and might be right.

But she wasn't about to...

"You're breaking my heart," she sneered.

"And you're desperate enough to kill a couple shiploads of people to save your ass from having to really look at yourself."

He grinned--a grin she wanted to smash like thin ice--and he tipped his head again to regard her.

"Face it: We're not so different after all." For effect, he straightened and held his arms out to show himself to her, pale skin, circled eyes, dead, embittered expression, and all. "Have a good look: This is what you're in for."

As if the wind had simply changed, he backed off. The grin faded, replaced by a sureness that invited her to try and fight him that time.

But she couldn't. She wasn't even certain if she was holding up her own mask at all anymore. Much as she would have loved to fight him, she knew nothing she said or did would change the fact that... *Don't do it!*

"You actually expect me to believe a word you've said?" she returned slowly, cruelly, with all she had left. "You left us for dead, Paris. You killed your own people and lied about it. Now you say you don't give a damn about trying to right yourself or make things better because life's just been too damned hard and daddy didn't give you everything you ever wanted. Giving up because you got caught and nobody likes you anymore."

Her eyes narrowed as she pulled her chin up at his reaction to her words. "You *are* nothing--the worst kind of coward. So why should I crawl into *any* pit with you, regardless of what I'm up against and how I feel about it?"

She was right. She'd nailed him. Not on all of it, but most of it. Enough of it.

Again, he'd stepped right into it, invited her...

Damn.

He felt a pain in his chest, breathed against it.

"I don't think I care if you believe me or not," he replied. "You--Cavit, Janeway, Chakotay--all of you--I don't *care*, because you sure as hell don't give a damn enough to look past whatever you want to believe."

"How tragically noble of you," she offered, dripping with sarcasm as she squinted back to him. "It must be so hard, being you."

He exhaled, slowly, swallowed the humiliation of another searing point on her part.

"Sometimes I think like that," he admitted. "But that gives you no right to claim superiority over me, just because you managed to avoid it longer."

"Oh?"

He nodded, not breaking their shared glare. But something he saw there somehow softened him

again. Much as she had torn away at his own defenses, much as he envied her relentless self-defense, he still felt sorry for her. She still stood defiantly, unmoved, still trying to deflect him, arms tightly crossed, feet set slightly apart, legs straight.

She really thought she wasn't going to give in once she got there.

He wished he'd even seemed that strong when he'd gotten himself to Auckland. Instead, he'd practically crawled into his cell, his head dropped nearly to his chest for being too emotionally exhausted by then to fight anything. He wished he could sleep--he'd do anything to sleep again...he still would. Even in the Maquis, his defiance had only the appearance of lechery.

He knew only then that it was just a hard, cold fear of self-betrayal, of anxiety in his distrust, the comfort of numbness and isolation. The ease of emotional paralysis...

Utter cowardice.

On the other hand, hers at worst seemed over-proud--if one didn't know what to look for. There was more, he knew.

He could see her fingers tightly pressed upon her arms; they trembled at the knuckles, as did the muscle in her jaw. She was too still, tense as a circuit rod and ready to short out.

She was getting nervous. It was a innate fear growing in her as his own warning sunk in--touched something maybe--that he'd known himself but was too ignorant to defend himself against before it was too late. It was the fear of animals backed into cages of their own unwitting construction.

That was a primal fear that he had known, though only once he was there, and felt the walls closing around him...

He did start to honestly feel sorry for her, if only to stop feeling sorry for himself for a moment. Yet, he showed it only by staring at her, and speaking quietly.

"It's going to hit you hard, Torres, when it does," he told her.

At that, she blinked. She'd heard him.

"You haven't gotten there yet. But once they put you to the routine, you'll know what I'm talking about. Even so, it's your choice what to do with it, just like it's mine. God knows what that'll be..."

The doors swished behind them. A couple words were passed there.

She drew a breath, glanced over, almost expectantly.

She was looking for the distraction. A way out. Deflecting.

He would finish his thought anyway. She deserved it.

"That's all you have left, Torres, your choice to take it or leave it. We'll see how you handle that, when the time comes."

For whatever despise she might have had for him, she had no reply to that.

Instead, she looked at Commander Cavit as he slipped in, wearing a grin arrogant enough to smash.

She was thankful for the disturbance. She felt the break in Paris' sudden intensity like a breeze on a stifling day, felt her blood begin to return to her, even if it was yet threatened...

Hit me hard...

The man addressed Paris. "You'll be happy to know there'll be no delay in getting you...home."

Paris' eyes held no more emotion when he turned them to the commander. "Thanks." The word was stillborn upon his lips.

Cavit, not lost of his smirk, blew a breath through his nostrils for want to chuckle.

God, if I was in Paris' shoes, they'd have phasered me by now, she thought--and hoped sincerely she wouldn't have to talk with that slime ball. But Paris...He's been there...it's 'hit' him...

"Have a good parole hearing."

B'Elanna watched the younger man's face grow terse again, and suddenly found herself interested. Though Paris did not move, the hard rage that he'd pointed at her before was not held back at all when he glared at the officer before him.

It was oddly relieving to see it pointed somewhere besides at her.

But it was equally disturbing to know the same *had* been pointed at her--that she was in the same class of people that had earned it.

"Look," he said, "I want off your precious ship as much as you want me to go. So would you just give me my orders and let me go?"

Cavit held out the PADD. "Have a nice life."

Tom snatched it. "Go to hell."

Without looking back--not at her, not at Cavit--Tom Paris left, going so far as to shoulder past Captain Janeway as she made her own entrance.

He didn't even apologize. Just left.

He wasn't one of them, she suddenly realized. It popped into her brain as quickly as the other mess there had been swirling.

Paris wasn't one of them. So what did that make him?

B'Elanna suddenly, insanely--unwillingly, even--wanted to figure it out, what she'd just seen--everything that'd just been said to her. His words were turning in her head...

What she saw with Cavit surely wasn't a show. She could practically feel Paris' ire, smell the adrenaline that somehow hadn't been released on Cavit's petty, superior grin...or her own accusations and attacks.

She wondered how he'd held it in--a gift she wasn't much good at--how he lived inside such control, knowing, never saying...

She wondered suddenly if he hadn't lied to her after all...

Not so different after all...What's that going to mean for me?

The thought of ending up where he was, just there, taking a PADD with her travel orders from pompous pig like Cavit...because she *had* to, for her own good. It put a shot of panic in her for all that she didn't want to believe it...accept it...

She saw herself suddenly, debating herself fiercely, but hearing herself say "Yes" to a captain's offer, following them onto their ship to hunt down the people she'd once fought side by side with...

*I would *never* do that!*

Still, she honestly didn't know if she might or not. He was right. She hadn't been there...yet. But she was going...

All that time to think about...With nothing to do to avoid it...But I didn't do anything wrong! I did what I could for them, and it just happened to be against somebody else's law!

Cavit looked at the Captain. She saw in the corner of her eye the woman nod, slowly.

It's not my fault that Chakotay betrayed us! Though I disobeyed...betrayed him....Even so, I was the only one who had the guts to...to kill them all...

The captain turned her way.

...to risk getting them all killed... All of them could have been dead because of me...like those three that died under Paris...

B'Elanna's eyes turned straight to the table. Her lips parted.

Oh God, what have I done this time?

In her terrible stillness, she wanted to run, hard and fast--anywhere. Anywhere that would take her away from that place. In her mind, she could feel her bare, hot feet pounding into a dusty earth, propelling her away...far away, feeling free...

I betrayed them. Oh God, I betrayed them all...

Inside her, she could feel that sensation, racing in her heart, thrilling her blood, making her know she was...

"B'Elanna Torres?"

The feeling drained away.

B'Elanna blinked and looked at the red-haired woman. She had come all the way into the room, a few steps ahead of Cavit. He was all manners now.

B'Elanna could spit on him. As for the captain, she was a model of Starfleet neutrality. Typical official posture and power in a body that looked taller than it was.

"That's me."

Janeway nodded, gestured to a seat.

B'Elanna did not move.

Shrugging slightly, Janeway moved to the head of the table, pulled the chair, sat. Not even a hair on her deftly styled head was out of place. Her hands were clean, her expression unreadable.

Totally in control.

Bitch.

"Mr. Cavit, you may leave now."

"Captain?" He hadn't expected the order.

"Dismissed," she said plainly.

B'Elanna almost grinned when he grudgingly left the room.

Well, maybe she does have something going for her.

So, as a gesture of thanks, when Cavit was gone, she took a chair, even if she chose one near the middle of the table.

Janeway had been eyeing her since she'd come into the room. She examined her like particle matter, so detached yet so intrusive, as she folded her hands and waited with an oddly unnatural patience for B'Elanna to look at her.

All that time to think...how I got here, where I'm going--or not going...

That silence, which had begun their conversation, indeed was not easy to wait through.

...Hit me hard? Reality? That's already there, Paris. Trust me, I know what reality is...even if it's too late...again.

B'Elanna sighed shortly and finally gave the older woman her attention. She had a feeling the Starfleet officer would wait her out--and anything was better than the vicious circle in her overactive brain, still firing hard and fast with Paris' damned distraction.

So she asked. "Why do you want to talk to me?"

"Honestly?" she said, almost casually. "I only wanted to know why you disobeyed your captain, took the risk you did."

B'Elanna almost rolled her eyes at the captain's softened voice. *What is it about captains who use those damned quiet tones?* Her own experience with it made her know what was coming...

Guilt. Lousy guilt...and whether or not you have it coming to you, they'll make you feel it.

Though, not if she could help it.

"What do you need to know?" she said, smirking purposefully. "I tried to break us free. Chakotay busted me. What else matters?"

"I'd like to know if it could happen again." That time, she was almost casual.

B'Elanna snorted. "Why do you think I'll tell you that?" she asked, knowing in fact that it wouldn't. Nobody knew the systems as well as she did...used to know.

"I didn't think you would tell me outright," Janeway replied coolly. "I wanted to assess it for myself by talking to you. Though..." There, she met her eyes without blinking, another appraising stare, "...I was also curious why such a bright woman such as yourself would feel the need to go to such extremes."

B'Elanna could have laughed at the tactic--then wondered it herself, recalled again her crushed dreams, and running away, over and over, every time, only to end up... *How could I have ended up where I am?* Looking at the other woman again, her stomach tightened. *How did I get here?*

But she killed the recurring question before it played any further. The captain's cool eyes unnerved her enough, made her feel like a bug under the glass...

She couldn't let it...

"Don't play games with me, Captain Janeway."

Janeway almost grinned back. Almost. "All right," she conceded. "I'll tell you the truth: Whether or not you give me any answers, Ms. Torres, you will be spending the rest of your journey in the brig, under guard. When you are tried, you will be tried separately from your comrades. This was the request of Captain Chakotay, and for his help and dignity during this period, I have granted his request."

Don't let that woman know, don't you dare show her...Damn him! Damn him! Where the hell am I going to go? How the hell did I get to this point?

"So I go alone," she said, forcing her lack of care though a thick throat, leaning back into the chair and tipping her head belligerently. "Nothing new, there." She could feel her blood fading, her heart futilely trying to replenish it... *Damn you, Paris, damn all of you!* "Anything else?"

Janeway seemed to consider that. "I have a feeling you acted alone, that you disobeyed an order that most of the rest of the Maquis crew was willing to follow so to preserve a shorter sentence. What do you think?"

I was the one who...No! I wanted to free us all...But I was the one who did it...and he knew it...Paris knew...I betrayed them.

"That's right," B'Elanna replied emotionlessly.

I betrayed them.

"Do you think this will happen again?"

"You've figured out the rest, figure that out, too."

I deserve this...

Janeway nodded, slowly, obviously still controlling her own ire behind a firm tone and piercing stare. Yet by then, B'Elanna couldn't imagine why she had held back. "I don't think anybody else on

board," she said evenly, "if anything, wants to end up where you have..."

Where I have...

"...So, I think it's reasonable to assume I have nothing else to worry about on the Liberty. We've taken more precautions, of course, but I believe this was a one time incident."

"Then why did you waste your time asking me?"

The captain drew a long breath. "I told you that before," she said, carefully still checking her tone. "I was curious as to why you did what you did."

"It doesn't matter now. I did it. I did it alone, and it was my choice." B'Elanna shrugged and looked away.

Why did I do it? God, what was I--

"And your sentence will reflect that," Janeway replied, retrieving B'Elanna's attention.

Don't you dare let her see...

"How much longer?" B'Elanna asked before she could stop her tongue, and cursed herself for asking. She didn't turn away, though, stubbornly fought the urge...to run.

Just get up from that table and run.... just run...nowhere.

Averting her eyes with an enviable casualness, Janeway pretended to ignore the change in her complexion. Yet B'Elanna knew the captain had seen her paling, which made her feel her dread even more deeply than before. Janeway was already winning and they both knew it.

"I'm not the judge advocate general, Ms. Torres," the captain told her. "What they decide will be according to the evidence of all your actions. It varies. But your sentence will be longer than the others, in light of today's incident and your unwillingness to help us on your former ship."

Former...I betrayed them.

B'Elanna didn't bother wondering about that again. Obviously, the woman wasn't going to hazard a guess, though she probably could--and she wasn't going to ask. The realization still sinking in, her mind instantly diverted to another question that had loomed in her brain since she found out...

"What about Paris? How much is his help going to buy him?"

Janeway blinked her surprise at the question, as well as the switch in the topic.

*Damn, I just gave that away, too! What's the *matter* with me? But B'Elanna quickly remembered that she'd seen him coming out of the room when she came in. She could easily figure that they'd spoken. Just keep it together, make it seem a good question... Think, think....Don't let her see...*

With practiced patience, Janeway's tone was unaffected, even as she answered the question. "His information was limited, but he was willing to cooperate. I haven't ignored that. He gets a good word at his parole hearing for it."

B'Elanna snorted derisively. It wasn't a pardon as it had been believed, but the thought that he'd

been that desperate and willing to sell them out did nothing to warm her, either. "Nothing like divining from traitors to get what you want," she sneered.

"You're no less a traitor than he is," the older woman replied.

"Paris is nothing like us!" B'Elanna snapped back. "He betrayed both your people and mine: He might have worked for the Maquis, but he sold us out when he gave himself up to you--and then jumped at the first chance to sell us out again so he could cut himself a break. Don't you dare compare him to me!"

Suddenly, Janeway seemed both confused and hardened by that reply, seeming to think on how to answer her change of mood. Their conversation had lasted long enough for B'Elanna to gauge that much out in her.

*Answer *that* and see how much I'll cooperate,* B'Elanna grinned to herself.

But the Starfleet captain said, "I'm sorry, but I don't know what you're referring to. Mr. Paris didn't give himself up."

B'Elanna's heart thumped. "What?"

"He never surrendered to *Starfleet*, if that's what you're talking about," she said, stating it as if it were any truth. "He did everything he could to evade capture, leading them as far as the Narosian sector before he was finally caught and arrested."

Then, the captain shrugged.

B'Elanna felt herself still inside. She had no reply.

It had to be a trick. It had to be a lie. It was a game--they were playing a game to manipulate her. It had to be a trick.

If he isn't on their side... We'd been told... Her mind tried suddenly to replay that day, many months ago. But she couldn't, not completely. It'd been foggy, she'd been knocked unconscious during the fight that sent Paris on his first mission--a rescue mission she was told he'd insisted on doing, was so confident he could pull off. Once she was finally revived, they were so busy, she never did piece together...

How could another Maquis ship have known to come for us if Paris hadn't done what Chakotay said he'd sent him to do? Rodrigo wouldn't have put his crew's necks on the block if they hadn't been told we were there...

She scowled, pounded her memory, slim as it was, for some way to disprove it.

But she couldn't, and she knew the captain there didn't need to lie to her. She had what she wanted.

*Why would they *want* to turn me against the Maquis? They've already got Chakotay working for them, and he's the one that knows everything...*

"Though I do wonder," the captain added, "when you obviously don't care for Mr. Paris, why you're so concerned about what will happen to him."

B'Elanna forced herself to shrug it off. "After what he did, I was wondering how long I'd get in comparison."

Janeway's mouth closed; her brow raised slightly.

Well, not that convincing her mattered. Nothing I say would.

B'Elanna turned her stare away. "Is that all, Captain Janeway?"

Silence, and B'Elanna considered the line of the bulkhead before her, damned if she would let it continue. She'd lost that one, lost badly.

Lost that whole day, her life as she knew it. The Maquis--her home, her crew, her so-called family--all too willing to turn away and look busy when Chakotay banished her--was gone. She lost her subsequent interrogation...She even lost an enemy...

*I've lost everything...*I* lost it...*

There was too much, too much and too confusing and she knew she was already giving away too much as it was.

It'll hit me hard...when I realize what I've done can never be corrected? That I can never go back? Never...and go on to...nothing.

At the same time, she wondered why she even cared.

Damnit, he can't be right about this... He can't...

Yet she knew, deep down, he probably was. *He has no reason to lie now, either...He's been there...already realizes...*

Her heart felt like a stone in her chest.

Finally, the captain said, "Yes."

The question was on his face when she entered the Maquis ship through the junction, though he didn't voice it.

Janeway's eyes were ones of experience. Waving away the guards that had waited with him for her, she gestured for them to begin their walk back to the engine room. "She's being escorted to the brig," she told him.

Chakotay nodded, not sorry to hear it, though sorry it'd had to be like that for his engineer. "It'll be the best thing, in the end."

"You think so?"

He nodded. "As long as B'Elanna believes she's a part of the Maquis, she'll never let go of it. As long as she thinks she belongs, she'll hold on. She needed us as much as we needed her. But now... Now, she's only a danger to us all--even herself."

Janeway's brows rose, even while she observed, "She is young."

"She's had a lot of trouble," Chakotay said. "She never said, really, about what. But I could tell she had a lot more going against her than her trouble at the Academy."

He was saying a lot more than he'd meant to--she knew it by the troubled grimace that crossed him. In spite of that, he added, "In retrospect, Captain, I should have never enlisted her. She didn't deserve any more...darkness, in her life, when all she wanted was something better, a place to belong, a life. I needed crew like her, though. She was one of my best people." He took a breath. "But I've got the rest of my people to think about, not just what she's up to--even if it's my fault for making her think like a Maquis to the end."

Janeway only nodded. She didn't want to seem too eager to agree.

"Maybe she didn't believe me when I told her I'd kick her off the ship if she tried anything," he added in afterthought. "That's like her--stubborn... In the end, this'll be better for her." He looked at her. "At least I want to believe that."

Janeway paused as he did, standing face to face in the filthy, damaged corridor, half lit by inferior emergency illumination. There, she placed her hand on his arm, meeting his eyes. "I think you did what you had to do," she said quietly.

The touch, the look, was strangely welcome.

But he only nodded his thanks.

He had spent the last hour making sure his own people were still in line. They were. Even Seska didn't dare cross him at that point, seeing the example he'd made of his engineer, his friend, that troubled woman he'd brought in, depended on. Everyone on his crew knew by then he meant business.

Meanwhile, he knew he could go to prison knowing he'd done everything he could for them all.

He'd sold out his pride to ensure their lives, buried his anger to keep them alive. He exiled their friend. He gave up his own personal mission.

Though he felt no regrets, he hated a part of himself for it.

B'Elanna was right. Deep down, he didn't want to lose, to give up his fight. Tired as he was, beaten as they had been, he'd wanted to persevere. But loss was relative, and sometimes fruitful once the injury was allowed to heal, like clipping back a plant to help it to grow.

Nothing would grow if they all got themselves killed, and above all other things, he did want to survive. He *had* to survive, since he had the choice to and few others--to take care of his crew, accept the responsibility for his actions, move on. In addition, he was one of the last left of his people. Getting himself killed would do no justice to them, either.

Perhaps that's what the souls of his dead people were trying to tell him. How could he know, after all, what waited at the end of that more sensible yet humbling path?

He really did want to know. At that point, he needed to.

So, he would follow it.

If she could have read his mind, Janeway would have understood that feeling better than the Maquis captain might have known.

She thought she'd needed Tom Paris. As much as she did not care for or pity the man, however, bringing him aboard her ship had ultimately not been a good idea. Not for the uselessness of his information (he'd been right, the Maquis had indeed abandoned those camps and he wouldn't do them much good), but for the ritual humiliation she had unwittingly subjected him to. At first, he didn't seem to care if he suffered.

Maybe he needed a bit of bringing down, she'd thought at first, watching his wise-eyed stares back at her own crew when they were too rude to be more subtle; his sardonic, pointed comments, intermittently laced with a self depreciation that just begged for attention.

She clearly recalled grinding her teeth every time she heard him open his mouth.

But then she noticed Harry Kim's honest attempts to be a friend to the man, and Stadi's growing concern. Somehow, that was all that was needed to make a small difference to the former pilot.

On a couple trips to the mess hall, she saw how quiet Paris was in their presence, holed back, trying, grinning from time to time, sincerely thanking but otherwise...quiet. Then she saw how the others glanced askance at him before whispering. Somehow, Paris felt it, closed his eyes or averted them to whatever meal he wasn't eating.

She was almost relieved when Paris replicated himself some civilian clothes. She had seen his discomfort with the Starfleet issue singlet, and only a couple days into their mission, it even bothered *her*.

Thankfully, it bothered him more. Many things did, and more than he seemed to admit to, let people see.

She knew what family he came from. It sounded right.

He was a criminal, but he was yet a human being, and he likely felt far more deeply than he would dare show any of them. Despite where he got the trait, it also revealed at least a desire for dignity, a thoughtfulness and intelligence that she had but glimpsed at Auckland when she offered him her deal.

She had been all too ready to be judge and jury to it then. His file said plenty, and his outward attitude confirmed it. She didn't have the time to analyze it.

Two weeks later, she could see the hateful pattern and all his defenses, and she wondered honestly if she was just as guilty for giving him a reason to wear that facade.

He was paying for his crimes. He deserved what he got--and on that point she hadn't changed her mind. Yet now, even that concerned her.

How many in the system had felt that way and more persistently? Who refused to look beyond that facade that he held so well? How many had passed him off because of his lineage and their unnatural but understandable expectations? Being a Paris was probably an incredible responsibility--one that he ultimately couldn't uphold. Had it been fair, in truth, to expect it?

What would the young man have to do to redeem himself--if but for himself?

She couldn't imagine what Tom Paris thought about that.

She could certainly understand why Chakotay regretted enlisting a young, talented yet troubled engineer. Janeway had done the same to the pilot, though she regretted it for different reasons.

Only then, with what they were doing now: Would they ever overcome their negative experiences and be bettered by it? Would any of it benefit them someday?

Her good word to the parole board, in Paris' hand and ready for their perusal: Would it be enough for him? Like Torres, he looked to need more than freedom to move beyond what he'd gotten himself into.

Unfortunately, she knew she didn't have the time to babysit his life or hold his hand. Soon, Paris would leave her ship and get on with his life. He would ultimately have to take those next steps on his own...

The captains crossed into engineering, shared another glance.

Without words, they knew each other well.

Arrogant, self-centered, coward, loser, disloyal, desperate...

Tom felt his heart turning repeatedly when it and everything else she'd pointed out spun in his already overwrought conscience.

Self-pitying, self-destructive, scared...

For some reason, he looked at his hand when he tapped for the turbolift. The skin was smooth and fair, the other side slightly callused by his more recent work...

All that time at Auckland, forced to keep to himself in a place where all eyes were on him, negating his want to talk, if but uneasily--open that mouth that'd gotten him in so much trouble.

*What the hell *do* I believe in? What's left for me when nobody bothers to see I really want to know? What's left for me in a life where everything I actually cared about died or was taken away? ...Nothing.*

He knew he had a few things going for him. He wasn't unpleasant to look at, had a body that worked well, he had intelligence, wit...

What do I believe in? What can I be loyal to when I believe in nothing...not even myself?

The lift doors opened.

He thought of the routine: Waking, eating, working, eating, returning to his bunk for a night of sleep

disturbed more often by his restlessness. Waking again, so to speak.

If only he could stop thinking so damned much.

Ironically, he was almost afraid to leave prison. In a way, it had also protected him, kept him from having to face a lot of the uncertainty that came with being freed. But he knew he would leave. He had to. He'd wanted to so much some days that he was willing to make *any* deal to get out of there. He just knew it would just reopen a totally different can of problems.

He wished he could just stop thinking.

The lift doors closed....

She honestly thought she could handle it, could push the rest aside at least as far as the forcefield that would soon enclose her, leaving her alone, isolated.

The security guard escorting her through the clean, new corridors would be her last company for a long time, if Paris' sentence was any indication.

*I used to *want* to be alone.*

But that was when she'd believed she could ignore herself, hole herself away and be bitter, be angry, tell the world to screw off so she could do what she needed to. She stayed busy to keep herself thinking on her work, on warp coils and isolinear units, plasma injectors and shield components...

She couldn't anymore.

In prison, she would have nothing but...herself.

From the moment she numbly left the briefing room, she increasingly felt her circling thoughts, her uncertainty, her shameful despair, everything she'd previously been successful in pushing aside. It crawled over her skin like maggots eating at her strength and resolve.

*I betrayed them... I was the selfish one... How many times had I convinced myself I was fighting for the Maquis? --No, I *was* fighting for them! I believed in it, what I knew was happening there... I fought...when I was really fighting...*

...But he couldn't stop thinking. That was impossible. Even in sleep, he couldn't stop his conscience.

Conscience. That's the only thing that survived through it all, that I've ever eventually been loyal to... Well, when it got too hard to deal with the opposite...

He'd failed them, all of them--and mostly himself. Over and over, he'd taken what he thought was the easier way out, and got deeper and deeper into the pit he'd belatedly realized he was in, clawing at the way out while the walls fell around him...

Fighting to stay ahead of it all, to stay in control... Now I have neither.

She couldn't kill her shivering, and couldn't blame it on the temperature of the Starfleet ship. She couldn't calm her breath, nor blame that on anything either.

Alone, left to think about it, day after day...

She couldn't feel herself running anymore, much as she willed that distraction into her mind. Rather, she felt the dead weight of a future filled with a blank, empty cell and the purposelessness that she would have to deal with. Waiting, inept and forgotten by a world that barely knew her in the first place; waiting for...nothing.

Paris' words, "It's going to hit your hard, Torres," stabbed her again and again. She desperately wished she'd had the time and the mind to ask him what 'it' was, so at least she could be prepared for it. Or had he said it? That uncertainty swirled through her without answer.

She wished frantically that she had something--anything--to work on, to *do*. Anything but knowing... She had nothing and nobody left, and she had no one to blame but herself.

She would be damned if she would cry. She would be damned if she'd give away anymore...

...He'd never acted from his heart, but from his fear, from desperation.

If only that hand, so smooth and strong, given to him by such respectable bloodlines, had pushed a different button, been quicker to react. If only that mouth had said another thing instead of what it had. If only he'd done a hundred different things than what he did. If only he hadn't been so weak and stupid.

He'd always feared he really was the coward he thought he was. He'd always feared he was as weak and uncommitted as he'd been accused of being.

I was so wrapped up in getting his approval that I... What was I thinking? Why did I make that so important? What did it matter to me what the hell he thought? What was it about him that forced me to give my soul to making him happy for me?

He could certainly see where that had taken him. Seeing the ease of being evasive, never deciding, never taking his own initiative, he stuck to it, fighting nothing while slipping deeper and deeper...into the pit.

He remembered times where he'd dreamed of screaming out, vindicating all his demons in an animal yell, taking it all out on the air. How good it would feel to fill his lungs and just scream, feel that pressure in his lungs and his gut, slowly releasing until he needed air again. What a release that would be--though useless in the end, to release that energy...

He'd had to be so quiet so long, had to be clever, had to be subtle, had to wear that mask of control or lechery or cynicism, anything to keep himself safe, keep them away. It had been there so long he forgot what it was like to be free of it.

Then he wondered if he'd ever had that freedom, and the desire was just that.

All the while, he'd dreamt of letting it all go, and to hell with the consequences. He would let them all see the hurt, the fear, the frustration--everything he'd held to himself, the rage he felt because of them and himself.

But he couldn't...

...To cry.

She knew what a release it was, its use, even its uselessness in the end. She remembered how it felt good to exorcise that energy, that tension, the pain and worry. It was embarrassing, frowned upon,

but it felt so good to simply let go of all the control she'd always felt a need to maintain. Since she was a girl, she had been told it was a thing of weakness.

It didn't solve anything, those wails, and those tears. But she remembered how it had, when she was a child, helped her sleep--truly sleep. It would exhaust her, the sobs, the pity bathing her, purifying her pain and fear, vindicating her suffering.

She remembered the swelling feeling that overtook her when she would begin, felt it in her chest and throat like an aching tooth she couldn't nudge. Then, finally letting that dam burst, reliving the pressure on the wall that held it...

To cry, drain the nerves that felt like they would pop for the strain they were under--just cry and sleep it away. Escape it all by beating a pillow and heaving for breath. Just let it go, and feel the waves of her sobs coming over and over again...

...He chose any deck--he forgot which one, and didn't care. He just needed to walk. Walk and somehow clear his head, still hurting from that morning. He would never rest the way it felt then--as if he could sleep before, or had without physically working himself to near collapse, or through outside measures.

He could not remember when he truly slept, without the help of synthehol or sex. Rather, he missed the natural tiredness that met the end of a busy day, where one relaxed a while, took dinner, a book or conversation, then simply retired for the night.

He missed the days when he wasn't plagued with the guilt of his actions, the guilt of his inactions; the shame of his self-inflicted impotence in a life he'd rarely felt was his to live anyway.

That was so long ago.

The long corridors, gently curving, passed around him; his thoughtful steps on the floor made no sound. So silent was his trip he could almost hear his heart beating...

...But she couldn't.

Her steps on the soft deck no longer held a pattern, but wandered as she did in her mind, and in her memory. Feet that dreamt of running now found the floor merely one after the other. Above, she watched the wall panels pass, one by one.

She knew she couldn't, and hadn't since she was that frightened, confused child, wondering where her father had gone, why he hadn't said goodbye, how he hated her so much that he simply went away. She hadn't since she'd felt so alone with those other children who didn't understand her, wouldn't know her...But how she had wanted, in her child's heart, for them to, for them to accept her, to not shun her.

She still didn't try, but absorbed the hurt, the insult, and let it go into her pillow, curled up and sobbing...

Her heart wanted it, but her mind would not permit such disgrace.

She felt as though she were going to crumble sometimes for the ongoing offensives inside her, the apprehension and the desire, the anger and the need, never reaching any resolution....

...His ears thrummed with his rushing blood, and he had to think to slow down. He was walking so

quickly that he had left one deck, found a turbolift, then another deck, and then another.

What am I loyal to? What do I believe in? What is out there for me but the rest of a life not worth living? Being prey to anyone and everything that does have a reason to keep trying, pushing on, growing, that has a purpose...

Without even knowing them, he was jealous of them, wanted what they had, wanted so much to live their life, those people without care but for their daily life, unbothered, uninterrupted by the plague of memory.

There were people like that. He'd known them once, was once one of them--or at least he'd had the beginnings of such a life. He wished he could be that again, or even anyone beside himself, if only for a while, just so he could rest...

What do I want?

He tried desperately to remember a time when he didn't feel so weighted, when he actually felt free enough to act as he felt right to, to do so without some kind of backlash or suspicion. It wasn't then, in the Academy. The shadows around him, even in the happiest times, had followed him there. It would have to have been before...but when?

*When did I ever know what *I* wanted?...*

...Just cry it out, go to sleep...She could feel so clearly again her limbs grow flaccid, her swollen eyes close, and that blissful wash of exhaustion as she finally sobbed herself into oblivion.

It had been so long since she had allowed herself that release.

If she could again...

He wondered if he could ever actually show the strength of character to try, just one more time, and stick up for it.

It had been a long time since he'd tried to win, not because he had no other option but for his own good, to make himself happy.

Or had he ever?

...Especially then, as she walked a few steps ahead of the security officer, glad he could not see her face, careful not to show too much in case anyone else came up that way.

She'd given enough away already, let that Starfleet captain see into her--just what she'd wanted to do when she called her up there, made her wait...think. She wasn't about to give them any more satisfaction.

But they'd already gotten it. She'd practically given it to them.

Thinking like that, she knew that it had indeed gotten to her. She knew she was lost, unsure, incomplete, and being forced into yet another stage of her life where she had no preparation, no one there to support her...and little reward to follow.

She might as well have never left Kessik. For the first time, she wished she hadn't...given up.

...But wanting and doing were two different things.

He wanted for that strength, that ability to just let go, to walk away with his head held high knowing he'd done the right thing.

But they'd curse him anyway. The last time he acted for others, they hated him for it....Yet, they were just too primed, because of his own stupid pride and fear, to misjudge him. He'd done it to himself--again.

He knew deep down, he would feel the shame of his many mistakes, no matter how hard he tried to think it was somebody else's fault.

He would always want to redeem himself, no matter how much he tried to convince himself it was in the past...

...But she'd gotten too good at it, at moving away, always moving, doing, walking away while convincing herself she was merely moving forward. Now, that pride and determination, what was left of it, was starting to eat at her like an acid in her spirit.

She didn't know what to think anymore.

None of her methods for pushing it away, avoiding it, passing the blame, yelling at it--none of it was effective then as she rounded another corner to the guard's direction.

The walls passed her in a blur, more and more slowly, en route to her imprisonment.

A wave of dread passed over her. So much time.

No work, nothing. Just me and my thoughts, months and months on end...I've had it only ten minutes... Months...years...

She would go alone to those cells, a forcefield closing behind her and having nothing there to do but circle them, trying for distraction but memorizing the walls, knowing it was futile, trying anyway.

*I have to deal with this. *I* have to deal with this. I have to be alone with...myself. All of what put me there, my father, my mother, my failures--*my* failures, what *I* couldn't do--what I *did* do, stupidly, expecting the impossible of everyone and myself...*

She swallowed against the tightening in her chest, breathed against her swelling throat.

I couldn't cope. I couldn't accept. I blamed her, being Klingon; I blamed him, freeing himself; I blamed myself, over and over, and all of them for judging me... I betrayed them all, betrayed myself... I brought this onto myself...lost everything, my family, my work, my pride, my purpose... I betrayed it all...and lost it.

Her chest shuddered...and her mind darted to deflect it. *No! Don't! Not now!*

She sucked a few silent breaths, having never felt the blind, white fear that suddenly enveloped her.

The walls passed around her. She could hear them closing space behind her.

She forced herself to go on. She was made of more mettle than what she was feeling and she knew it. She had more strength...

Her heart pounded wildly. Her limbs shook.

Strength I blamed on everything wrong with me, and everyone who went against me, even when they were right. All the stupid pride and anger, all the blame and hate...of myself.

Her throat thickened, her palms were cold and wet, her stomach turned.

I betrayed them all, and now I'm going to feel it...It's going to hit...

It was impossible for to feel like that. She hadn't since...

She exhaled, shook her head, sucked a breath.

Don't you...! She slowed again.

*No! Don't let them win! Don't let...What the hell is the *matter* with me?*

A hand touched her arm--

She sprung away, spun and backed up against the opposite wall.

"Get away from me!" she snapped, glaring at the guard through the tears that had treacherously filled her black eyes.

The man was instantly cautious. "Please, ma'am, just this way," as he gestured to the corridor.

One hand on his phaser in the holster, he reached out to her--carefully.

"Don't touch me," she snarled and felt the water drip over her cheeks even as she damned it--damned him for seeing it, damned herself her weakness and fear and longing and failure, damned all her betrayals, seeping forward...

"Just leave me alone!"

He stepped forward more slowly, and his firm yet quiet words did not even reach her. "Ma'am, I have my orders."

I won't go! I can't go!

She started back, poised to run.

He almost had her. He was very close...

She bolted.

He grabbed her arm--she flailed back at him. She missed.

"Let GO!" she screamed, trying to kick, trying to do anything to get away. Finally, she squirmed and ducked, slipped out of his strong grip.

She ran. Free--

--Only five steps before she felt his weight hit her back, tripping her forward where she hit the deck with a thud. Her wind knocked out of her, she dragged for breath, gasped and tried to raise herself.

"NO!"

She couldn't!

She scrambled, clawing at the carpet, but he'd covered her, was heavier than her. He was smothering her--

Oh God, no! Don't let them! Don't give them...

His hands grabbed her wrists--

"Let me go! Please, just--"

"If you don't calm down, I'll have to call for a transport to the brig," he warned in a hard breath.

His knee on her back, he had pinned her arms, pulled them back and up her spine, even as she kicked and thrashed beneath him.

Trapped.

"No! God, oh God, please! Just let me go!" she cried out, feeling her blood pounding, bursting, her face become wet with hot streaks of water. She felt dizzy, sick, she shook her head confusedly...

*What the hell's *happening* to me?*

Her heart was beating against the floor.

She couldn't breathe.

Why is this happening to me? she screamed inside herself, but the anxiety was flooding through her in a way she never knew...desperate--trapped--unable--

"I'll go--I will! I'll GO! Just let me go!" She choked and threw her head down, futilely sucking the sobs she shook her chest--smashing them to no effect.

They just kept coming--she couldn't stop it. Crying--crying hard...

"I'll go! Oh God, PLEASE!" she wailed, trying to struggle to no avail. *Oh God, I'm dead, I'm dead, I'm dead, I'm dead...Damn them! *Damn* them!*

She couldn't stop--

"I'll go with you! I'll go with you! Just--*please stop!*"

"Get off of her, Rollins!"

The weight disappeared, yanked up from her heaving ribs.

She heard the guard lurch and a shuffle of steps, then, "She's had enough!"

Paris!

She drug a breath so she could push herself to turn over, still shuddering with her sobs as her eyes turned up to the scene.

Tom Paris was in the face of the security officer, and had put himself between Rollins and her. He was standing so high above her, her eyes hurt to try and see his face. His fist was clenched, his back arrow straight. Rollins was glaring at him, though seeming a little confused at what to do. Paris wasn't posing a threat, but was purposefully blocking him.

"Can't you see she's upset? Give her a chance to calm down."

"Paris, I have my orders to take this prisoner to the brig."

"Did your orders include pinning her to the ground and nearly breaking her arms?" Paris demanded. "She might be Maquis, but she's still a person. She said she'd go with you, so lay off her!"

B'Elanna didn't speak--she couldn't have very well if she tried--but both her relief and embarrassment began quickly to add to the unexpected terror that had come over her...

What happened? she blinked distractedly as Rollins took a step forward. But she knew: She panicked. She gave in.

Just like Paris said, it would hit her--

Paris shoved the officer back. "Leave her alone!"

Rollins pulled his phaser from his holster and Tom deftly smacked it away. It hit the wall and bounced to the floor uselessly out of their reach.

"You're only going to earn more trouble than you've already got, Paris," Rollins told him.

"I'm not looking for trouble," Tom responded, "but I'm not going to let you drag her off like that. She doesn't deserve it."

"She attempted to escape."

"She said she'd go with you--and I believe her. Let her calm down."

The guard moved, Paris pushed him sharply back again, stepping forward defiantly.

"I'm not letting you hurt her again." His intent was clear.

B'Elanna felt the muscles in her shoulders cramp as she pushed herself up to her knees, still trying to control her thick, trembling breaths, the dizzy waves that came with it.

It didn't stop, much as she willed it.

The tiredness had begun to find her, however...blessed tiredness...with bad timing. As usual.

"Rollins to security, I need support on deck nine, section five. --Mister Paris, please move and let me take this woman--"

"Not until I know she's all right," Tom insisted.

He didn't budge.

Rollins moved anyway, forcing himself past, and Tom yanked him back around. Rollins grabbed his

wrist, and Tom reacted by bringing his fist swiftly up and into the other man's sternum--he fainted as Rollins came back, though not quickly enough to avoid a blow in his side. But then he threw an uppercut into his jaw. Rollins spun into it, then spun around.

The man was mad--and poised himself to make another go. "What are you trying to prove, Par--"

"*Prove!*" Paris shot back, suddenly afire with the implication. "You think I need to *prove* something too? Who the hell *else* wants to get on my back?"

Rollins' eyes widened, a little taken back by the other man's sudden turn. He held his hand out in a gesture, while not giving up his position. "I'm just saying you don't have any place in thi--"

With a yell of pure frustration, Tom grabbed him by the collar and tossed him across into the other bulkhead. Rollins, stunned a moment, moved forward and grabbed him by the collar of his shirt, turning and throwing him back against the same wall.

"Par--"

"Damnit!" Tom rasped and swung the guard around again, slamming him with all his strength--

"You won't--"

He let out a primal yell, his face set with a rage--beyond rage. It was....

"I've got nothing *left* to prove, you son of a bitch!"

Desperation.

"Nothing!"

"Paris!"

Before Rollins could move again, Tom grabbed him by the tunic and slammed him with all his strength against the wall, and again, crying out, "I've got nothing, you son of a bitch!"

The officer hit the panels with a thud, then again...

"*Nothing!*"

...and again.

She watched in numb silence.

What he meant by nothing, she had no... No, she did know. She did.

Sadly, she knew all too well. Or would.

The officer's head lulled. Tom suddenly stopped. Froze.

Desperation...even if he had nothing left...or because...he wished he did.

Without warning, Tom released him.

He so desperately wished he did.

The man fell to the floor.

His own arms fell to his side.

Tom slumped as his shoulders heaved, let his breath go, drug another, and another.

Rollins did not move.

Standing in the middle of the corridor, heaving for breath, Tom looked over his damage. He gasped, choked, for air. His hands shook convulsively.

"Oh my god," he croaked.

Then he looked down to her, to her wet, swollen eyes and open mouth.

Silent. Shocked.

"I'm sorry." Even his tone trembled, cracked with the weight of what he'd done.

B'Elanna was gaping, and she didn't bother to hide it. She realized she did not know the man above her. Tears sat unshed in his blank blue eyes, his face was blotched with a fury just passing, and his voice... It was like the world had just come down around him.

He was sorry.... *For what?*

B'Elanna shuddered a breath. "Security's coming," she whispered, a little hoarse.

He nodded. Then his stare darted, lit with a thought. "Do you want to get out of here?"

She started at the very question. "What?"

"I mean it," he said, suddenly anxious. "There's nothing left for me--there wasn't before and there's less now. I can help you."

He was dead serious.

Her mind instantly began working again. A flurry of hope found her... "How can we get off the ship?"

"I don't know--get a shuttle? If you want to go, we'll find a way down and I'll take you. But you'd better decide quickly."

"Break out of the shuttle bay, you mean?"

"It'd be the only way."

"We'd be crazy."

"Won't be the first time for either of us." He moved down to his knee and almost took her arm, then decided against it, settled for looking her in the eyes. "Look, I got us into this part of it, and I'm sorry. I'll take the blame for everything--"

"But you--"

"Please, B'Elanna. I didn't want to see you go in there like I had. I couldn't watch that happen to you."

She could see his sincerity, in his eyes misting anew with his words, in his voice, ragged with emotion...

He did give a damn after all. He did feel. He was desperate, nervous and all but crying, but he wanted to do the right thing, whatever that was... He wanted to free them...

Damn right, she wanted to go with him. Trouble was...

"We'll never get away," she concluded, sore in her own resignation. "I want to go, but we can't."

"I'm telling you the truth--"

"Tom..." She shook her head sadly. "I know you are... You'd better go before they get down here. You're in it enough already."

His hand reached out and covered hers, flat on the carpet. "I can't let you take the blame," he told her. "Besides, once Rollins gets up, he'll know who did what."

She said nothing, but pressed up on his fingers with her knuckles. Instantly, he moved his hand, but she turned her palm up to take it. He was trembling, even more than she was at that point. She swallowed, squeezed his fingers gently.

"I was wrong about you," she stated, plain but true.

"Not as wrong as you think," he said with a small, guilty grin. "But I guess that's why we're in it, right? Try to get it right next time?"

Against her better judgment, she smiled. "The way we act, I think that's going to take a *long* time, Paris."

Unexpectedly, he laughed.

He felt it. Oddly, unthinkingly, he did manage to laugh at her quip and at himself, releasing the knots in his back with an ease he'd not felt in a long time. Maybe he did a little more than he should have.

But that didn't matter. He actually laughed, and she did too, a little. Meeting her gaze, he thanked her with a blink.

Returning it, she likewise blinked away the last of the water from her eyes. Her hand relaxed around his, sighing out the last of...

She blinked quickly, then put her fingers to his mouth to silence him as she cocked her head. She pulled her hand away and met his eyes again. "Please just go along with it," she whispered, "--for me."

"What--?" But she had already scrambled away and to the phaser, then got to her feet. He turned in his crouch to see her pointing the weapon right at him.

"Get up, you p'tahk!" she ordered.

"B'Elanna, what--"

"Get up! NOW!"

Tom's shocked stare suddenly went past her to the security contingent coming from behind her, their weapons drawn and aiming straight at her.

"Drop the weapon." It was Tuvok.

Her mask fully restored, that time benefited by her reddened eyes and paled skin, B'Elanna turned to see three guards, Tuvok included, ready to disable her. Playing a look back to Tom, then to Rollins and back to the three men, she growled loudly and threw the phaser away, sharply turning her back to them.

Tom stood.

B'Elanna's eyes locked onto his. "Please--go," she mouthed, silent as they took her arms from behind.

Tuvok called for an emergency beam out for Rollins.

Tom couldn't move.

Go? Where?

Rollins dematerialized from the deck.

They gave her a nudge forward, still holding her tightly. She gave a bit of resistance, but otherwise passed him without much show. She even slumped a little for effect. They could not see her face.

Her eyes met Tom's one more time, wide but sure.

Tom felt his chest constrict.

Go where? On the shuttle? Or just try to make them think she'd done it? She knows that'd be impossible. Did she actually... She's going to go through with it... She's going in...just like I did.

Slowly exhaling, he felt his blood drain.

"Mr. Paris."

He looked at Tuvok.

"I recommend you return to quarters and remain there until I have been able to question you about this incident."

"I will..." Tom's eyes turned down the corridor. Torres' small frame, flanked by the larger officers, moved around the bend. He saw her breath catch, her head drop shortly.

He was trembling again, his throat closed. He swallowed against both.

"But I'd like to talk to Captain Janeway, too, if possible," he told the Vulcan. "I think...I need to, Lieutenant."

"I will give the Captain your request," he replied, giving him a cursory examination with his dark,

blank eyes. "Please return to your quarters, Mr. Paris."

Nodding again, Tom turned away.

She'd taken the fall, albeit temporarily, for him.

Yet she hadn't realized that in trying to save him, by sticking up for him, giving him a chance, she'd left him with even less to feel proud of. She hadn't done it for herself; that was certain. It truly was selfless...

After I took out my shit on Rollins. Damn!

He punched the button for the lift, numb yet again but for the need to shake his head, turn his eyes down to his trembling hand, never quite so perfect for what they had done...again.

*But I had.... I really did... I really didn't want her to hurt, couldn't stand to see her like that, crying... B'Elanna--crying, panicked, unable to hold it up anymore. Have I been *there* before, and I couldn't...but... Damn, I didn't want to take it out on him! Damn, damn!*

Tom grit his teeth, blew his breath in frustration, with himself, with it all.

The lift doors just couldn't open quickly enough.

*I guess I never *will* get it right... Even if she needed help, as usual, I took it too far.*

She took at least the initial blame for it, so he wouldn't have to go to the brig with her, to go through it all over again.

She stuck up for him.

Now it was his turn.

He knew that was the best and only thing he could do--whatever might come of it, no good word from Janeway, more time at Auckland, having the pleasure, perhaps, of joining B'Elanna Torres in the next cell. But at that point, it didn't even matter anymore.

At least he'd know in his heart...

The lift doors opened.

"Deck four."

With a heavy sigh of relief, Kathryn Janeway fell into her new favorite chair and looked out at the plasma streams around them. It'd been an eventful week, but with everything settled, they were set to finish up the last of the repairs and leave, finally, for home.

She'd gotten it done, she knew at last. She had Tuvok back, she had the Maquis in line with the help of their own captain. She did mean to make sure Starfleet was aware of Chakotay's full cooperation. That along with enough information on the Badlands to last Starfleet a long while would be more than enough to satisfy them.

She knew she would have to leave Earth again soon, but she did plan to see Mark, to spend time with Molly, full of puppies (she grinned to herself and peered over at their picture), to drop in with her mother for a visit. She'd known before she left that she wanted a vacation. She hoped they would allow her a small respite at least.

After the past week alone, she knew she needed it more than ever.

So much for avoiding trouble.

Such a thing was common for her, a part of her line of work. But looking back on it left her mouth turned up with introspection, wondering if she'd done the right thing.

In three visits to each of her two Voyager-bound prisoners, she had made some heavy decisions. Very likely, she would never know if her judgment had indeed been sound.

Janeway took a slow, pensive sip of her coffee as she watched a plasma stream fly up from a point of unknown origin, blazing and swirling, then disappearing from whence it came...

When she came into the brig the first time, Janeway thought the woman in the cell looked more like a frightened child than a half-Klingon rebel. Her full mouth slightly agape, eyes wide, staring up to her, the engineer hadn't even tried to put up the mask of bitter indifference that had been plastered to her facade earlier that day.

Meanwhile, Janeway was more in the mood to tear the younger woman to pieces for what happened to her officer.

"I'm sorry," the Maquis told her, quiet yet sincere. "It was my fault. I panicked..." There, she stopped, seemingly at a loss for words as her mind went elsewhere.

"Sorry doesn't cut it, Ms. Torres," the captain said icily. "Just what were you thinking, trying to escape?"

"I knew I couldn't. I just... I wasn't thinking like I usually do."

Torres sighed, shook her head. Shed of her vest and curled up in the corner of the bunk, she was terribly still. Her hands were held tightly together, pulling her knees to her chest. She looked tiny as

her face still tried to piece out words that worked, a child trying to explain things they did not have the vocabulary to express.

"I've never been like that, felt so scared," she whispered, then looked up again. "I don't get like *that*, Captain--never. I didn't know how to control it, getting out of control like that. But...I couldn't stop it, and when he grabbed me and pushed me down, I... I'm sorry."

"You're *sorry*?" Janeway queried incredulously. "Mr. Rollins is undergoing treatment for a serious concussion due to your...fear? Because you got *scared*?" She came up close to the forcefield, glaring down into the young, troubled woman's eyes. "Well, you listen to me: You think Captain Chakotay came down on you, you've got a few things to learn about how I feel about *my own* crew. Once Starfleet gets through with you, you'll have a hell of a lot more to be *scared* about--whether or not you're inclined to it"...

That had been so easy, Janeway knew as she drew another long sip of the dark, rich liquid. She toed off her boots, then pulled her feet up onto the chair with the rest of her.

It'd been easy to take out her protectiveness on that young lady, who gave the impression of not needing so much protection.

It had been good there'd been a forcefield between them.

For a moment, the space around the ship lit in an array of dazzling streamers, dancing in the perimeter, darting in and out of their safe hold, though not too close. Somehow, they just didn't come into the clearing.

Too easy.

But that's when it, naturally, became difficult...

"What?" Janeway breathed as she felt herself pale.

Then she wondered why *that* would shock her.

The young man stood firmly in the place he had chosen, hesitant on how to put it but otherwise unafraid as he confessed, "I'm the one who injured Rollins," Paris told her. "B'Elanna didn't touch him."

"You?!" Janeway blurted, torn between surprise and fury. The former pilot--the criminal she'd actually made the mistake of starting to feeling sorry for...

"I'm willing to accept whatever punishment you think is appropriate," he said with an odd, stiff formality. She meanwhile was seriously considering smacking him hard across that smart mouth of his.

Then he added, "But please let me explain what I saw...what happened. Please, Captain Janeway. I won't make any excuses for what I did. I deserve whatever I get because of this. Just please hear me out."

Standing stiffly at the door of his quarters, she thought she might as well, as nothing he could say would assuage the misery that she had instantly designed for him. She wanted to bury him for betraying her softened opinion of him, wished her glare could blow him to pieces.

Meanwhile, he told her. He explained his meeting with Torres in the briefing room, how afterwards he had wandered the corridors until he heard a woman's cry echo through the corridor. He told Janeway of the cold, deathly shot that crushed in his chest when he heard it, how it suddenly propelled him to help whoever had let out that terrible scream.

"I found her *begging*, captain," he said, his voice growing thick, his eyes both pleading and insisting as he stared straight at her. "Half Klingon or not, I never thought I would ever hear B'Elanna Torres cry like that. She was scared out of her wits--and that wasn't a show. She would never have done that to get an edge. She's too proud for that. So, I pulled Rollins off of her--I only meant to get him away from her for a minute so she could pull herself together..."

He paused. She waited.

"Captain," he said, and his voice grew softly insistent, "when you go to prison, it's like going to your death in a way. You're wondering how you ended up there, how you screwed it up so bad that you'd have your freedom taken away from you--and then you know exactly why, and wish you'd done anything to avoid it."

Cracking with emotion--a strange thing in itself to see in a Paris--Tom paused again. She knew all he would see when he looked at her would be her unabated disappointment. She still meant it.

He blinked when he recognized that, but wasn't deterred from continuing.

"I don't know how B'Elanna was brought up, but I know it couldn't have been that far away from normal. When I knew her in the Maquis, I saw that. I can tell she just wants to do what she thinks is the right thing--and beyond that, she is able to laugh and feel and...When I saw her struggling and Rollins pinning her, I couldn't just watch it, or ignore it anymore. I'd been there.

"Even when you know you deserve it... It's a kind of fear you can't imagine. You don't know if you'll handle it, if you'll come out knowing yourself anymore, because you're going in not really knowing what you're all about in the first place. I felt a lot like she did--and nobody was there to help me. No one, Captain. So I couldn't *not* do anything. Helping her was the right thing to do. I believe that.

"I screwed up when Rollins wouldn't back off. --I know he was doing his job. But he got so insistent, and I wasn't thinking. I knew was that I just couldn't let him pass, so we got tangled up and... I... I didn't go there wanting to knock him out--just keep him away from her long enough... I let it get out of control... I was out of control..."

He shook his head and turned away. She opened her mouth for her reply, but he still wasn't done.

"All my life, I've had to hold it in, keep myself in check. Something just...snapped." He turned his eyes, regretful but accepting, to her again. "I let loose on him because I was scared--for her and for me. I shouldn't have. I knew that when I realized...I know that it was totally wrong of me."

"Well, at least you have one thing right," Janeway replied, her tone cut with gravel that no sad-eyed stare could soften.

"I want to apologize to him, if he'll let me," the young man said, bucking up his strength for what he seemed ready to say. "It won't change or help anything, but I mean that. --And if he wants to press charges, I won't fight them. I'll accept whatever I get for this one."

Janeway hadn't expected the frank sincerity in Paris' face when he said it.

She didn't--wouldn't--forgive him. He would indeed get what was coming to him, despite his heartfelt confession. He deserved it.

But she hadn't expected his want for contrition...

At least Mister Rollins was all right. He healed nicely under Dr. Fitzgerald's care, and was back on duty the next day. When he was appraised of the situation, he was oddly understanding.

The captain couldn't help but be impressed, if not disturbed. He called it a part of his job, that Paris was unstable and he should have remembered that.

She told him, "You're very brave, Ensign, and did your duty to the best of your abilities. But you do have rights." Upon her explanation of them, he promised he would think about it. She gave him that time to do so. She hoped he would decide to take every right he had.

Janeway leaned her head back into her chair, then bent it forward, stretching out the nerves that had tightened during a yet another long day over the Maquis ship's warp coil assembly.

The first day fixing it had been long enough...

"B'Elanna actually put this whole thing together, from scratch," the Maquis captain told her quietly, the morning after she'd spoken with Paris.

Chakotay said nothing more, though, as he unfolded a tool case.

He had also heard of the incident, took it with a quiet acceptance she was starting to get used to. She hadn't told him of her more recent discovery, considering his already hard feelings for Paris. She would in time, when she had figured out what to do with those two wraiths, who waited in their respective rooms to hear their punishment.

For the mean time, she couldn't help but be impressed--very impressed--with Torres' work on the ancient Maquis ship. Starfleet had indeed lost a damned good engineer.

How could a bright kid like Torres end up where she had? Janeway had wondered as she worked, shaking her head at what she found in that jury rigged engine. Chakotay indeed *should* have felt guilty for making such a talented young woman into a criminal simply because he needed personnel and she was willing to adopt a family.

It was sad, how those things happened...

Her feet were getting a little cold, so she tucked them up under her as she continued to nurse the warm drink, let it soothe her, willed herself to relax. She would need to go to sleep soon. She wanted to be ready for every contingency in the morning: Other Maquis ships, any Cardassian vessels wanting to "look in" on her capture, and most of all, those plasma storms.

Soon, she and Mark could take that day off together she so needed. Maybe more than a day, she hoped. She always *thought* about vacations, though, and rarely took them.

She grinned knowingly to herself on that truth. Some things never changed.

A few shots of bright light, twisting up in succession, only to be replaced by another set, or few, or perhaps a pause. It was such an unusual area, the Badlands. The layman might have asked--a good question, really--how things like that could concentrate in such a limited region of space?

The answer, Janeway knew, was explainable, but rather complex...

"He was being noble, Captain," B'Elanna finally admitted when Janeway returned to speak with her a second time. "I guess it looked pretty...desperate, coming into it like he had. I was pretty messed up, and he was looking out for me. Much of a creep as he could be, I can't say he's not the type to do something like that. Even you told me what he did for us... He saved my life once."

Torres' eyes drifted away as her head leaned back onto the wall behind her. "God," she breathed, "I'd almost forgotten about that..."

"...She stuck up for me after the whole thing--let Tuvok think she'd attacked Rollins," Tom told Janeway when she likewise gave him a second visit. He had been confined to quarters with a guard outside, and B'Elanna had planted enough questions in her head to make her curious. Thankfully, he didn't complain about the isolation, even if he did seem bored, a little restless as he spoke.

"Wasn't it easy to believe she'd do it, too--being part Klingon and all? God knows why she'd do that for me, though. I honestly haven't been able to figure that out. I mean, only a half hour before that, we were about to tear each other's throats out. --Or maybe just our own, and we didn't... We were just reacting, I guess..."

The were still reacting, albeit a little numb in their regrets. Torres remained mainly terse and plainspoken, though in moments, parts of that child would peek through again when she fell onto realizations of her conscience. Paris seemed constantly to be trying to figure it all out. His subjects roamed, his ideas were disorganized. Verbally brainstorming.

But in the end, they both circled around the same theme, Janeway noted to herself: What would be right, what might have been right, how to get it right. They mentioned it so often that even Janeway began to wonder the same...

"...Oh I knew he was from a good family." B'Elanna grinned, a bit inwardly. Her otherwise unrelenting eyes were glossed with an odd tiredness that had found her after only a few days in the cell. Or maybe she really was fatigued. In that second visit, they had spoken for a good deal of time.

"We used to think he was just an admiral's brat looking for trouble," she continued, "in too much trouble that he couldn't handle...--Me? I grew up on Kessik-Four. Guess you've heard of it?...It was a beautiful place, normal, very...human...I guess you could say I felt like I didn't really belong. I kept pretty much to myself most of the time..."

"...Yeah, you could say that," Tom chuckled, turning from the window to lean back on it as he remembered. His eyes were lost there.

"She almost drowned. It was so damned hot there that we ended up in this great lake, played...like kids, I guess...until she took off on her own." His eyes turned pensively down. "I hadn't felt so...free, since I was a kid. I even laughed..."

It had been a long time coming for Paris, who had tried and failed too many times over, even when he meant well, and was taking those first steps into rebuilding his life only to fall back again. Likewise, Torres had gotten herself cut off from a place she'd finally found some feeling of belonging. She was on her own once more.

In those second visits she'd paid to each, Janeway began to see this.

"...Yes, it means something to me!" she retorted, half angry at the question, half defensive. "Of

course it does! If you could see what I have...But I guess it's no use telling you about it if you don't believe the Maquis have the right to fight it."

"No," Janeway told her. "I've seen more than a few atrocities on the Cardassians' part. I understand *why* you would feel like you do, and why the Maquis would form. I know how I'd feel if I were in their position--but I'm not. I believe in Starfleet's decision for the Demilitarized Zone--"

"Some demilitarized zone," the engineer scoffed.

"No thanks to the Maquis, either," Janeway pointed out. "I also know the Maquis are making a mistake by adding more trouble to an already difficult situation. Do you understand that?"

"No," B'Elanna answered, but shook her head at her quick denial. "Yes. But I still don't think I agree... So, what's going to happen now? What am I going to do, in prison? What'll be left for me when I get out?"

Janeway's eyes narrowed. "You might have considered those things before you chose to join a terrorist organization, Ms. Torres."

"I didn't *choose* the Maquis!" she cried back unexpectedly, shuddering a harsh breath as her eyes turned again to a glare. "It just happened. I never *planned* to get involved! I wound up there when the ship I was working on was attacked by a Cardassian patrol. It's not noble, but it's the truth. But I saw those dead people, those children and those colonists murdered. Do you think I'm blind? That I'd ignore what I saw, that it wouldn't make me mad as hell about what was happening there? Do you think I have no heart and wouldn't care?"

Janeway was a bit taken by her passion--furious but not bitter toward her or anything but the situation itself, which in truth, Janeway could indeed understand. "No," she said quietly. "I wouldn't deny you that."

The younger woman reigned herself as suddenly as she'd started, falling back against the wall, turning her eyes down. "So what happens to people like me? Or do we end up like Tom Paris, always on the wrong side of everybody's opinion?...I know you'll never forgive us. To you, we're only criminals..."

A pause--and Janeway couldn't fill it.

Torres sighed, her shoulders dropping slightly.

"I never thought," she said, soft for tiredness or for thoughtfulness, Janeway wasn't certain, "when I was growing up, that I would be a convict. I always dreamed... Maybe that was my problem. All I wanted to do was get it right. I thought I had, finally, in the Maquis. They accepted me."

The Maquis engineer turned to her again, eyes searching, blank with uncertainty.

"But now it's over, and I can never go back. They'll never trust me again, not even let me near them, knowing what I've done and where I've been... What will I do once I've served whatever punishment Starfleet gives me? Tell me that, Captain Janeway." Her eyes drew away from the wall. "What do I do now?"

Just then, she was the child wanted an answer the elder could not give with any guarantee, but just then so wanted to...

"...I know Starfleet will never, never forgive me," Tom told her, heavy with that certainty, "and neither will anyone who knows what I've done. Aside from Harry, maybe Stadi, nobody's put my reputation aside long enough to know me any better. I guess I can't blame them for that. I'm not worthy of respect, when you get down to it. Seven months at Auckland told me all I needed to know about accepting that, and coming here proved it's pointless trying to change their minds. But that works out okay. I can't seem to forgive them, either."

"Forgive them for what?" Janeway asked, truly wanting to know. There was a note of despair in his voice, not pity so much as...weariness, which concerned her despite all the anger she'd felt only a few days before.

"For getting it right," he answered honestly. "For not having to go through what I did, for judging me, for hating me and having every right to... Guess I'll never forgive myself for causing that, either. But it doesn't change, Captain. I won't change. For the rest of my life, I'll always be trying twice as hard to do better, because I know it'll take four times that much to prove myself."

His eyes darkened, then, as he regarded the captain, still standing straight, at the door, staring back at him. "Or do you have any better ideas? What will I do when all I really could do was be a pilot? Where am I going to go--or is there even any purpose in going anywhere now that nobody wants what I have to give, which isn't much, I know. What can I aim for when I don't even know what I want? When I can't think about anything besides having my freedom back?"...

Janeway sank back into her cushions. Her cup was nearly drained, her body warm from the intake of the steaming liquid, the remnants cooling rapidly. It swirled slowly as she tipped and turned it; remnants of the dark water stuck to the sides of the cup.

Outside her window, the plasma flares ebbed and struck, twisting and firing in a dazzling display that had been her view for some time.

It was beautiful, that natural phenomenon. But she was anxious to go home.

She had a home to go to...

"I have completed the full report, Captain," said her security officer as he laid the PADD down before her.

"Thank you." Her voice was distant, and she knew it. She likewise knew her Vulcan officer would surely...

"May I make an observation, Captain?"

She grinned warmly, recalling again how much she'd missed him. "Always, Tuvok. What is it?"

"I have noticed that the situations involving Ms. Torres and Mr. Paris have left you...distracted."

Janeway gave him that one. "They're distracting people."

A slight breath alone escaped the man. "Indeed."

She stood from her desk, went to the window to view again the display that had been her odd company on their mission. A successful mission overall. A reason to be proud of their work and determination and commitment...

"Tell me, Tuvok," she asked, "do you think that adding prison time is the best thing for them? You've reviewed all the reports, all the records. You were there when Mr. Paris made his apology to Ensign Rollins..."

A vision of disciplined shame she would likely never see again.

"I'm not saying they shouldn't pay for their crimes. Far from it. They richly deserve their punishment. But these...young people. They've barely even started their lives and they're going nowhere." Her eyes floated to his again, and she hoped for a moment he could sense her concern.

"They had so much potential," she continued. "I used to believe that people had to pay the consequences for their actions, whether or not they meant them. I still do, for the most part. But at what point should we stop punishing them for that? When do we start forgiving people for betraying the things we hold dear? How can they ever forgive themselves if we don't forgive them?"

Tuvok seemed intrigued by the query, and probably would have liked to discuss that problem in length. Yet she knew he knew his captain well enough to keep his reply simple.

"It would be logical to grant them forgiveness when their terms have been served."

"Yes." She had a feeling there would be more.

There was. "However, the mind is not so easily sensible. It does not forget, particularly when you are a guilty individual. *They* will never stop serving their sentence."

"Even if they move on," she agreed. "I don't think I'd forgive myself too easily, if I was in their situation."

"The Rehabilitation Commission tries to engender a sense of conscience for the prisoners' actions," he noted.

"But are we fair to continue punishing them, judging them?" she countered.

"No," Tuvok answered plainly. "But we are not unnatural."

It still wasn't right, not as right as it should have been. Of course, as a captain, she definitely knew that nothing in the universe was precise, there was no perfectly correct decision, no easy method or procedure. She still couldn't help but want for that neater resolution.

She had known it before, in such a blank, official sense, but slowly, she came to realize... At that point, there, on her ship in the middle of the Badlands, they had nothing left.

It was time that changed.

She couldn't do that for them, even if she wanted to be a guide after coming to know a bit about those complex, hurt people. They were children in a sense of the word, waiting for the next step, waiting to be able to take that step, but stopped for the memory of falling.

They didn't know where to go, what to do.

She wondered how she might have been if somehow, in some crazy way, she had wound up in either of their shoes. It was hard to imagine, though she'd known the plague of self-doubt, let her own despair crawl up on her before.

But she'd been able to fight it. She'd had the support of her family and a career waiting for her when she was ready. What if she hadn't? What if...?

She couldn't help them.

But she might help them help themselves...

The engineer was asleep when Janeway came the third time to the brig and dismissed the officer on duty. She would have her words with the prisoner alone.

She seemed so young, so small there. Facing the wall, she laid on the bunk, boots off, hair matted with sleep. Her body was tucked in a fetal position, hands crunched up before her. Her feet looked tiny.

As if sensing Janeway's examination, or perhaps having heard the door, the prisoner woke, pushed herself to sit, turned. Her eyes, swollen with sleep, were somehow so much older than the rest of her as she stared at the neat woman who had entered.

"In consideration of your record," Janeway said quietly, "I will be recommending to the Starfleet judge advocate general in charge of your case that you be given one half the time in addition to those of your former crewmates."

B'Elanna Torres did not speak, but blinked her acceptance.

Janeway was glad she did not fight it, and moved close to the invisible wall that separated them.

"B'Elanna," she continued, and was gladder still the woman did not mind hearing her given name, "I can't say that I understand what you'll have to face there. But if I can advise anything, for your own good... It's not designed to be enjoyed or easy, and I don't think you expect it to be like that. But you have an opportunity to do something that you haven't been able to do before: *Look* at yourself, and get over what got you into your situation. Even you admitted it wasn't nobility, but the answer has to be there. Use that time to come to some terms with whatever it is that's troubling you--and don't ever forget what you *do* have. You're intelligent, talented, determined, sensitive, and you had a good upbringing. That counts for a lot more than you know. It should."

Grudgingly, the young woman nodded, shrugged. "It'll be hard," Janeway admitted, meeting the engineer's dark gaze again, "probably more than anything else you've done to date. The hardest thing anyone does is deal with themselves. I know I have, and to tell the truth, if I didn't have good people around me, I don't know where I'd be today. In the end, though, it came down to me, and pulling *myself* together and getting back on track. I've a feeling you can start, if you give yourself a fair chance. Use your time there to do that"...

The admiral's disgraced son had been reading when he let her in for her third visit, not long after speaking to Torres. The book was nothing much, he said. He'd pushed it aside with a swift hand before politely inviting the captain to sit. With equal manners, she took the chair across from him, avoiding the temptation to peek at what he was reading by getting straight to the reason she had come.

"Being that Mr. Rollins does not plan to press charges on you for your attack on him--though I still have to laud him for his generosity--I have had to come to my own conclusion on what to do with you."

He took that well, she noted, watching the young man nod, then wait for her to continue. His eyes turned up again, asking without words.

She waited, too. For what, she didn't quite know. Or perhaps she was wondering exactly how she would say what she would. After several more seconds, she decided to just get to it.

"I'll make you a deal," she said, meeting his stare firmly. "This one is entirely up to you--and I want to be assured you'll follow through. I may or may not make sure that you have. I'd rather trust you."

He seemed almost hesitant to ask, but he did.

"The Rehabilitation Commission will hear about your transgressions aboard my ship," she told him, a feel of ice returning to her tone with the reminder of it. "But I will not recommend you serve any additional time because you were willing to help us. The issue of your early parole will be entirely up to them." She watched him carefully there, for a sign, any clue that he would believe himself 'off the hook,' as it were.

The former pilot only blinked. Waited. He knew there'd be more. Nodding to herself, she went through with it: "What I will recommend, however, is that you seek professional psychological treatment, and *follow* it."

That managed to make him wince and frown. Not even a sardonic crack passed his lips at the mention. Feeling a shot at his negative reaction, Janeway leaned up on the table. "Don't make me make that a condition of your parole," she warned, holding his eyes without a blink when they darted back to hers.

"--Don't think I don't know what I'm asking you do to. I know what family you come from, and I understand the psychology itself well enough to know. But it's high time you learned some alternatives to how you've been dealing with it. There'll be no quick fixes, no getting out of it. You need support from somebody who knows what they're talking about and *can* possibly help you... I know, even *I* could use a shrink every now and again. But you *need* it." She let a point sit a moment. "You need it, Tom, because your recent experiences aren't the only issues at hand, and I have a feeling you know it. At the same time, I think you have the capacity to grow from all of this, if you'd let yourself believe that... I sincerely hope you do"...

A bright dazzle of natural energy, so useful--so needed in so many ways--yet so violent, destructive. That region, somehow inclined to those displays that soon sizzled into nothingness after a brief yet turbulent existence, burning itself out, had inexplicably left a small haven for them, those wayward travelers and warriors...and those stuck in between.

Her cup was empty. They were set to leave in the morning.

Finally.

"*Paris to Captain Janeway.*"

She looked up toward the comm, furrowing her brow slightly. "Mr. Paris?"

"*I hope I'm not bothering you--and I know I shouldn't even be asking this, knowing everything you've done. But...I was wondering...if...*"

Her lips pursed with a smirk. He sounded like a teenager asking his parents for an extended curfew a week after breaking it--while she, the wise parent, knew he was squirming and letting him do so a while. The greater irony was that the young man was Tom Paris, so world-weary, so clever--tripping over his own tongue to make a request of her.

"Spill it, Mr. Paris. What do you need?"...

The doors to the brig slid open and she gestured to the shift officer. "Out," said that flick of her fingers, that point of her chin. The young officer complied.

"Get a cup of coffee," the captain ordered quietly as he passed. Translation: Twenty minutes...or Janeway hoped the ensign understood. She didn't want to stay up all night for a visit between prisoners who really didn't deserve *that* much.

Though, she did understand why Paris would want to.

The former Maquis was asleep, and the former pilot turned a raised brow to the captain when he reached the edge of the cell. Sighing through a frown, Janeway moved to release the field, waited for him to enter.

He stiffened a bit when the field went up behind him. But then he slowly let out his breath, moved forward carefully, not wanting to surprise the woman on the bunk--probably for good reason.

Janeway stepped aside, *mostly* out of view, at least. Semi-private was mannerly enough. There was no chance she'd leave them alone.

He didn't seem to know how to approach her at first, but settled on kneeling by the bunk and touching her hair. The touch was gentle, Janeway thought, oddly familiar for two people who were foes not so long ago.

The young woman only stirred at first, drew away a little.

"Shh," he breathed. "It's just me, B'Elanna."

She turned, pulling her eyes up to his, then sitting up. "How did you get in here?" she whispered, scowling, looking him over.

Janeway smirked. *He didn't *break* into the brig, Ms. Torres.*

Tom shrugged, sighed a little. "We're going back tomorrow. I wanted to say goodbye...and thanks."

A tiny smile pulled at her mouth. "For what? For getting you in trouble?"

He chuckled. "Yeah, I'm real glad you did. --No, seriously, you didn't get me in trouble, and I did want to thank you for... Well, I guess you said some things that made sense to me. And you tried to stick up for me. You didn't have to do that."

She nodded, her grin turning a bit inward. "Well, you... I guess you did the same for me, so you earned it."

"I was glad to...to do that much. I wish I could do more."

"I know."

At that moment, their eyes found each other's, their expressions still set in half smiles. It struck Janeway how they allowed that much intimacy to pass between them, with such truth in both their eyes. They knew where the other had been, and where they were going. It was a look of understanding, a bit awkward, a little sad, and yet they did not avoid it.

Acceptance, perhaps?

Slowly--and Janeway could see the pilot's reflexes readying to back away if rejected--he reached out and touched her hand.

For a moment, she seemed to consider it. He was strangely patient. It was her choice.

She made it.

He audibly breathed his relief when she turned her hand over and curled her small fingers around his. Inspired, he drew a full breath.

"I'll be there, B'Elanna," he promised, "if you want me there or need a friend." He nodded to her stare, which widened as he spoke. "You should have at least someone you can relate with. I'll be out by then, on Earth, probably Marseilles if I can find a place there. I don't plan on leaving. You know where to find me when you get out...or whenever."

She seemed a bit overcome for a moment, ironically troubled by his kindness. Struggling with it for many seconds, her eyes everywhere but on him, she seemed to decide on that, too. Finally, she whispered, "I just might."

Glancing up, she looked embarrassed by his expression. But she did not turn away again, even when he said, "I hope you do. I'd like that."

"Maybe you might need an ear, too?" she suggested.

"If you could put up with listening to me that long," he said with a shrug, a hint of a quirky grin following it.

"Well," she admitted, her lips curling wryly in their own right as her eyes turned askance, "for a while, maybe."

His smile warmed. He squeezed her hand. "Friends then, this time?"

Torres seemed amused by his question, shook her head of something Janeway assumed she had not been privy to.

"Yes, Tom," she said softly. "We can be friends."

The captain was almost certain she could hear the man's heart begin beating again from all the way across the room.

Watching them continue from there, Janeway blinked when another thought crossed her mind. Considering the extent of B'Elanna Torres' background, the Federation Rehabilitation Commission might appreciate the addition of another engineer on one of their renovation projects.

It was worth a mention, at least.

Transmission J.28-1-S99224
Recipient: Inmate C-75435.m
Origination: STR.001; SHQ

SD.50537.7

I wasn't certain at first whether you would want to hear from me again, being that we had been on opposing sides. But since our contact had not been disagreeable, considering, I thought you might want to know what's happened since we saw each other last, over two years ago.

You and I parted ways on the Liberty, when you so honorably turned your ship over to Admiral Dernas. I knew then that you carried a large burden, however, a conscience for your crew, and particularly regarding some certain decisions you were forced to make.

I got to thinking about you today, so I thought I'd take the chance and bring you up to date on the result of one of your actions. You see, I've had a bit of news on our "projects."

I'll cut to the chase and start from the beginning: About twenty-one months ago, your engineer was released after serving her nine month sentence.

She pulled a loose curl of hair behind her ear and leaned into the power assembly. A simple snip with the laser fitter and that part was done. Getting in there was the difficult part. The rest was routine.

That was a switch.

Pulling herself out, she flipped on the power. The generator whirred to life without a hitch. Nodding to herself, she turned the unit off again put the laser away, glanced at the sunset. She would be able to run a few efficiency diagnostics the next day.

The work was simplistic--but it was work. Anything, even drudgery, was better than boredom in that place. She still didn't like the nights there, or meals...She tolerated Caruthers.

As if on cue, a soft-toned alarm sounded for a few seconds.

She pulled off her tool apron and set it in the case, then tucked the case away in a nearby bin before hurrying out of the gully she'd been working in. She didn't want to be late.

All but bi-monthly, she often was--so distracted in her work that she didn't hear the evening alarm.

They had an hour to walk the court before reporting for dinner. After that came bed rest, or so they called it. It was more like pacing herself to a half sleep, wishing she'd done more in the day to tire herself, cursing herself that she hadn't.

"Hey Torres, off for more official business? Give the administrator my regards."

She smirked, not stopping as she brushed off her gray issue uniform and climbed the steps to the main walk. "Screw off, Atrel."

The Maquis prisoners liked to give her hell. They knew she'd been separated and tried apart from her crew--and they knew what that meant. At the same time, they didn't know anything. She didn't care to tell them, either. She stopped caring months ago.

She sifted her fingers through her hair, knowing it was a mess that couldn't be helped. She knew she needed a haircut. She often forgot about that too, but it didn't bother her. She knew nobody there gave a damn what she looked like.

Wiping her face, chewing her lips a bit, she brushed at more dirt. It'd been dry that week.

Nine months ago, it'd been the rainy *season* in New Zealand, and Inmate Torres, B'Elanna, had spent her first two weeks there under rain clouds and gloom and cold. She believed at the end of that time that she was close to completely losing it.

Shivering, lying open-eyed on the bunk of her silent cell, she tried desperately to distract herself. Eventually, she gave up and thought herself into tears or fits of anger, or periods of anxiety that left her gasping for breath, *needing* to get out of that place. Her nerves, once like iron, were so pitifully raw some mornings that the doctor had to come to administer a mild sedative--a humiliation she cringed and snarled through as the doctor ignored her--to get to breakfast safely, which she barely ate.

She looked at her assigned busywork and barely knew what to do with it, she lost a few kilos for but picking at her meals. She even stopped caring for herself, her distraction became so prevalent.

At one point, she actually asked for a counselor, though she immediately retracted the request.

That was her initiating time, the first few weeks, when they settled her into "the routine:" wake, eat, inmate education, eat, solitary, eat, retire. Gradually, solitary work replaced education, and outside work replaced solitary. If she stepped out of line--and she certainly did a few times (everybody did at least once, she learned later)--solitary replaced everything for a few days.

She became a model prisoner after three ventures there.

Her nights remained impossible.

With the good behavior, however, and her increasingly diligent work, she was given more liberty and things to do. Graduating to model prisoner also gave her an hour off each day after her outside work to go where she wanted on the grounds, and later an opportunity she'd been far too pessimistic to expect at the time.

Of course, she had known from the start that he still came there for his appointments...and when.

After resolving herself to meet with the "counselor from hell" (as she'd grinningly been warned about him), her further good behavior gave her yet another huge liberty--a deal agreed on by all three

involved after that privilege had in fact been threatened.

As dusk began to fall over the grounds and the other inmates made their way to the court, she hurried herself in the opposite direction, to that arranged meeting, dusting herself off and cursing the dirt all the while.

She never forgot Janeway's words, that dealing with it would be the hardest thing she would ever do. Every day, despite the benefits of her cooperation, it was.

And embarrassing, frustrating, infuriating, painful...

Examining herself, such as she was, was a constant struggle, and harder still that she actually began to *do* it. Every time she thought she'd realized something that would help change her, settle her, help her move forward, she found another layer to hurdle, and another right behind it.

It was enough that she just wanted to throw up her hands and just keep busy. But she knew all the good that did. She'd done that her whole life--and wound up living her days to the cue to annoyingly gentle alarms, mindless work and periods of maddening isolation, desperately trying to stay occupied all in between.

Not to mention, Doc Caruthers would give her hell. He didn't take excuses from anyone--certainly not some cute, snotty prisoner with a bad mouth and enough insecurity to write a book on. But then, that was probably why she'd benefited from his services, much as she fought with him, cursed him outright, told him he was a glorified hobbyist--and even when she dented his wall in a few places.

But then she got to "think" about that too, when she was sent to repair the damage.

She cursed the wall the whole time she re-plastered it.

It was difficult, her perceived Klingon side, with which she'd never come to terms, who manifested her fiercer nature, her outbursts, her penchant to hurt and be hurt much as often as it gave her the strength to just keep going, especially in the beginning.

Doc Caruthers, however, could give "a rat's ass" if she was "half Klingon or half Chihuahua," which eventually--*eventually*--was good to know.

On the other hand, there was her more "intellectual" Human side--whose cowardly reasoning she blamed often for all the stupid overanalyzing, silly fantasizing and insecure holing up that'd been an equal curse to her.

She knew after a while that she'd simply have to stop separating her genome and just accept that she was screwed up overall.

It was easier to categorize her self-blame, though.

She had given it some genuine effort, though. She did, if not at first spitefully, want to try. She wanted desperately to work her way out of that pit she'd gotten herself in--laser-sealing rudimentary machinery for her "living," spending over a third of her day with only her contemplation as company...and also sometimes the insane screams of those who hadn't coped at all. That was harder to hear than her thoughts.

So she did what she needed to. She worked to the alarm, moved on cue, even walked into her bunkroom at night without complaint. She forced herself to eat a full meal, did what was assigned to

her, put up with the counselor from hell. She used her time and what that earned--an hour or so every other week being able to share the time with someone she *wanted* to see for a change--and didn't waste a moment of it.

She had no choice but to take Janeway's challenge for what it was worth. Otherwise, she'd have no excuses later--soon...very soon, when she would have her final pre-parole hearing.

She grinned just to think about it. Parole wasn't freedom, but it was out of that place. As scared as she was of leaving there not knowing what she would do with herself, how she would cope, she did know that she never wanted to feel that slight reverberation of the forcefield behind her ever again.

Parting from the main path of the work site, she started across the park trail, striding through to the main walkway. She knew there was only an hour before she would be contacted to return for dinner...then sleep.

Only a week more of that, she reminded herself, and then... Well, she didn't know what to do next, but what she had planned was a damn sight better than Auckland, easier as it might have been with the help she'd been given.

Moreover, at least she knew she had a place to go. That idea alone had kept a tiny smile on her lips since she accepted the offer to search for a little place. It wasn't a difficult decision, either, when the suggestions were brought back to her. She'd always loved the sea.

Skipping down the last hill to the pavement, she suddenly hoped that *he* wasn't late that time: That bi-monthly trip to the facility gates took a while as it was--and often more for the welcome distraction that accompanied her.

Stopping at the gray stone road, she saw the door that led to Dr. Caruthers' office slide open, and cursorily primed back her hair again, drew a quick breath and pulled her posture straight as a tall, neatly-dressed form exited.

Then she rolled her eyes at her own maneuvers. She knew she looked lousy, but she always did. He was used to that. So why bother?... Well, she knew why, but it still didn't make a difference. Not there.

"You're late," she called out.

She smiled when Paris turned and found her in his eyes.

"Don't blame me--blame the Doc. It's easier that way."

The grin upon his lips, curled in a way she'd come to know well over the months, said instantly that he'd survived another round with Caruthers, whom he returned to talk with every other Thursday afternoon. In fact, the day's session seemed to have gone well.

That wasn't always the case.

The same went for her.

She crossed her arms as he approached. He held his hands behind his back, still returning her welcoming grin. A pause, a blink of a hello, and they turned together on the road. Falling into a natural pace beside each other, they began their walk towards the entry gate on the other side of the facility.

It seems that Ms. Torres did very well there. You might like to know that Mr. Paris has also improved notably since his release.

"Everything's all set up," he told her as they rounded the first turn.

"What is?" she asked.

He laughed. "Your *apartment*, remember? I've got the entry card waiting for you and all the furniture you need. I might have missed some--"

"I'm sure you didn't." She shook her head immediately, pulling her stare up from the gravel. He was being too nice again. "I could have picked all that up when I got there."

"You'll be busy and tired when you get there," he said. "It's just something you won't have to deal with. Really, B'Elanna. It's not too much and I don't mind."

She couldn't help but smile at his sincerity. He was being her friend, and wasn't doing it for any reason but that. But she'd become unaccustomed to free favors...or maybe she never had been used to them, or trusted them.

Tom enjoyed his generosity. It was obvious from what he had told her about his life, and how miserable he made himself when he failed people. He needed to *do*, and know he had done. It was half the reason she sometimes told him he didn't have to. But that time, he'd been in earnest, and he expected nothing in return. She believed that.

She knew she should do something in return someday. She did owe him for that one.

More than often, she couldn't believe she'd had such luck in getting to know him...and then she was amazed how much her opinion of him had changed. How could something like that happen with such good timing for a change? she often wondered. Yet knowing what a friend he'd become to her, she didn't wonder for long, but just let it be.

"Thanks," she said. "I really appreciate it, Tom. You know you don't have to do any of this."

"I know."

She grinned. "One more week, right?"

"Just one more," he confirmed. "You really did great, you know. Your last pre-release hearing and all. I told you it'd be okay."

"Yes, you told me," she replied, "--at least fifteen times."

"And I was right," he droned, just in that way that both annoyed and amused her so faithfully. "One more week, Torres."

She couldn't look at him just then, shining like that. She knew she shouldn't be too excited, too happy. Eighteen months of parole still followed her release, and at least another year with

Dr. Caruthers, per her deal with him.

But if there was one thing Tom Paris could do, it was make her feel like everything really was on the upswing. Over the months, he had somehow developed--or she had finally picked up--an undeniable charm and straightforward optimism about him. Much as she tried to resist it, she couldn't help but think that maybe it *was* all right. She knew well that she *wanted* it to be--just that she had so much experience otherwise.

That wasn't to say he wasn't pessimistic, either. In the beginning, he could be much darker, far more cynical, than she had ever been. Sometimes, he still was. More deeply than she could have imagined before of any pilot, he felt and internalized, and had let it out in every way but well, until he learned not to.

Looking back, she could see him in Voyager's briefing room, bearing small pieces of his soul to her, and she didn't even see it then. In hindsight, it was so clear, everything he said about himself--and everything he'd said about her.

She'd come to appreciate his honesty even more when she began to recognize it for what it was. When he was cheerful, as he was at present, he usually had a real reason for that, too. It wasn't just pleasantries. She'd learned not to ignore that...even if she didn't show it all the time.

"Aren't you happy to be getting out?" Tom said, breaking the silence in his usual roundabout way, eyeing her askance.

"Is that supposed to be a joke?" she grinned. "I'm *too* anxious."

"No such thing," he returned.

"Well, at least in a week I'll have the time to figure out what in the world I'll do with myself," she said, light with some effort.

"I think I can start you off," he returned playfully, seemingly unbothered by her straightness. "What's the first thing you want for dinner?"

She knew he had purposefully sent a thousand delicacies spinning into her quick mind. Not that she resisted the renewed rush of excitement. "God, I don't know," she breathed, then bit her lip to think.

"How about braised shrimp in linguini, baby leaf salad with a creamy vinaigrette, a fine wine--"

"Tom, shut up! You're making me drool!"

His smile grew even further. "Well, start thinking about it, and I'll make sure you get it."

She laughed, shaking her head. "I guess you just devoured everything in sight when you got out?"

"Actually, I didn't--though I won't deny I enjoyed eating real food again." He looked ahead to the bend in the road. "No, this time around, we'll definitely celebrate. Whatever you want, you just name it."

She peered up to him. He hadn't celebrated his own release, probably didn't even know where he'd be *living* when he was released. Just found himself a place to sleep, a replicator he could order from. Just thankful to be out...wondering where to go next.

She knew him well enough by then to be able to picture it, and she felt for him. He'd worked hard to start something for himself since his release. At first, she knew, he'd gone in circles and might have given up if he'd been any less stubborn to get it right that time. Finally, almost by chance, he'd found some direction.

His company, his friendship, during that time had grown more appealing to her--more meaningful as well. Seeing his confidence strengthen gave her something to hope for too, too, especially while she was finally starting to sort out a few things of her own.

"What I'd like," she finally told him, "is a quiet dinner, somewhere comfortable with some good company--and yes, a really nice wine. I've never really gotten to enjoy one before."

"Oh, then I'll *have* to procure an excellent one in that case," he enthused, his smile lighting further as he considered the sky. "Hmm... Something to compliment the meal, which you still need to decide on before I let my own great taste in cuisine do the job for you." He turned a look of mock apology to her. "Now, the company might be harder to come by."

She snickered, shook her head.

At that, he gave it up, leaned a little towards her as he spoke again. "We'll have a good dinner, B'Elanna. Nothing too much. But if you want to go out, I know some good places. Any way you want it, it'll be good."

"You've got yourself a date," she told him, pinning her gaze on the horizon of the trail. "Don't be late."

But she couldn't keep her face straight for too long. Even that damned grin of his was infectious.

Now, before you start believing too soon that there's something terribly wrong with this, I think we would both have to recall exactly whom we're dealing with.

Janeway laughed aloud when she read the last lines in the file.

"Captain, we will be in orbit of Earth in ten minutes. McKinley Station has cleared our coordinates an--."

"Thank you, Commander. Proceed." Her voice was etched with another chortle when she spoke, causing Cavit to pause. Before he could be tempted to ask, she added, "Janeway out" to cut the comm.

She couldn't help but laugh at what she was reading. If anything, it made good distraction. She needed one.

Several months ago, Mark had finally thrown up his hands and proposed to her in front of both their families, giving her no option to put him off again. Increasingly since then, she had been a strange bundle of nerves, which rose to taunt her attention every time she wasn't busy enough to counter it.

Her first-to-last-minute cold feet was typical for a bride, her mother had teased her in their last communique?. When it wasn't that, Janeway was equally anxious that nothing would come along--as things often did, she knew painfully well--to disrupt it.

But that was tomorrow--the wedding, the party, the honeymoon. Today was still just that and not over yet, she told herself again and again, as she willed down her "shakes" with a little success. Enough success, anyway, that she allowed herself a big smile at that very helpful distraction.

She leaned back into her seat and took up her coffee--which she knew she definitely didn't need at that point. But what she read was good enough news to sit and savor, read over a few times, mentally fill in the blanks where the text did not elaborate.

The report did certainly look promising.

Even so, Janeway seriously had to wonder about what else it *looked* like, hearing it second hand as she was.

Though she was confident in believing that it'd crossed their minds, it also seemed right to believe they didn't care too much.

True to his hesitant promise, Tom Paris had indeed gone to a psychologist--and without her having to push it too much. But she already knew that. A few months after leaving the Badlands, she'd sent a brief inquiry to see if Paris had gone through with her advice, and to see if B'Elanna Torres had settled into Auckland well. Thankfully, neither of them seemed to have ignored her. They were both acclimating--Torres with a little more ease, it seemed.

Each of them had struck her in a way, struck up a cord in her that had always been there, but had usually gone unrecognized with their sort. Though always so protective of her crew, she had never felt so...unwillingly needed. The fact that both of them were so troubled, so cynical, criminals, conflict waiting to happen, only made her own turn of heart more miraculous--at least to her.

They had indeed needed someone to *give* them a choice, lay down a line that wasn't either impossible for them to follow, nor abandoned once laid.

That was precisely what Janeway had done, the least and the most she could do for them, really: Empowering them to help themselves; making them see she did believe they had a chance at a future, if they really wanted it. Having taken those extra steps, she was naturally curious if it had made a difference.

Occasionally they, Paris more often, came to mind when she watched her crew deal with other peoples, watch how her first officer handled getting them out of tight spots, how he handled pressure situations. Cavit was good at his job, a fine and dedicated officer. But there was a hard line in him that ghosts of his own had probably etched, something very unforgiving, even bitter. He tended to go to the extreme, come down a little too hard, hold a grudge even when he used his manners.

A fine officer, he was, but what had kept him on the straight and narrow when others like Paris could not? The thought had intrigued her from time to time.

Necessarily, Cavit's style had altered her own leadership a little, brought her down from the very hard lines she'd always drawn, particularly on people who couldn't keep themselves on the right side of Federation law. Of course, at that point, Cavit did that work for her. She only had to decide whether his hard line was correct or not. In a way, that made her job more difficult.

She grinned to think about it. Some people had been convinced--still were at times--that she was made of nothing but steel and slate, thinking point "a" to point "b" much of the time. Maybe they were right, though she knew she'd become much less stringent over the ten months she'd been captaining the Voyager.

Even so, she never had let up on *herself*.

She wondered what might have been if, so hard on herself, she'd made as fateful a mistake as Paris had? Or if she'd drifted into the terrible situation that Torres did? She could imagine how that might have drug her down...

She knew the haunt of depression well, how easy it was...

But people change, she knew. People grow and learn, sometimes the hard way. Indeed, at times she had, and had been lucky to have gotten through it well enough, to have great timing perhaps, a family that came after her when she needed it, forced her to snap out of it when personal tragedy threatened to consume her. Once she saw the same sensibility, she forced herself as well.

What had been the difference between herself and them? Maybe she had been stronger--but in their situations... Paris had been there, and watched Torres begin the same route he'd taken. His own conscience was spiraling him downwards again, she was stuck in the rut of a confused morality. Both of them were going nowhere fast.

It could have just as easily been her, had the conditions been right...or wrong, as it were.

It was not a pleasant thought, but she still considered it sometimes, when her mind was idle enough to recall their pained, lost expressions. She'd dealt with so many people in her years as an officer. Theirs were among the faces that stuck with her.

She had realized the week she'd come to know them that people like that could not just be "cut loose," as Janeway had said and, yes, meant--so blase;, so professional--in the park at Auckland. They needed to know there was something for them in the future, that they could be forgiven, and could someday be content. They needed the chance to forgive *themselves* most of all.

When she watched each of them being led off her ship, she had honestly hoped they would be strong enough to do that, to accept themselves, and grow from their mistakes.

Judging from the report she'd been sent, she was pleased. It'd take time, but both seemed to be working on it.

It was a lot better than the nothing they'd both expected.

But even as she came to this conclusion, she glanced through Torres' parole statements and saw the docket bearing the parolee's new housing location. Janeway couldn't help but laugh as she let that thought fester.

How strange life is, indeed, she thought, finally putting the PADD aside to get back to the pile of work and preparation she still needed to finish before transporting to Indiana.

Cold feet or no, she wasn't about to make herself late for her own wedding because of paperwork. Mark would *never* let her live that one down.

How well, after all, did we know them? I can say I thought I knew Tom Paris--or at least his sort....

"What about you?" she asked, leaning well back in her chair as she peered across to him.

Tom shrugged as he collected the rest of the utensils. He'd considered it a hundred-thousand times by then--and much preferred to talk about B'Elanna's hopes and possibilities, as she did know what she *wanted* to do. His own attempts at finding something had only produced a resolution based on alternatives. Not many people were ready to trust a formerly incarcerated pilot. He knew he shouldn't cling to unlikely luck in that department.

Regarding her again, he found her happily fed for the first time in at least nine months, and with a small, slightly anxious grin on her lips. He knew it well from his own first day of release from Auckland, being totally unsure but glad to be there. But unlike him, she had company on her first night of freedom, and she did look curious to know how it was going. So, he indulged her.

"I've still got another couple semesters of engineering before I find out if they'll take me for graduate study," he said, taking the dishes away to put in the little reclamator in the tiny corner kitchen he didn't bother complaining about. He ate out most of the time, anyway. "I have a degree in astrometrics with minors in navigational engineering and biochemistry. Starship development isn't all that foreign."

"Well, you should decide you really want to do that before going into a graduate program," she told him.

"I know. I think the coursework's been interesting enough to take it further. --And it *is* something I've thought about: If I can't fly them, why not design them, right? I'd always wanted to when I was behind the conn... You might try classes, too, you know. There's a great engineering program at Tours that's worth looking into."

B'Elanna's grin grew. "Hmm, I might find a way to get kicked out of another school," she said lightly.

Tom chuckled. "You'd better not." But again, he shrugged, neatening the counter with quick, careful hands. "Anyway, whatever it is I decide to do exactly, it'll be because I *want* to, though. I want to love it."

Turning again, he saw her nodding, then standing with her wineglass. Finishing it off, she handed it to him to add to the reclamator.

She caught his eyes, still smiling a little--a little knowingly, it seemed.

He felt his blood rush for her attention. She was his friend, sure, the best damn company he'd had since he could remember--and that during their hour-long walks across the Auckland facility every other week for seven months. She was tired from the work detail. He was fresh from a session with Caruthers. They still made the effort and the energy.

Kindred spirits meeting in hell, working their way out.

Just trying to get it right.

For all the anger that she spewed and lashed, his equal temper and self-pity had been left to eat him alive, chew away at his strength and better senses. He let his bitterness take over when nothing miraculously appeared to save him. His months with Caruthers--whom he'd chosen with a shrug while undergoing the final throes of his parole hearings, and regretted immediately--helped him see that, even if he really didn't want to face up to it.

But he'd made his promise to Janeway, and for once, even if he never met her again, he was going to keep his word, which he'd so shamefully made into nothing with his raging self-consciousness, his burial of feeling and truth. If anything, he would at least try to make his word a good one again. She'd put a little faith in him with her challenge; he wanted to prove to someone that he wasn't a total waste of time.

So he kept on with the counselor, let the old man pick at his brain and make him yell, make him defensive, make him feel like shit, make him leave the office wishing the door was the kind he could slam. The predictable consequence was that Doc was also making him mull it to death for the next two weeks, stew and digest it until he went back, knowing that Doc was...right. The jerk.

But he did always go back, and maybe that was something in itself. He didn't have that much pride to lose, he figured. For that matter, Caruthers always took him, welcomed him to sit and waited for him to speak. Tom was a little grateful, but still hated it when Doc did that. Eventually he started talking again, even about nothing, about anything, just to kill the silence.

Thankfully, Caruthers talked back, and some days, they would just converse like two men playing checkers in the park.

Soon enough, though, Caruthers would find something else to poke at that Tom didn't want to go near, and the conflicts would start all over again. Still, Tom did return, kept it up, made himself face up to it. He no longer sought to get away. He'd done enough of that. He knew that had to change.

Actually, what had to change was his sitting on his ass about being a loser, coward, cynical, bitter, waste...

He'd been getting sick of feeling like that.

It felt good to get sick of it.

On those Thursdays, he started meeting B'Elanna on the road outside the offices. For her good behavior, she'd been granted an hour to herself after the work detail. It meant she didn't get to grab a seat in the dining hall with anyone else because she'd be a little late reporting in, but she didn't care--and said so. He'd felt the same when he'd been there.

Their first conversations usually concerned similar topics--"the routine," one he knew very well and had found her still adjusting to...so to speak. She looked like hell, but seemed to be trying to pick up her pieces, get acclimated. He had finally determined the same for himself.

After a while, they would "happen by" each other, on her way to wherever, on his way out. Soon, their subjects became more meaningful, more personal.

Why he confessed as much to her was still a mystery to him. There was something about that pretty, dark-eyed woman who'd once hated the sight of him, something that told him she'd listen, she'd understand. Much to his relief, her responses grew more familiar as well, not only of him, but of herself, too. He had a feeling that it was worth a lot more than face value, and found himself wanting

to know more.

He began looking for her when he left his "sessions" with the doc.

She began to meet him outside, trying to make it look incidental.

But it wasn't necessarily permitted. Some ass of an official somewhere called it a visit. Tom immediately plead his case to Caruthers: There was no harm, since he and B'Elanna were essentially in the same boat--and from it, too. He assured the man it was only friendship, and that he wasn't after her. He told him they could talk to each other, relate to each other. It was the truth.

But he left believing he'd just wasted his time, and walked to the gate painfully alone.

Two weeks later, he and Caruthers talked, as usual, maybe a little quieter, but nothing too unusual. When the time was up, Tom left as he always did...and found B'Elanna waiting outside for him.

He stared at her, not knowing if...

She shrugged, arms crossed, eyes on his, smirking slightly.

He grinned like an idiot.

She explained the rule: No touching, no displays of any kind, just walk to the front gate. No more.

Tom hopped down the steps and fell in line beside her, holding his hands behind his back to stave off the temptation.

Who was he to complain about such a big favor, after all?

Maybe Caruthers wasn't such a bad guy after all.

Naturally, they filled the time talking.

As the weeks passed, they talked about even more--about everything, anything, whatever came to mind. Soon enough, they spoke of what really was *in* their minds. Or maybe she talked just to have an ear besides her shrink. Maybe he did because he was fresh from all those new and improved soul-scrappings with the doc.

No. Tom knew it had been her, too. She somehow knew what he was getting at--even when he didn't want her to. More and more often, Tom found himself distracted at times from his studying, or his walks through town, hearing her words mulling around in his head, or even the words he told her.

It became more normal, meeting her each time. He expected and looked forward to that every other Thursday despite their turns of mood, which were common even within a long period of strangely easy talk about themselves, their childhoods, their growing up, and eventually the mistakes that brought them to that paved gravel path.

It seemed to pass without notice--at least for him--all those months spent gradually coming to know each other. He did have a life, so to speak, outside of that.

His classes were going well, and he had made some friends among a few of the professors there. Several weeks after his release, he'd met with one of his sisters again, going out to lunch, where she pressed him into seeing their mother, who missed him sorely. He finally did, and was glad he'd been

encouraged after all. Not to say it was easy--there was more uncomfortable silence than honest conversation--but it didn't go badly.

Just like B'Elanna had once reminded him, it was a start. That in itself was a good thing--and, true, he *shouldn't* have expected everything to be perfect. The fact that he wanted to keep trying was the important part.

Still, that was only a glimmer in the life he was trying to build for himself. At least he was able to get used to the small routine of his life, including his trips back to Auckland, which ironically also helped him put that past behind him. Even his conversations with B'Elanna, varied in topic and increasingly intimate, made the time that had brought them together seem like another life altogether.

Well, of course, they had talked about that time, about what had brought them to the Voyager, what points they had been at. But after a few conversations, it came up less and less, replaced by other topics that seemed more...pertinent.

Such as the future.

Then, just as suddenly as he had seen her outside on the path, waiting for him, B'Elanna was there in his kitchen, standing near to him. Shed of her prison uniform for a casual outfit and heeled shoes, her newly trimmed hair curling around her pretty face, she was looking up to him with those big, sable eyes, both wise and anxious at the same time.

So complex, so full of her heart and mind...yet another puzzle he could spend eons figuring out.

Of course, he knew he had puzzles of his own to figure first.

Or at least that'd be the first thing Doc would remind him.

"I won't go back to doing things I don't love again," he softly reiterated, lost in her piercing stare.

He took her glass for her, barely touching her. He didn't dare touch her.

Her eyes diverted. "Well, that's good," she said quietly. "You'll be happier."

"I think so," he agreed, moving to finish cleaning the kitchen, accepting her help when she offered it. "I'm pretty sure I like what I'm doing now."

In more ways than one.

For the first time in his life, he had somebody who knew him near him--having dinner with him, taking about whatever came to mind, just like they had for several months by then. Only that time, she was free, too, and readying to get on with her life. They continued the same conversation on the balcony, watching the sea beyond them ripple in the slim moonlight, shimmy in the breeze until a light rain started, sending them inside again...

She was someone who knew him possibly better than any person had, better than anyone he'd allowed so far. For some reason, he wasn't scared out of his skin.

Well, maybe he felt a little awkward. He just fought it well.

But they didn't talk about that. They spoke of what they'd do with themselves. As always, both of

them wanted work of some kind, and Tom told her what he knew about what was out there. She suggested to him some more specific fields he might like. They were very good suggestions, and they talked about that for some time. He invited her to lunch with his mother the next week. She tried to be polite, but he really wanted her to. His mother was very kind, and might have some connections she would find useful. B'Elanna finally accepted.

He forced himself not to seem too happy when she did.

He couldn't believe he had gotten so lucky...or maybe, somehow, he'd earned it? Maybe his efforts had finally begun to pay off?

One thing was certain: Harry Kim was right after all. He had indeed met someone who gave a damn.

This time, he wasn't about to take that for granted.

It seemed so long ago, that conversation--further still, the numb, dull pain that followed him every day, haunted him in everything he did and every stare he felt sawing into him. Since that fateful "assignment," those feelings had gradually eased, that feeling of necessary isolation had been replaced by a more sincere want for closeness.

Or at least he wasn't nearly as afraid of it as he had been. He had accepted the fact that he needed to move on, had come to want to.

He certainly remembered the bitterness of purposelessness well, though--still felt it crawl on his skin when he failed at even simple things. But it was better, and was getting better still.

It was strange, as his more sardonic side resisted such hope. But for the first time in years, he actually felt some confidence that things might turn out okay if he only stopped getting down on himself so damned much and tried again. It had worked with his studies, with his mother and sisters...with B'Elanna.

He had to push himself some days, but it was working. Finally.

He looked at his friend. She was yawning, speaking quietly, if not still a bit nervously; her bare feet were curled up on his couch, her posture was relaxed. She was almost ready to go back to her own place, a nice flat he'd found for her on the west side of town. Ready to get some rest in her own bed, in a quiet room all her own for the first time in nine months.

Gazing at her, Tom sincerely hoped that his actions had indeed made the difference.

He was more than willing to keep going if what he had, there and then, in himself and in the friendship he'd gained, was any evidence of the consequences...

If so, he did want that to continue.

...and I knew very well that Ms. Torres had been both your comrade and friend. But I think we had seen them, come to know them, in a relatively short amount of time, and during a low point at that.

I have to say, it wasn't too much of a surprise to me to see they kept in

touch, seeing how their friendship began. It might even be my doing, recommending Ms. Torres to Auckland as I did, and wheedling Mr. Paris into counseling. In any case, they were ready for change.

Somewhere along the line, things finally began to improve for them both. Maybe it was therapy, or maybe they finally just grew out of it. But judging from their records alone, it's clear they purposefully began working to enrich their lives, make something out of themselves. Moreover, somewhere along the line...

B'Elanna jumped up to her elbows, gasping hard, heart skipping.

She froze.

Since her release from prison nine months before, since starting her life all over again and trying to move on, this was not unusual.

She was in a warm, comfortable bed. Her eyes turned to the nearby display of a sunny morning, the warm breeze wafting in the windows. She could hear people on the street below, pleasantly moving along their way.

Another day to them, and she'd woken up as she always did.

This time, however, she was in Tom's bed.

A year and a half ago, she despised him, and now she was in his bed.

He wasn't there, but she heard him shuffling around in the kitchen.

Her heart slowly calmed, and she exhaled.

Then, she quickly recalled that at least she did actually get some sleep--sleeping with her friend. Taking the risk of accepting his approach, and winding up closing her eyes a couple hours later, safe in a warm pair of understanding arms...

With her closest friend...now her lover.

Just kissing him...finally kissing him on the step of his building...sliding her arms around his strong, warm shoulders, feeling his hand take her waist, his other hand thread into her hair, cup her head...

He needed to study, she was on her own way home to prepare for her practical exams. There, they tacitly decided what they wanted: Looking at each other in a strange, knowing silence for nearly a minute, they slowly gravitated into each other's embrace, into a kiss...then more into it, and gradually up the stairs, to his apartment, to his bed...into each other...

B'Elanna had to grin at the images and feelings that met that recollection. She'd wanted to make love with him since before she left Auckland (or at least she had considered wanting it), more since being paroled, then more and more seriously every time they met over lunch or the occasional dinner, or walked together through the city or along the water, even shared their studies. He had become completely comfortable with her--comfortable enough to argue as well as he bantered with her. She

rose to every challenge, egging him on even when they disagreed, leaving her fascinated by him as much as he was obviously engaged by her.

It had come to the point where she had ached for his caresses, imagined his soft, warm hands touching far more than her hand or her arm, his pleasant mouth exploring her, tasting her skin... His searing gazes had come to practically beg for her closeness, and she did everything but give it to him...for a time.

Finally, she let that happen, as did he...

Only to wake up with her heart pounding. As usual.

She wondered if she would ever sleep again, really sleep again, without waking with a jolt.

She'd forgotten the last time she actually had slept without disturbance.

She looked to the window again, the breezy curtains, the sounds on the street below. Turning away from that light, she shivered into a stillness, unable to break her stare from a particular roll in the blanket, losing focus...

Tom came in then, a tray in hand with cups and a decanter, pausing soon inside the door. He knew, looking at her, approximately where she was. She was pale. Her eyes were wide. Hell, she wasn't even in the room.

"Morning," he said quietly.

Snapping her attention up, she quickly propped herself up on the pillows against the head of the bed, ghosting a smile his way. "Good morning."

Anxious.

He still knew mornings of waking up like that.

He had that morning, too.

He moved to place the tray on the bed stand, moving his chronometer aside. "I hope you don't mind," he said. "I ran down and got some decent coffee. We can have breakfast there later. Capel's?"

"Sounds great." A little quick, that.

"One teaspoon?" he asked, turning a cup up.

"Yes," she answered.

He did not pour, but sat at her side, turning a little to face her.

"It takes time, doesn't it?" he said gently, hoping that didn't come off as condescending. She had admitted to her occasional insomnia since her parole. They had talked a little about it. Never right after waking up, though. That was definitely new.

"Everything takes time," she replied, then shook her head at her own words.

Tom nodded. He knew it wasn't him, or their lovemaking the night before, which had inspired more

contentment in him than he'd felt in years. Though, he couldn't put his finger on what it was...except that he'd never felt so close to anyone, especially a woman, so connected. When he was with B'Elanna, it was very, very different. Making love to her had sealed that. Maybe there wasn't supposed to be a word for it.

Anyway, he knew it wasn't about him, her tension.

She sighed, tried again. "I guess you've had a lot more time to get used to it."

"A little," he said.

B'Elanna regarded him again. He was always so concerned about her, while she was at Auckland and well after--to that day. He was so different than how she had once perceived him to be...another lifetime ago. For seeing his eyes, so gentle to her there, she did manage a little smile. That look of his never failed to warm her, remind her--as if she'd forgotten--how much she had come to feel about him...

"I enjoyed last night, though," she said softly. "A lot."

"I did, too," he returned, bent to press his lips to hers.

There, he lingered, feeling his blood rush when she pressed easily into their kiss, her full lips warming quickly on his as their mouths moved together. He felt her place her hand on his leg, so naturally, soft and small. Pulling back a little, he kissed her again, gently.

Parting, his gaze was tender, and she was thankful for it. Gradually, her nerves of a minute ago passed a bit.

A bit.

She wasn't nearly stupid enough to expect it would just go away.

She opened her mouth to speak, closed it again, darted her eyes to the coffee--away from his--then growled at that move, too, slumping. "I'm sorry, Tom. Sleeping is still hard sometimes."

"I know. You start wondering if it's an evil plot after a while." He caressed her hand, still laid on his leg, warm there, a little tense. "It gets easier, if you let it. It'll get better."

"Well, I'd be pretty crazy not to let it, right?" she smirked. "I'm okay. It goes away."

He assented, turned to finally pour their cups.

Maybe it was crazy--maybe all of it was, right as it felt to him. But he knew... Maybe he should go ahead and get it out of his system. It would be easy just to let things be, not say anything. But he'd been doing that for more than a year by then, and he knew pretty well what withholding in other matters had done for him...

She watched him, watched his eyes fill with some sort of struggle as he carefully poured their coffee. He did that a lot--let his mind wander into decisions and indecisions while otherwise silent and busy. His eyes could hold so much behind...

"I want to keep being with you, B'Elanna," he said quietly as he poured some cream into his cup, then looked back for her reaction. "I know we've just...well, started out. But we're friends--more than

that, really--and... I don't want you to leave."

"That might be the best arrangement, actually," she replied. "I'll never get this good service anywhere else."

He laughed a little at that, turned back to stir some sugar into her coffee.

She grit her teeth at her own sudden need to evade his sincerity, much less her own feelings--feelings she knew she had, wanted to have, had shared with him only the night before.

Evasion was a bad habit, she knew--and one she knew could definitely be his, too. For a moment, she almost blamed him for influencing her. But he had dropped his own offhandedness for a moment to be real with her...essentially proposition her. She'd been the one to deflect him for the nervousness still crawling in her.

He was being so damned nice about it, too.

She almost wished he would call her on it.

At the same time, she knew that wasn't really up to him to.

He was being so damned nice about it, too. She almost wished he would call her on it. Inwardly she cursed her stupid awkwardness, but then she stopped again, knowing it would go nowhere, her usual stewing and misdirection. Moreover, it wasn't his job to baby-sit her moods.

Then, she smirked to think she was starting to sound like the doc.

With a conscious effort, she sat up, reached out and touched his face. He turned to the contact and she laid her palm on his cheek. Meeting his gaze again, her smile turned as gentle as his had been before, and as unwavering.

She meant it to be both.

"I'd like to stay, Tom," she told him.

That time, he smiled, reached up to take her hand.

"Thanks."

Mind you, I wouldn't say they're cured. Even these near two and a half years later, there are still shades of what I'd seen in the Badlands, those doubts and insecurities. But that's natural. We all have them. They just have to work a little harder to fight that off, maybe accept help they wouldn't have otherwise considered.

I think it's shown well on them. They look to be starting to put the past behind them and moving forward with their lives. I'd suppose you could call it successful rehabilitation, in more ways than one...

"You're done already?" The inmate looked predictably surprised. He'd been fumbling with the thermal wires, just untangling those salvaged parts while his counterpart had already finished setting up the unit they would be connected to.

"It gets easier," the other man encouraged. After almost thirty months in the Federation Penal Facility at Nevra-two, he'd gotten that work down to a simple routine. He couldn't say he'd never had trouble with it--and had given up on recycling wire bundling as soon as he'd earned the privilege of delegating it. "Just don't pull on it--just makes the knots tighter. Ease the knots apart from the middle, and it'll loosen up."

The younger inmate nodded, clearly tired but trying. He wasn't used to the days there--yet. "Thanks, Captain."

The older man grinned and picked up another tray of parts. "It's just Chakotay--big Indian who can't manage knots to save his life. Welcome to hell."

The man grinned and got on with his work.

In truth, Chakotay didn't like them calling him "Captain" anymore. Even if it did bring him a wistful smile, he always corrected them, quietly, usually trying to find something wry to say in return. There wasn't much time to smile, after all. Even sarcasm had its benefits there.

But the smile made of that memory... No, that he couldn't let continue.

They called him captain, anyway.

Even if he had been successful with one, there'd always be someone else arriving at their first detail with twice the stubborn memory of the last inmate he'd corrected. He wondered sometimes why he bothered.

He had promised himself he would move on, even if moving on would have to begin there on Nevra-two, surrounded by Maquis who remembered his name all too well, even though they had come there much later than he had.

Or perhaps he should hold on to a little.

The last of his own crew had been released about a year before. For them, he had been the strong one, as he had been before. Some only got a few months as they were just one-timers (he'd explained it carefully to the JAG overseeing the trial), most got six. A few got a year. Others were extradited to the Bajoran government.

For however long they were there with him, though, he made himself an example, digging into his work assignments without shame or anger. He tried hard not to think about how the rebellion was faring without them, and looked forward with his comrades to the day they might meet again and look back on their fight as something long past, but something they could be proud of.

He knew, though, they would never meet--and maybe that was for the best, too. They needed to get on with their lives, as best they could. He would, too.

He still had another few weeks in his term, then a year and a half of parole, the location still to be decided on. He knew they had been gracious with him, only giving him two and a half years. Other Maquis captains had gotten twice the time for similar charges. Then again, they hadn't been very cooperative.

"Chakotay."

He turned his head from the next piece of work in his hands to the guard, who motioned him to come with him. Setting aside his piece carefully, he stood and followed without complaint. "What is it?"

"Administrator Ograla would like to speak with you."

Chakotay nodded shortly. The request was nothing new, really. He was a frequent guest to the warden's office. Ograla and Chakotay had met often, especially in the beginning, as they worked to mete out a good way to handle his people and the other Maquis. They formed a strange friendship in the process. Though she was known, particularly to him, for her note of steel, she had been willing and patient, and plainly spoken when it came to the practical matter of making that rehabilitation site a better one for its inmates.

That was all Chakotay could ask for--more, even. It had helped him with the guards, who instantly distrusted him when they learned of his former rank. It had helped his people, who had enough to deal with.

He entered the warden's office, not too briskly, not straying in the jamb. Ograla grinned briefly at him from the center of her usually busy day. "Here," she said, pushing a PADD across her desk. "But don't tell anyone. The last thing I want is every prisoner on base clamoring for outside contact from non-family members."

Curious, he moved to take the PADD. "Who's it from?"

"Why don't you read and find out?" she replied, standing to leave him to it. "I'm going to lunch. Clear it and leave the PADD when you're done. Bomaro will take you back when you're ready."

"Thank you."

He took a seat on a plain bench by the windowless wall.

He activated the letter...and blinked.

For a moment, he felt like someone was stepping on his grave.

In truth, though, he had been curious, had wondered from time to time, in little flashes when he let himself look back. He seriously tried not to remember too often, though.

But how could he not? He was surrounded by his past, faced his bitter yet conceded defeat with every beaten, angry Maquis that came through that place. He wondered where they had been, how the war fared; who was alive, who had perished. He wondered if anything they had done, sacrificed, still fought for, had even made a difference, or ever would in the end.

He resisted every day the temptation to ask the new inmates. Then again, he didn't have to. They spoke of their struggles and outside news freely enough. As he expected, it didn't look good. The reminders of the increasing violence spun in him, a vicious combination of pride and despair, of purpose and uselessness...of anger.

His time in the Maquis was hard, but it had been a life of his own choosing, when he felt no other option but to fight, to vindicate his people, to protect his quickly dwindling home sector. It was his doing, his making a crew, training them...and enlisting--something he knew he was very good at.

He'd forgotten along the way, however, what he might be doing to their lives. As an old Earth expression went: "I would never wish this on my worst enemy." But he had, unwittingly, wished it upon countless trainees, had needed them so much that he didn't think about how he'd bestowed upon them the hell and pain and fury that he had suffered and endured.

It was a war. It was for the cause, the better good--an old, staid rationalization, but a believable one.

It didn't make it right. Nothing would.

So, yes, he looked upon the letter with great anticipation, reading every line and in between them, trying to see beyond the simple words and subtle lines.

As he read, he nodded, glad to see what he was... His brow furrowed.

He blinked and read the paragraph over again. Then, he considered the opposite wall, feeling a stab of protectiveness for his former engineer, that young, bright woman he'd ruined and hoped would turn out all right in spite of him. But now, according to what he'd just read... He almost turned the letter away. He couldn't believe to believe that B'Elanna Torres would actually choose to involve herself with that careless waste of a pilot. It was almost too hard to read. But by that point, he had to, if only to make sure he got it right.

Chakotay glanced through the paragraph again. He'd read it correctly, and forced himself to read the remainder, make himself at least *try* to see that other point of view.

He was glad he did. He still didn't like it, but...

...I remember you telling me, Chakotay, why you had done what you had--for your crew, and for Ms. Torres. You said you'd had to cut the cord, for her sake as well as the crew's.

By the look of things, maybe it was all right after all.

...I thought at the time it might not work out for her. I think you knew you had no other alternatives but to send her away and wish for the best. Whatever we might have thought at the time, it did work. It worked for Mr. Paris, too, I think, giving him the impetus to cut his ties with the past....

Janeway certainly seemed assured in her statements, perhaps for good reason. She had been the one to feel them out, who proposed their punishments when it was time to mete them out. She had essentially made the final judgment for them.

...At the same time, I also believe that they needed some investment in the future. Thus, I intervened with my recommendations. Thankfully, the Rehabilitation Commission listened. That combined with their efforts gave them something to work for, some hope to keep them going...

It was a good one.

....I think we both helped them begin that process, in our different ways. I hope you read that well, Captain.

I know I was glad to think they had found some direction and acquired the confidence they had needed to take the steps they finally have. I really believe they've taken every advantage of their revised course in life, too, as they should have....

Maybe he had gone off on Paris too rashly. He had no idea what the man had been through--not really. He certainly hadn't experienced prison as Paris had-- *then*--and he'd never had his family's reputation to deal with at the same time.

Through his bouts of bad sleep filled with his conscience, the tedious work and days filled with the reactions of his crew and other inmates in captivity, coupled by the stigma of being a traitorous Starfleet officer, he did feel at least a little sorry he hadn't stopped to check his resentment. On Voyager, he only knew he had every right to despise that treacherous pilot, who turned out not to be as much the traitor to the Maquis as he'd believed.

That, Chakotay came to realize, had been another spot of poor, quick judgment on his part. Paris' attitude had done the initial damage, but Chakotay knew the rest was *his* problem.

So maybe Paris wasn't the fool Chakotay had thought he was. He did seem to have taken care of himself in the end--and B'Elanna, too, in a way she'd needed it.

As for that other traitor, his trainee, his victim, the friend that he had banished for doing what she was taught to do... B'Elanna would always make her own choices, it seemed, make up her own mind. That was her right. Her choice. Chakotay was glad she was still alive to have it, even with Tom.

Sighing out his breath, he grinned to himself. The path had indeed been humbling. It had taken his freedom, had left him with little to go to once he was freed. But it had also led to the better end for those involved, as he had wanted it to be, even if he was still resolving it.

Even though he might have to continue resolving it for the remainder of his life--as they might, too--he'd done the right thing.

The souls of his ancestors might well have agreed.

The trails had diverged, though two chose to walk on one together.

Perhaps winning was relative, too.

Ironic as it may seem, I think Ms. Torres and Mr. Paris compliment each other. They certainly seem to have progressed more than I'd expected, both personally and professionally--and probably did better for themselves than you imagined, too.

Well, perhaps now I'm a little behind myself. I might have started by telling you how I came across my most recent update of their situation....

"Are you sure she'll like the tomatillo preserves?"

She straightened at the picnic table where she and her husband shared their lunch, hearing the familiar voice from behind her and to her left. It couldn't be...

"Tom, your mother likes everything we bring her," was a female's reply.

Her fork slowly dropped into her salad.

"...Besides, she told me she wanted something new to go on the roast this year," the female continued. "This is it. It's not too spicy, it has just the right amount of sweetness, and you'll do just fine with the toast and your dad will love the Chesterfield replica. No holiday nightmares this time."

She felt herself begin to smile from deep within.

Kathryn Janeway--Kathryn Johnson as she went on layover--had been granted leave after a long three months in an increasingly hateful war she honestly didn't want to go back to. Of course, it was nice to come home to Mark, too, who was patient and worried, encouraging her to come home sooner, perhaps start "considering a few other options" still open to them. He was really starting to tempt her there.

Thankfully, he was proving as persistent a husband as she was an obstinate career officer.

"Okay," the man's voice said behind her. "I'm sorry, but you know how it can get... Okay, how *I* get. I somehow always expect the worst when we go over there."

"I know," came the woman's reply, gentler that time. "But that's why I bring the mobile transporter."

They both laughed as they appeared in the corner of her view, walking on the nearby path by the rippling bay. Judging by their direction, they had come from Headquarters, just north of the park. She had likely just missed them there, having dropped in for a quick meeting and to meet her husband.

Kathryn sighed through her smile to see them. En route to his parents, it seemed, they strolled along alongside each other with a few packages and bags hanging from their fingers.

Like anyone.

"You didn't--did you, B'Elanna?" he suddenly asked, wondering.

She snickered. "Of course I didn't."

A small spray shot up from the rocks, misting the air. Neither seemed to notice. Instead, the young woman, but a gamine beside the tall, fair man, stopped and knelt to hunt through the bags they were carrying.

They looked somewhat the same as Kathryn remembered, though attractively dressed, hair neatly done, and in far better health. The young woman's face was made up a little. On their way to some occasion... Admiral Paris' birthday?

Her brow rose with the thought, and then she quickly held her fingers up to her husband, who'd noticed her distraction.

"I wouldn't worry about your dad," the dark-haired woman said, back on their original topic. "He is getting better about you--"

"After you nearly tore his throat out," the man smirked, watching her shift through the bags.

"It was just a...heated discussion. Anyway..." She finally pulled a PADD out of the bag and reached out to drop it in her companion's suit pocket. "...you've got some good news to soften him up." She stood again, her posture proud enough to nearly meet his height as she smiled up at him, then patted his pocket. "You aced your thesis. I know it, and so will he."

He smiled widely. "Yeah, I guess I did."

Kathryn smiled, too. She hadn't read it, but she'd heard of some very interesting work on his part. His name somehow popped out from a list of many whose propositions and research group works were open to public knowledge and she perused from time to time. As good a pilot as his reputation once boasted, it wasn't too shocking to know he'd taken to design engineering as well as he had. She made a note to herself to read his work over when or if he published.

"--And now his boy's 'mate' doesn't have to hit any more outmate hearings," the young woman added and bent to get their packages together again. "I'm glad it went as smoothly as it did."

"I was just as nervous," he nodded. "I remember thinking they'd find a reason to keep me."

"I did, too," she agreed. "It was bad enough just going into Headquarters this time. Creepy."

"Let me get that one," he said, but didn't pick up the bag right away. She was rearranging the contents. He licked his lips while she wasn't looking, drew a long breath, turned his attention back down to her. "You're probably going to hate me for this, but..."

She looked up, her eyes widening as he took the bags she handed him. "What did you do *this* time?"

"Well," he said, purposefully offhanded, "while I was waiting for you downstairs I met with a lady called Ann Stravesi. She's the chair of the engineering-tech branch of the University of Novaspol--it's in Odessa--"

"I know where it is," she cut in. Her stare had become like pools of black lava. Apparently, she knew where he might be going with his confession.

He continued despite her reaction. "Well, she's looking for interns, and I gave her your qualifications."

"You *told* her about me?" That time, her voice had turned a bit shrill. "Did you tell her I'm an ex-convict?"

"Yes--and she doesn't have a problem with that," he pressed. "B'Elanna, you *know* that's a rare thing. I wouldn't take that for granted."

It was good to hear that he hadn't, Kathryn thought. Particularly with the struggle in the DMZ worsening, she knew how a couple former Maquis convicts might meet more than a few obstacles trying to make a career.

"Anyway, she needs a good engineer who's willing to learn and maybe earn their degree while interning on some development projects."

"And so you..." She was shaking her head, staring downwards. She looked as though she'd either smile or smack him. "I haven't worked on a real ship's engine in over two years--and that thing was forty years old! I haven't even finished a degree yet."

He sighed shortly. "I know. B'Elanna, it's a *chance*. I know how much you want to get back into what you love doing, stop fooling around with that basic coursework that makes you nuts. Stravesi and her department work closely with Daystrom, and I know you'd love to have your hands on the newest ideas and technologies. You can't tell me you're not interested."

Her eyes pulled up to his again, and her mouth curled into a tacit acceptance of a not so unwilling defeat. Even at that distance, Kathryn had noticed the young woman's eyes lighting up like a child's on Christmas at the mere mention of the illustrious Daystrom Institute--and well they should have.

"Okay," she said, peering up to him with a grudging smirk, "you're right."

He smiled--a damnably boyish smile. He looked perhaps sixteen years old and getting his first permission to take the family land cruiser out by himself at night. "Just think, B'Elanna," he said, "your ideas and work could go to *Daystrom*. Imagine that."

"Why would Daystrom take anything of mine?" she challenged dourly. "Some ex-Maquis, fresh from parole?"

"Maybe because you're sharper than the whole bunch of them?" he countered. "And there's only one way to find out, you know."

She shrugged, then paused. For a moment, she seemed to be figuring a series of calculations behind her eyes as she regarded her boyfriend again. "How did you manage a connection to Stravesi, anyway? I don't remember you going to any seminars lately."

A slow, sheepish grin crossed him again, betraying once again his every manly feature. "Okay, I met her over a game of dom-jot in the rec room."

Suddenly, she laughed--aloud and freely, shaking her head at the sky. "I should have known!"

"Well, it's not like she lost a bet," he complained, snorting at her unspoken accusation. "She won five out of eight rounds."

"You're crazy, Paris," she told him.

"I won't deny that. So, will you talk to her? I swear, all I did was tell her about you--no tricks, no strings. You know I wouldn't do that to you."

There, he was totally sincere. It was plain in his tone, in his expression.

She looked at him askance a moment. Obviously, she wasn't in the habit of letting him off the hook that easily. After a moment, she did assent, however. "Okay."

"Really?"

The young woman gave a sharp, single nod. "Yes. I'll talk with her."

"Promise?"

"Yes! --God, don't look at me like that. I'll do it, okay?"

Suddenly he moved and embraced her, plucking her off the ground as if she were a twig. "Great! Doctor Torres--I can hear it already."

"Tom, you act like I've already been accepted!" she laughed, holding tightly on to him.

"I'll just take it as a good omen," he replied. Setting her back down, he released her enough to view her expression, then snickered. "And don't *you* look at *me* like that. You won't know if you don't try. You're the one who taught me how to do that again."

"Yeah, and look where that ended you up," she pointed out with a wry stare.

"I'm not complaining," he said softly, his eyes still lit as he neared her again. "Besides, if this works out, it'll be all the more worth it for putting up with me this long."

"I can't imagine if it doesn't," she replied. "If I *don't* go through with it, you'll have even more excuse to keep crawling up my spine."

His grin grew clever as he collected two bags on one of his wrists. "Well, I still mean to do that, Torres," he said in a low purr that made his meaning clear. "I think I'm pretty good at it."

The young woman's smile turned smartly to the side. "Well, you've come along pretty well with practice. You have potential."

"Shut up, jail bait," he chuckled, bending to kiss her.

Grinning with promise of further retaliation, she returned it.

Their arms wrapped around each other for a moment, then slid back down to the other's waist as they parted. She scooped up the last bag, then they started off again.

"You'll do great, B'Elanna," he assured her.

She leaned her head against his shoulder as they walked away. "I hope so. I still think you will, too."

Kathryn grinned, watching as the two, unstopped in their conversation, continued their stroll down the walk, moved on with their own lives, their plans, each other...their future.

Those same young people had once been homeless, purposeless, incarcerated, sitting in solitary confines on her ship. Moreover: Solitary themselves. Those two, so scared to make a move for the threat of further failure and disgrace, locked in their own stifling self-judgment, much less that of others'.

Two and a half years to assuage all that suddenly seemed too short. Where had the time gone?

Ironic. Or maybe what she'd seen was just the result of a hell of a lot of effort.

Yes, that was probably it.

She thought at first to go say hello to them, but decided against it. They were busy, on their way somewhere else.

They had their own lives to live, as did she.

Suddenly, it occurred to her that Captain Chakotay might be permitted a letter. She was a captain, after all, and he just might like to know whatever became of his engineer.

Blinking herself out of her thoughts, Kathryn turned a quick smile to her husband and returned to her meal. His eyes went from her to the couple and back to her. She knew he'd ask...

"You know them?"

She glanced down the path once more. Arm in arm, the young couple turned on the winding trail, into the woody shade and towards the exit of the park.

Walking easily away.

"Not anymore."

(fin)

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2nd Place, ASC Awards, Best Angst (?!), 1999