



Temporality

"The King is a good king:
But it must be as it may;
he passes some humours and careers."

(Shakespeare, Henry V)

Naomi Wildman couldn't help but smile, albeit nervously.

She had arrived in the corridor outside engineering with Icheb, and waited expectantly for the others. Chakotay said he and Captain Janeway would be bringing to help them get past the Kazon there. They were advised not to reveal much about the future: It wouldn't matter in the end, but it might prove to be a distraction. Curious as Naomi was to talk to them, she agreed it would be best to keep quiet.

To say that she was already a little distracted herself was an understatement, especially after seeing the two who had been lost and had meant so much to Voyager, so long ago.

The present was enough to think about, really, without their help.

Only a couple hours ago, the bridge called down to astrometrics to announce the spatial rift's appearance. As Icheb scanned it and pronounced the impossible, Naomi felt her face drain at her captain's awe-etched explanation: It was the same anomaly they had encountered seventeen years before. Moments later, Icheb pinpointed it on their sensors.

Then, as they discussed what to do about it, the captain said, "This might be a chance to find the people we lo--"

The comm died.

Icheb continued to follow the captain's last orders despite the interruption, however, and detected the chrono-kinetic surge that had struck the ship. It had come out of nowhere, had not even bumped Voyager--*their* Voyager. Naomi correctly guessed that it probably wasn't their "time" that had taken the hit. Agreeing, Icheb found and traced the haphazard rifts that had formed all over Voyager.

It didn't take long to count the fractures. It took longer, actually, to believe that it was happening again, and for Naomi to realize that maybe the captain, commander and Icheb were right, that maybe they could find their lost people again as well as escape the anomaly. Staring at the rift itself in the main viewscreen, they knew it was a possibility. The captain believed it could happen; he even spoke with an etching of hope. If they did very well there....

She and Icheb spent another hour scanning and trying to determine the exact nature of the temporal fractures, agreeing that they might want to investigate that part of it, see if they could manipulate the anomaly and access parts of it.

The possibilities....

Then Captain Janeway and Commander Chakotay walked through the doors.

Naomi felt her heart stop when she turned at the sound and saw the most impossible thing that might have come out of their dilemma. But it indeed had happened: Two of the people they lost had just found *them*.

She could hear her captain's last statement all over again...and there they were. What would he have done if he'd been there instead? With a steadying breath, she reported her and Icheb's findings to the two, wondering all the while....

"If only Seven were here," she heard herself say, even while wondering why she would wish for her, too, after as much time. Then again, maybe somewhere else on Voyager...maybe Seven and the others weren't lost, after all. Maybe they *could* reverse those tragedies--and not only the losses Voyager had suffered, but the time after. The fact that Chakotay and Janeway could traverse the ship made it possible. They might come up with something. Everything Naomi remembered about them told her if someone could find a solution, it'd be the woman she so fondly remembered.

"When I was little," she told Janeway, "there was nothing I wanted more than to be the assistant captain."

How she had wanted it, and how that dream had been lost to her. It shouldn't have been. Their many losses should not have happened.

A few moments later, however, watching the two leave, she wondered if it would be fair to change what happened to the surviving crew, to turn back everything they had achieved--and everything *she* became, too. How much would change, and how much would happen anyway? Would it be right to take that chance?

No. The accident was just that--a temporal accident, a rift in space that required correction.

So bizarre to think of her known life as an error. Then again, they certainly weren't going anywhere as they were. The more she and Icheb searched for another way out, the more they knew how stuck they were.

After some time, Naomi could only shake her head at the readings. Icheb, of course, continued to work, but she simply couldn't make herself pull up the same figures yet again. They would only tell her what she already knew--that she didn't know.

When Janeway and Chakotay came again to enlist their help in restoring the latter's timeline, Naomi only needed to see Icheb's nod to keep her from asking further questions. She accepted the plan and the serum Chakotay injected without a word, then followed the captain and commander through a section full of comatose people and into the turbolift.

There, she watched them both in a sort of awe, only blinking as they passed through another few fractures. She had to remember to pay attention, not lose herself in the wave of thoughts inspired by them and what they were doing. Through a section of deck eleven filled with thick, green gasses, a point of construction, and then an eventless nook just around the corner from the main entrance of Engineering, Naomi looked at Janeway's pretty, red hair, her straight-backed stride. She gazed at Commander Chakotay's gentle eyes and brief, understanding grin...

It had been so long. She hadn't forgotten, and at the same time, she almost had. Seeing them from an adult perspective alone made it so different, and yet so similar...

All those times, before her, all that history yet to be, and maybe even happening again....

"You recognized the complementary base pair."

"Actually, I just found two pieces that fit together."

"You're missing the point."

"I thought the point was to finish the puzzle."

That always had been a problem with her, actually, though she didn't know it at the time--or for a long time after....

She barely heard Chakotay ask them to stay put, only nodded when Icheb said they would.

With a smile of thanks, Chakotay touched Janeway's arm and turned them back. They disappeared beyond temporal field seconds later.

Naomi stared at the place for longer than she meant to. Breaking her gaze with a shake of her head and a quick breath, she turned a weak smile up to Icheb.

"Pretty strange," she said, finally ending her silence.

Icheb gave a nod. "But we have to do this," he said, "to put Voyager back into temporal synch."

"I know. But everything we've been through...." She sighed.

"Might happen anyway--just in a different way." He glanced down the hall to the doors of Engineering, and then back to her, a sympathetic smile set upon his lips. "It might be better for everyone involved in the end," he offered. "Just preventing the damage Voyager suffered because of the chrono-kinetic surge..."

Paris' cold, hard glare flashed before Naomi's eyes.

"...would make a big difference--but a good one."

Naomi's response at first was only a slow blink.

A couple days after he took command of Voyager, she came around a corner and found Paris hunched over a melted access panel, his fists on the wall, utterly still to survey the damage there. Soot streaked his face; his eyes were red and swollen, probably from the smoke that still lingered in that blackened corridor. Then, he turned his head, exposing his frightfully hard expression.

She had never seen anything like it before, on him or anyone else. It froze her instantly.

"What are you doing in here?" he asked her shortly. "I thought we said this section was off limits."

Naomi's stomach shrank further still. His tone was no kinder than his expression. "I'm sorry. I was trying to get to the turbolift, to go to the mess hall."

"You know the other way around, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Then *take* it," he ordered, his glare continuing to burn a hole in her memory. She knew even then

that she would never forget it.

"If I find out you've been exploring closed sections again," he finished, "I'll recommend to your mother you stay in your quarters. It's not safe here, and I don't want to feel responsible for what could happen to you on top of everything else. Understand?"

"Yes...sir," Naomi choked and turned to run away, squinting to keep herself from crying.

It didn't work....

Naomi blinked herself back to Icheb's familiar gaze. "I hope so," she said.

"So do I," he confessed, letting his little grin say the rest.

Despite her thoughts, their silence afterwards wasn't as uncomfortable. Then again, it'd always been like that with Icheb. He had a very straightforward way about him that at the same time wasn't too blunt, but always gentle-natured. He was as uncomplicated as she was prone to complication...most of the time, anyway. Sometimes, he could get himself muddled beyond comprehension.

Her lips turned up a bit. Oddly, she was as glad of that ability as his simplicity. It made her feel better that she wasn't the only one who got herself twisted up into knots over issues.

Only that hers were a little different.

"You make a lot of assumptions, Naomi," her mother had told her during one discussion. "You look at what you can see and think so much about that, you start believing you've got it figured out. But it's not always right. It's not always the whole picture." Pausing, her mother gently squeezed her hands. "What you said to Captain Paris was not right. You said something that was very hurtful--and not true."

Naomi shrugged. "I really didn't think I hurt his feelings," she said sadly. What had brought on the conversation had been bad enough without having to have a talk about it. "But if you think I did, then I'll say I'm sorry."

"Good." A moment later, though, her mother sighed. "I don't think he took it personally," she admitted. "Everyone's been under a lot of stress, including you, and he knows that. Still, you can't assume he doesn't care about what happens to us just because he says he doesn't want to be here. *None* of us really want to be here right now."

Naomi regarded her mother, pale and tired after fifteen hours spent trying to coax a half-functional relay system into giving them the data they'd so desperately needed on the bridge--only to have their work fizzle away before their eyes.

Naomi had been there because they simply couldn't find a safe place for her to go with supervision. No place on the ship was safe, then, and they had begun to routinely evacuate sensitive decks, just in case. She couldn't go to sickbay with the Doctor like the captain's baby had, at first because her mother didn't want Naomi to be exposed to the traumas there again, and then because the chief engineer had closed the entire section off so they could repair the surrounding area. Then they learned that even Neelix and Icheb were busy in engineering that day. They wouldn't let her be down there at all anymore.

So, she held on to the side of the panel and stiffly watched her mother work with a terse face and trembling fingers. As the rest of the bridge crew grew increasingly frustrated with their setbacks, Naomi covered her mouth when the air got thick and hoped it would end soon, and they would fix the ship.

They always had before, she knew. Before, she always believed it would be okay.

Then a jolt rattled below their feet, and a power failure hissed across the deck's panels, blacking out the bridge for a moment. When it relit, another kind of smoke was trickling from an access port, followed by an eerie buzzing noise.

"Goddamnit, Sam, what *this* time?!" the captain shouted, smacking the arm of his chair to propel himself to his feet.

"I'm losing control of the shunt relay," she answered tightly.

"The entire control grid's charred," reported Torres as he strode around a chunk of a bulkhead and to her station to see.

The captain blew a slow, hot breath through his nostrils. "As if it was worth anything in the first place. Can we fix it from here?"

She shook her head, screwed her mouth into a tight frown. "I'm going to have to go down there again."

"I don't know why we don't just let Voyager self destruct and get it the hell over with!" he snapped, then whirled around only to catch Naomi's horrified stare.

Indeed, it had scared her, mainly because she knew he would--and could--do it. In his recent mood, the way he looked at things and frowned all the time, the way nothing worked anymore, and the way he'd been talking about their failures that day alone, he would probably destroy the ship if he really wanted to. Worse, the others would probably agree with him because he--unfortunately--was the captain.

But Voyager was her home.

The captain was immediately apologetic. "Naomi, I didn't mean--"

"Yes you did," Naomi cut in, biting back her tears. "You just want to give up and leave. Captain Janeway *never* did, even when she was sick--but *you* would. At least you could do it for *her*."

"Naomi!" her mother admonished.

Tom closed his eyes for a second. "I'm not giving up, Naomi," he said in a dangerous kind of quiet, a sort she'd never heard before in him. "I can't and won't." A pause. "Sam, there's nothing else you can do here right now, not until the relay's fixed again."

"I can help with that," she offered.

"Get some sleep," he ordered, quiet and pointed. "We'll need you rested later. And I think Naomi needs a nap."

When the captain's eyes pointed back to her, Naomi's eyes turned down. She didn't look up again.

Her shoulders sagging as she gave up her post, her mother took her to their alternate quarters on deck three, without a word through the debris littered corridors and jerky, flickering turbolift. Letting her mother guide her by the hand over another chunk of the ship nobody had gotten the chance to move away from the deck, Naomi tried not to notice anything else until the doors to their quarters closed behind them.

Her mother said nothing at first, pacing away the last of her nervous energy as she prepared and served their ration dinner. Then she sat them down for "a talk." For Naomi, it was a long wait. She'd never known her mother to be so displeased with her.

Or maybe the captain's bad mood was contagious.

"Captain Paris cares probably more than we do about keeping Voyager safe," she said, rubbing at one of her dark-circled eyes before taking Naomi's hand again. "On top of having to be the captain, he's got a baby, too--I don't think he or B'Elanna have slept since before she was born, and they worry about her all the time. It's been a very hard time for him. Try to understand that."

"I understand he's not like Captain Janeway was," Naomi said darkly.

"You're right," her mother pressed. "He isn't. But that doesn't mean he won't be a good one. He just needs time to grow into it. Captain Janeway probably needed it, too--and she had a nice, new ship when she started out."

"I guess so."

Despite their unspoken agreement, though, Naomi managed to avoid talking to the captain about it again....

Naomi's eyes drifted back to Icheb, who had been silently watching her as she remembered those times. It was a frightening thought, repeating those hard days. At the same time, she only felt a numb sadness when she thought about it in itself. It was, after all, only the first in a series of difficult years that Captain Janeway had bequeathed to them without meaning to.

If anything, she hoped that time would never have to happen again.

A slight buzzing rolled into the corridor, and Naomi and Icheb both looked to see the "temporal wall" begin to distort. She straightened when Captain Janeway and Chakotay reentered from where they'd left, and blinked as though it was the first time she'd seen them.

Not that she thought she'd get over seeing them alive.

Commander Chakotay was grinning; Captain Janeway licked a lip and turned a glance behind her, saying a few words in that tone Naomi had so fondly remembered. It itched with warmth, as did her smile, while still every bit the captain.

Naomi could see her childhood idol all over again, sitting behind her desk in the ready room and smiling at her, a spark in her deep blue eyes, always so reassuring, a rock of strength.

Mere months later, that light was all but gone, replaced by the aftereffects of a stubborn determination that never found a moment's respite. Grievously affected by the radiation she'd been exposed to during the initial repairs, and weakened further by the successive months of trying to rebuild her severely compromised ship, the captain finally just couldn't take the strain.

Losing almost a third of her crew to the damage caused by the rift's surge and from radiation poisoning was equally debilitating to the woman who'd always been so protective of her own. Being deprived of her closest friends--Chakotay dematerializing and never recovered, Tuvok dying from radiation exposure, not to mention Seven, who had disappeared during one of the initial explosions--only added salt to her wounds.

Naomi missed them too, especially Seven, who was as dear and had seemed as imperishable to her. So many times, the former Borg--the same woman Naomi had initially been terrified of--had reassured Naomi when Voyager was in trouble, had somehow met her when she could and told her everything would be okay. A much different matter that last day, Seven left her and Icheb to their lessons that morning, Naomi had barely said goodbye, and Icheb promptly dropped his transwarp studies to build a puzzle. It was the last time Naomi saw her. She never did come back to ease their uncertainty.

A day later, Naomi clutched to her mother again, sobbing with pent-up fear and exhaustion. A day after that, waking to ask about Voyager and Seven, her mother smoothed her hair against the pillow with a trembling hand and broke the news as best she could. It didn't seem real. It took Naomi a long time to believe that Seven couldn't be found, that she wasn't on the ship somewhere and just not able to be reached, that the captain couldn't do *something*.

Only when Naomi began to feel Seven's absence, when she called to her friend and realized she wasn't there, when she thought to say Seven could help them and had to silence herself, did Naomi begin to know, really know, what had happened there, whom they had lost, how much they had lost.

At the mass funeral, Janeway couldn't finish the eulogy, and had to be taken aside. The Doctor was called to settle her.

Unfortunately, it was far from over, the extent of their losses. Shamefully, those things quickly took precedence.

Even so, Naomi didn't understand why the captain couldn't fight back as she had before. Even Neelix's explanations of her being very tired and ill didn't make sense. It was as if someone had drained Janeway's very spirit, which frightened Naomi as much as it made her wish she could help.

But she could do nothing but feel worse and worse about it as the captain's condition deteriorated.

Captain Janeway had likewise become more introverted as they continued to try to repair Voyager. Despite the tight will that had never left her, every failure seemed to take even more out of her, and not even Tom or B'Elanna, Neelix, the Doctor or Harry could counsel her. Rather, she appeared more distant to them than anyone, likely without even meaning to.

It didn't seem like her--didn't seem right. Nothing on Voyager was. Before, Captain Kathryn Janeway and the ship she was so proud of had always rebounded eventually.

Not that time....

Seeing them again, remembering all she did, made Naomi know--again--that Icheb was right.

They *should* do it.

Then, to her unexpected surprise, Harry Kim arrived with them, younger than she was and five times more wide-eyed than she had *ever* been. He almost looked like he was going to come out of his skin with either trepidation or insane curiosity.

He stared at them a full few seconds before driving his eyes back to Captain Janeway.

"We'll be back shortly," she told him, then followed the commander, who had already disappeared through the temporal wall.

Kim looked after them for a moment, then turned a small grin Naomi's way, shrugging to himself for

lack of anything to say.

Then again, Harry always had had that aura about him. Willed as he could be at times, he was still the "little brother"--or that's what Neelix secretly called him. He'd always looked about a step behind, even when he wasn't. In that respect, at least, he hadn't changed.

It was strange to see Kim in a gold uniform and with such jet-black hair. He was so incredibly young, even Icheb chuckled when their eyes met.

Despite their many misfortunes, it turned out that Harry Kim had made the perfect commander--or at least that's what the others who'd always been in Starfleet had said. Capable, amiable, ambitious, he was also utterly loyal to his captain--and above all, approachable.

Every time she was feeling moody, which was often in the early years after Janeway's death, Commander Kim would be the first after Neelix to offer a hand, or lend some support. Usually that turned into an hour or so in the holodeck--the only part of the ship somehow left undamaged--with Captain Proton or Speed Racer or one of the many holograms Tom Paris had created but had stopped playing.

Maybe it was good for Commander Kim, too, to relive those memories, not too long past but definitely in the past, in Naomi's opinion. Of late, she couldn't imagine Captain Paris in those programs.

Kim always looked wistful when they took a short break from their play, letting his gaze drift over all the details his old friend had so meticulously programmed. Sometimes, he also talked about how "Tom played these not as much for fun--believe it or not. To him, it was also an art and a culture. Most people never realized that about him, that things for him ran a lot deeper than they appeared. --Though, he still liked the fun part of it too."

With a sigh or a grin, Kim soon got back into the plot, looking hopefully to her to see if she was feeling a little better. Usually, she was. She hadn't missed his reflective moment, however, and she always thought about what he said about his best friend, their captain.

More than he probably meant to, he'd said a lot....

"Did you come on board after...the Delta Quadrant?" Ensign Kim ventured, suddenly itching to start a conversation with someone there, nervous and trying not to show it.

Naomi glanced at Icheb. Apparently, Chakotay and Captain Janeway told him only what he might need to know. "You could say that," she smiled.

"You're Ktarian?"

"Half-Ktarian," Naomi answered. "You might know my mother--Samantha Wildman."

"I met her," Kim nodded, but didn't seem to know where to go from there. He looked at Icheb.

"I'm from the Delta Quadrant," Icheb said before Harry could ask, a slight smirk curling the edge of his mouth.

Naomi knew why.

During his Starfleet training, Kim had taken Icheb to "decompress" in the same Speed Racer program that she loved so much, which the commander never was too good at and Icheb had mysteriously resisted

at first.

Kim thought it might do Icheb some good to enjoy some velocity, but despite his persistence, Icheb repeatedly--and without explaining why--said no. Naomi still wondered why, though she remembered when the two men haggled over it in the mess hall and Paris and Torres overheard it.

Without stopping in their path, both of them broke out laughing.

Naomi's eyes flew open to see it. She hadn't seen either of them laugh in a very long time.

Commander Kim was confused, too--and for the first time, Naomi saw Icheb blush.

"Go race the damned car," Captain Paris told Icheb as he passed. "Consider it an order." Shaking his head with another snort, he took his wife to their table and pulled her chair for her.

Icheb did as told--and thankfully, he liked it. He and Commander Kim ended up becoming good enough that the crew sometimes came to watch their race programs, diverting themselves from the ever-continuing struggles they would return to on their next shift. They cheered the heroes on as if *that* was the most important thing they had to worry about.

Kim and Icheb beat the bad guy every week, of course, but it was still a lot of fun....

Naomi grinned at Icheb's plain but friendly information, which did nothing but keep young Kim from saying anything more. In fact, it made him even more entertaining, the way he shifted from foot to foot and darted his eyes around as if to find *anything* purposeful to examine.

As amused as she had been just then, however, the entry of three none-too-pleased-to-be-there Maquis made Naomi's mouth fall into an open smile.

She couldn't stop herself.

She even had to resist greeting the shorter woman among them, willing her feet to stay planted and her hands to not reach out.

Even hard-faced, frowning and determined, yet equally apprehensive, B'Elanna Torres was a pretty woman in Naomi's opinion. Straight-postured as she nodded to Chakotay's words, it was perfectly clear that the engineer understood what they were doing, part of her wanting to get it done, and the other part wishing she wasn't there. Pacing the corridor a few steps and back again, she stopped abruptly in the middle and stared up at the commander as he finished laying out their part of the plan.

"Where's the access corridor?" she asked him. She really didn't know--yet.

"At the next juncture," he explained, pointing. "We'll get everyone in place when we have everyone together."

"Who's *everyone*?"

Chakotay almost bit his lip. "A couple more people," he told her, and nodded to Captain Janeway.

B'Elanna Torres screwed up her mouth, but said nothing. She probably knew she'd find out soon enough.

Young, brilliant, tense...so much ahead of her.

Was it right to risk taking away what had become of her? Naomi suddenly wondered.

The darkly lit young woman caught the attention as if she'd sensed it. Her dark, solid eyes darted up to Naomi's fairer gaze. She raised her chin defiantly.

"What are *you* looking at?" she demanded.

Naomi's smile didn't die, though she did repress it more, shook her head, pulled herself together.

She had a feeling that *that* B'Elanna wouldn't want to know.

Crossing her arms tightly against her vest, B'Elanna Torres almost followed Chakotay and Captain Janeway out.

"No, B'Elanna," the commander ordered. "You stay here."

"Why?"

"We need everyone to stay together. We won't be long."

She didn't want to, but she did obey, pulling herself back to a bulkhead and leaning against it. Briefly, she noticed Kim, but blinked when he took a step back and checked his waist for a phaser. Realizing 'where' he was with only that, Torres' eyes turned down to nail the deck, as if willfully avoiding Naomi's unbroken stare.

She even ignored her own comrades with that.

Her face was set much like how it had been the day they'd gone to pay their respects, to say goodbye, as if times were not bad enough already. Their hearts had all already been broken, twice over, if not more--and they were only at the beginning of a period that none of them escaped unaffected.

The chief engineer had lost them both. Only months before, she had lost her best friend, whom she had ordered to be transported from under her very fingers. He never reappeared when she sent him to Sickbay--or anywhere else. Years later, Naomi learned that for weeks after the accident, even as they were still reeling from the damage they had taken, Janeway and the others had searched the remnants of the rift and the surrounding area for any evidence of Chakotay's energy patterns. They continued, in fact, until they finally could not justify any more attempts.

A few months later, a safety valve Captain Janeway was trying to repair blew a bulkhead out. It killed her on impact.

When Naomi was supposed to be sleeping, Susan Nicoletti stopped by, and whispered to her mother that she and Lieutenant Torres were the ones to find Captain Janeway in the central access room on deck eight. Once realizing that her captain was dead without hope for revival, the chief knelt on the floor for many minutes, still as a stone.

Then, her head bent, she touched her comm badge to call her husband. Susan said it was probably one of the hardest things B'Elanna had ever done--because she knew what it'd do to him, too.

"I'm still trying to believe it," her mother said sadly. "And B'Elanna...she respected Janeway so deeply. You knew she did, even if she didn't say anything about it."

"She never had to," Susan agreed. "Tom didn't either. I just hope they accept the change. It's been hard enough on everyone as it is."

A long silence followed.

"In a way, I'm not surprised about any of this," her mother mused. "Captain Janeway couldn't have held on much longer. Maybe it was better that it was quick."

Naomi pulled her blanket over her head, crushing her head in her pillow.

Another dear person to her was gone, and with her hand warm within her husband's needing one, her belly full with her first child, B'Elanna Torres stepped forward to touch the capsule holding Kathryn Janeway's body.

She did not cry. She did not blink.

Instead, she stared at the shell and whispered, "Take care of our friend."

Naomi, half-wrapped around her mother, stared unashamedly through her tears at Torres and Paris. Watching them honor their captain, she thought even then that their light had changed with their losses, just as it had Captain Janeway. At the same time, they looked more resolute than ever, as though they had taken all the strength and purpose Commander Chakotay and Captain Janeway had left behind.

In her child's mind, she thought they'd done this purposefully.

She didn't really understand the equal loss and burden they had taken on.

They were, after all, the highest-ranking officers left on board, along with Ensign--now Commander--Kim, became first officer to his old friend Tom Paris. For her part, B'Elanna Torres had chosen to remain in engineering. They needed her there more than anywhere, and she knew it better than any command role she might have assumed. No one argued that.

The three had agreed on that course, in fact, in an open briefing for the crew, where Paris openly stated that she'd gotten the best of the three.

Torres grinned and rubbed his leg under the table. (Naomi was sure no one saw that but her.) "I'll make it up in incubation duty."

For the first time in what seemed like weeks, the new captain smiled, patted her round belly. "You've got a deal," he said softly.

It was Paris' idea to make his wife a commander, though, and although she had balked at first at the promotion, Commander Torres carried the title, all its privileges and responsibilities, well.

She became young Naomi's next idol....

Naomi had unconsciously wandered across the corridor in her thoughts, passing the woman, who was younger than her and still tightly crossed and crunched against the wall. Blinking to a move at her side, Naomi gave a small, friendly nod to Gallagher, then to Ayala, who was equally dirty and so much younger than she knew him. His only reply was a blink. He did not block her path.

"Maybe we should see if they're okay," Kim suddenly said.

"No," Icheb told him. "It's difficult getting through the ship, but they can manage without our splitting up. They haven't been gone much longer than they were when they got you." His lips curled up. "Be patient...Ensign."

"Yes, sir," Harry said with an official nod.

Naomi laughed, as did Icheb. "Oh, now I *do* wish I'd remember that," she giggled.

"It was worth it just for remembering only an hour," Icheb agreed, chuckling more to turn a fond stare back to the man who would be commander. "Sorry, Ensign. You'd have to know where we've been."

Harry did not ask.

Naomi was not surprised. Kim always did know when to give it up.

"Oh my God," came a voice behind them, and when Naomi turned, she almost coughed to see the young, blue eyes of *Lieutenant* Paris pointed straight at her. He looked exhausted, disheveled, but ironically impressed to see what he did. "I knew you'd be a heartbreaker."

Naomi couldn't help but place her hand flat on her skipping heart as a breath of relief escaped her. She'd been a child the last time she'd seen such an unaffected expression on Tom Paris' face--at least when pointed at her. She never thought it would mean so much to see it again.

His arms opened. "Might as well, while we're here."

Naomi didn't argue, walking straight into the lieutenant's arms. His closed around her immediately, squeezing her tightly. She laughed at the mere feel of his warmth. "It's so good to see you, Ca--...sir."

Parting, he gave her a look, but quickly dismissed it. "No, I don't want to know. I know enough--and it's good to see."

Glad he said that, Naomi hugged him again. "Same here."

It hadn't been a year past Captain Janeway's death when Naomi knew without a doubt that she didn't like being near Tom Paris anymore.

He wasn't outwardly *unpleasant*--all of the time--but he was unnerving to her, being near him after knowing what he used to be like. When she was little, he was the fun uncle, as her mother once called it, inviting her to the holodeck, or "crashing" her programs, even taking her for trips in the Delta Flyer. He had always been tender and cheerful, good to be around.

Then, he became the captain--something she thought would be, despite the way he got it, a great thing for anyone. For him it seemed the opposite. As tired as he had been when Janeway was struggling, the day he appeared with four pips on his collar, his face looked particularly drawn and his eyes held an eerie blankness. He was quieter, rarely smiled. His very presence felt cold to her.

Then, she said what she had on the bridge about his giving up on them, in front of everyone and meaning every word. Naomi could tell it had affected him, was sure it had, because after that, he barely spoke to her at all--and *never* apologized for his actions again.

He did still manage a grin for Naomi on occasion, but that smile had changed, looked more like an afterthought than proof that he was happy about anything or pleased with her. It didn't *feel* right--like Janeway's weakening hadn't seemed right, either.

Naomi still couldn't comprehend why, and after a while, didn't bother to. She just knew he was different.

One morning, she came into the mess hall very early and caught Tom there alone. Leaning his chin on

a fist, his fingers curled around the handle of a coffee mug, he stared out of the viewport. Though the room was dim, she could swear he had tears in his eyes.

"What's wrong?" she asked, almost timidly. She hadn't spoken to him since the bridge incident some months ago, and didn't know how he'd react.

He shook his head. "Nothing," he replied quietly as he looked at her. His eyes remained glassy, and hardened as they found hers. "What are you doing here at this hour?"

Naomi swallowed. His tone was neutral, and still quiet, but she hadn't forgotten their conversation in corridor soon after he became captain. "I was supposed to meet Neelix."

"He's not here yet," the captain told her. "Would you like some juice--breakfast?"

"I already had my rations," Naomi lied. "But thanks. I'll go find Neelix."

His brow rose. "You sure? I'm not due on the bridge for a few more minutes."

"I'm sure." Naomi tipped her head, observing the captain's expression again. "Do you always come here before going to the bridge?"

"B'Elanna and Katrina are still asleep, and...well, I need a little time to gear myself up, think. There's a lot to think about here."

"Oh." Naomi stepped back a couple paces. "I'll go find Neelix."

Captain Paris only nodded, ghosted a smile before looking back to the stars. At that angle, she could see his stare glimmering again above his fallen face. The hardness returned a moment later. She left without another word.

When the doors closed behind her, she felt herself shiver through to her spine.

She decided she didn't know the man in that room. Not anymore....

Naomi finally moved away to let Icheb shake the Paris' hand. She looked back at Chakotay and Captain Janeway, who both smiled in a sort of parental way to the scene, though Janeway seemed more impressed by it than Chakotay, who was on the pleasant side of bittersweet.

Both of them saw a man that had come a long way.

Naomi did too, though in another way.

Then, when Icheb moved aside, Tom looked across and froze.

A beat of silence, and Naomi blinked at the glint of gold on his left finger.

The young woman he'd spotted seemed nearly as surprised--though there was relatively little emotion behind it. Her arms were still wound upon her ribs. Her head tilted just slightly as she observed him.

How strange it was: Commander Torres still did that sometimes.

"B'Elanna," Tom said in a breath, unable to take another upon speaking her name and seeing her react to it.

She blinked, slowly, a dubious show of respect, then focused just enough to make her eyes squint, a returned observation. "Paris," she acknowledged.

His responding nod was a numb one.

With but those words, Naomi knew two things: One was that B'Elanna Torres had no idea--not even a suspicion at that point--as to why the man adjacent had spoken so familiarly to her, despite the love in his voice and the longing in his watery eyes. His long stare did manage to sink in after several seconds. She just didn't know what to do with it.

The second thing was that Tom Paris, gazing at the young woman still backed up close to the bulkhead, desperately wanted his wife, his most solid counsel, his beloved mate. He wanted to tell that young woman everything they'd been through, everything they'd accomplished with each other--if only to have a piece of that again. If he hadn't realized it before, it looked to be hitting him at that moment: He needed his wife.

Naomi suppressed a deep sigh.

Neither of them knew what was to come, not even the blond, handsome man Naomi had loved so dearly when she was little. If that Tom Paris was from around Chakotay's time, seventeen years in Naomi's past, then Naomi knew that he and his wife were recently married. More, they were expecting a child.

It was only the beginning.

After some time, and Voyager being how it was under his command, it wasn't a bad thing to say that Captain Tom Paris disliked his necessary role. Many people said that he'd have preferred to have been back to his old routine of pulling double shifts as chief conn officer and medic, would much rather be with his family, not fuss after a ship that seemed bent on overturning even the simplest repairs and try to lead an exhausted crew with even less rest.

One time in the mess hall, she'd heard him tell his wife and Kim that if they ever got back to the Alpha Quadrant, he and B'Elanna would find a place and settle down for good. He didn't even care where it was at that point, as long as it was a *home*.

They said nothing to that--an unspoken agreement, Naomi correctly thought.

But that wouldn't happen until his duty was served--until they were back at Sector Zero-Zero-One, Captain Janeway's original coordinates, which they never had deviated from, even if the ship was still in serious disrepair and desperately understaffed. Despite that, and before any of his own desires would be served, not a person on board doubted his promise that they would fulfill Janeway's dream to bring her and Chakotay's crews home.

Commander Torres always echoed his sentiments with a determined breath and as assured a tone as she'd ever had, though with a soft edge that had grown on her since giving birth to Katrina. For their will and honesty alone, it was easy to trust them in that, if anything.

Yet as much as they followed the common dream, Captain Paris and Commander Torres often insisted on doing it *their* way.

Their style of command in itself was different. Where Janeway, Chakotay and Tuvok were older and settled into their roles, Paris, Torres and Kim were the crew's peers who had been elevated to their positions. Thus, a peculiar informality became the norm when they assumed their new roles, even while a particular "commander's distance" and firm control of situations was as noticeable, even when they

were off-duty.

The captain and chief engineer in particular left no doubts whatsoever they were the ones to answer to, that Paris was indeed the captain, and Torres was third in command.

That balanced with Harry's approachability and finer sense of regulations made a pretty good team, Naomi thought--but only after several years of getting used to life on Voyager all over again.

Again, they did do things a *bit* differently.

About five years after Janeway's death, they landed Voyager on a mineral rich planet to rebuild parts of the ship too far gone to manage anymore. Their supplies gone, their hull almost constantly alerting them to micro breaches, and main power suffering for always having to compensate for those flaws, they had no choice but to simply stop and get out of the vacuum of space.

"No short cuts this time," Commander Torres had insisted in a public staff meeting. "The time we spend down there will *save* us from having to stop later--if we're even able to. One attack and we're in serious trouble."

The captain was too strained to disagree. "It's frustrating enough to be here without a ship that can't cooperate anymore," he stated. "I'm sick of working on something that'll just break again. It's not worth the hassle. I'm more than willing to get ahead of the game for a change."

Ironically, Kim had disliked the idea the most, and made his protest known. The captain turned a hard, bleary stare his way and told him, "Give it up, Harry. We're all but dead in the water and you know it."

Commander Kim sighed, shrugged. "Not like I ever could push the issue when both of you are set on it," he conceded, "even if you're both right. I just hate to admit we have to do it."

Even Naomi knew they did. Like many others on board, her mother had been treated for chronic exhaustion five times in three years. At one point, the Doctor had to restrict her duty for two months so she would recover. Her mother worked on PADDs in their quarters and transmitted them to her department instead, despite her teenage daughter's protests.

They landed only hours after Kim agreed to the plan.

After several months, they had all been tempted to stay. Working there without pressure to move, the threat of a systems failure risking their lives and seeing Voyager slowly return to its former glory, was an optimistic, even idyllic, time for them all.

More, the captain and chief seemed transformed by the relaxed routine, shedding the hard facades that had been downright frightening to Naomi on occasion, and simply uncomfortable other times. They got themselves on a workable schedule, gave everyone leave for as long as they needed--and took some themselves. They spent at least half their off-duty time exploring the planet, sometimes with Katrina or sometimes with just each other. In both cases, they appeared more content each time they returned, pleasantly spent and usually smiling.

Naomi was surprised at first to see it, really. She almost recognized Tom Paris again. She'd almost forgotten his laugh, the sparkle in his eye, even the way he teased his wife. Naomi had almost forgotten, too, the wry looks she'd send back to him, both promising retaliation and asking for more.

Nobody, however, was surprised when B'Elanna became pregnant there.

About eight months after Voyager touched down, they introduced Miral to the rest of the crew in the gentle sunshine of that world. Before them all, the father was as proud and thrilled as he had been since he'd done the same with Katrina, even if those had been such harder times. Though his eyes were still deeper, his expression still more thoughtful, Naomi was happy for the captain. She had not been for years until that day.

Before Miral's birth and after, they could often be seen on the green not far from the ship, playing a game with Katrina, or even taking their reports and Katrina's homework out into the afternoon sun. Just after sunset, they'd pack up what they brought and come in for dinner, dropping the toys just inside the mess hall door, having come straight from the ramp.

One time over dinner, the captain playfully grabbed his wife's big belly and growled a kiss upon it, making the chief laugh and swat his head. Little Katrina burst out into giggles, making her father go after her next. The girl squealed with delight and flew out of her seat.

This was especially pleasing to Naomi, who began to think again about the captain, that maybe he hadn't changed so much after all. Maybe it was because he was busy before, not happy with so much to do and nothing working, just as her mother had told her years before. Seeing things work there was obviously doing wonders for his mood, not to mention everyone else's.

They kept Voyager grounded on the planet for over a year, refusing to leave until their systems and hull were back to spec. Few complained, but even those who did were invited to take a shuttlecraft on their own. Voyager would catch up with them.

Nobody took the offer.

Meanwhile, Naomi took some upper level physics courses with B'Elanna, who allowed her to follow her through engineering and study the systems as they repaired them, piece by piece. Naomi found herself quickly impressed by the chief's cool calm within her element. When she was a child, she'd seen B'Elanna as a little too brusque to be comfortable with. Seven had been, too, but she had also been more accessible. Naomi simply never had the chance to get to know Torres then. Years later, she found herself gravitating towards the ever-steady chief engineer, seeking some stability within all the complexity a teenage girl could imagine--this in addition to her unpredictable life on Voyager.

She noted the commander's smooth hands and sought to emulate their agility and confidence. Naomi was a tall, slender young woman, and unfortunately had been clumsy at first with that gift, so there was definitely a limit to what she could copy for herself. Yet Torres' instinctual grace, her knowledge, practically self-given, showed every time she moved in even the hardest repairs. Her confidence likewise came through in her assured handling of her staff, the problems they faced, and even how she reviewed her student's homework.

It made Naomi envious in a way that she made the chief engineer her biggest influence--aside from her mother, of course.

If Commander Torres noticed Naomi's efforts, she said nothing about it, though she did invite Naomi to go with her into the hills to collect some ore for refining into duranium. They could have transported there and back, but the chief wanted to get out for a while, stretch her legs on the long inclines. Miral was two months old, after all, and as much as she doted on her girls, she needed a breather, too.

They left at dawn--nine hundred hours in their case.

They didn't talk very much at first, but Naomi remembered having a good time and learning a lot--and about more than physics. She found out that the chief never did finish her coursework at the Academy,

not even on Voyager. She didn't see the need. Naomi found out that Torres had been estranged from both her parents long before she'd ended up on Voyager, and that everything she treasured was with her there. She wanted to return to the Alpha Quadrant, mend what she'd left behind, but she could live without it.

The captain felt about the same way, the commander commented in afterthought.

Naomi let that all sink in as they had their lunch, before they set back for home. She watched the woman talk to her husband over the comm and wondered if the commander knew how strong she appeared, how much she had become and accomplished. There, leaning back on an arm in the warm sun, her legs stretched out before her and her eyes set wisely on the view as she talked to the captain, Commander Torres seemed as if she could handle anything.

"We've left plenty of markers," she told her husband. "Tomorrow, we can start patch transports and have hull sections nine through fourteen re-plated within the week."

"Just what I like to hear," Captain Paris returned. "So, does that mean you're done for today?"

"Just about."

"Better set back soon, then," he said. "You know how the sun's setting earlier right now."

Torres snorted. "Yes, sir."

"Watch it, Chief," he chuckled, then, "I'll see you when you get back. Be careful. Paris out."

Naomi grinned to see the chief's responding smile, a bit clever, but content. The captain had a special ability to inspire that expression in her, too. Of course, Naomi grew up hearing stories about the infamous "courtship" of the lieutenants--and rather enjoyed them. In her memory, they'd always been together, so hearing different versions of their beginnings had always been a curiosity of hers. Some recollections had Tom Paris learning the true meanings of patience and persistence while B'Elanna Torres led him slowly through the coals of courtship. Others said they both swirled around in their teasing and flirting until they just couldn't deny their deeper feelings anymore. A couple people said they'd been in a sort of denial from the start.

Staring at the commander, the captain's voice still echoing in her mind, she asked, "Which of you liked the other one first? You or him? --Before you fell in love."

Torres looked surprised at the question, but grinned to think about it. "Well," she said slowly, "some people say Tom came on first, which he did--but I can't say I didn't let him. When we've talked about that, I think we agreed that we liked each other a lot sooner than we did anything about it--probably for being scared to death of the idea."

Naomi smiled.

"I think we liked each other more and more at the same time."

"When was that?"

Commander Torres thought about that too. Then, she shrugged. "A year or so after we got on Voyager. Around then, we became friends."

"It took that long?" Naomi was surprised.

"We were pretty...independent," she answered. "Frankly, we just weren't ready to handle anything like that--not when we couldn't even handle ourselves. Tom socialized a lot and I had my friends, but we kept a lot to ourselves then."

"You didn't think you had anything to go home to," Naomi thought aloud.

"That's about right," the commander nodded. "But we do want to go home, if only so we can finish what we started out here."

Naomi paused. No one had forgotten the biggest reason Voyager kept going--why they kept planning to leave that safe, pleasant world. "For Captain Janeway."

"And Chakotay. They wanted it, and it's all we can do for them now, if not the rest of the crew. It's worth it--all of this is worth it--as long as that happens someday. I know they'll be at peace, and we'll have honored them."

Naomi smiled, nodded. "We will."

With that, Commander Torres patted her legs with both her hands and got to her knees. "So, why don't we pack up and get ourselves back? It'll be dinnertime by the time we do, and I don't want Sam to be mad at me for keeping you out after curfew. For that matter, Tom 'll pace a hole through the floor--and I just repaired it."

Naomi laughed and moved to pull their sacks.

Their walk back was brisk and quiet again, but Naomi remembered smiling to herself most of the way down.

They left the planet a few months later.

As the pressures of running a shorthanded ship immediately returned to the crew, Naomi and Commander Torres didn't have the time to talk again for a long time. Meanwhile, Captain Paris was back to his former habits within the week.

Icheb said once that Captain Paris was suffering from headaches every day. The Doctor had injected a regular analgesic and said the captain needed more rest. He was doing too much, let his concerns drive him too often, and didn't eat a regular enough diet. The Doctor had gone so far as to lecture Commander Torres about her husband's health--and warned her about her own ruthless schedule while he was at it.

Icheb didn't know what the commander said, but her response must not have nullified the EMH. It wasn't uncommon for the Doctor to compare similar diagnoses to them. "If it's good enough for the captain and chief, I suppose it's good enough for you, too," she overheard him lecture a crewman once. "But I would highly recommend you follow my advice, instead."

Even Neelix sighed when she tried to talk to him about it.

"Sometimes, Naomi, we have to do what we don't necessarily like in order make things work. That's what Tom and B'Elanna are doing. It's a tough job, running this ship--not to mention being parents. They're doing the best they can."

Naomi shrugged. "I know, but I don't want it to go back to how it was before. I don't like seeing them like that."

Neelix sighed a breath through his nostrils. "Neither do I, but they're going to be the way they feel

they have to be, even if we think it's not right."

"But you're their friend," Naomi pressed. "You can talk to them."

Neelix's eyes shifted. "Well, yes, I am--and I have. I can't change them, though. I admit, at times I wish I could. But I can't. The best I can do is be there for them when they need it--and that's the best any of us can do. That's all they'd ever want, if they asked for anything."

Naomi began to feel sorry for them. On the planet, it looked like they were truly happy for the first time in years. Now it was over--again.

Within months, she was accustomed to their temperaments enough again that she had stopped thinking about the difference, only remembered that pleasant time as just that. She could be sure they felt the same, and had moved on, too....

The pilot and engineer continued to hold each other's gazes, almost as if they were in a contest to see who would look away first. One saw a challenge in a man she probably distrusted for just the presence of his uniform and pips--and certainly hadn't fallen in love with yet. The other saw a younger form of the woman he married, the mother to the family they started almost immediately.

It ended in a standoff when Chakotay purposefully walked between them to get back to the temporal wall.

"We'll be back shortly," the commander said, eyeing the half-Klingon, then the pilot, perhaps even regretting his collecting them first. Naomi could see why he would. "We have one more person to bring."

Tom blinked, nodded. "We'll be here," he said.

B'Elanna Torres' eyes drew up the long frame of the pilot, hardening her examination once his eyes weren't on her.

"As if there's anywhere to go," Tom concluded quietly as Chakotay left, his voice cracking a little. His eyes turned down.

Naomi licked a lip and glanced at Captain Janeway disappearing behind Chakotay. Looking at Paris' sad expression again, she decided. Somehow, she couldn't let him look like that without doing something--especially knowing that she *could* do something for once.

"It's okay, by the way," she told him, subtly but sure. "You don't have to worry."

Tom looked back at her, blinked. His eyes seemed to clear as he registered her meaning.

Torres didn't miss that, either. Her eyes narrowed.

Naomi nodded. "Even if what we're doing doesn't work for some reason, it'll be all right."

The pilot straightened with that information, his color returning a bit as he drew a deep breath. "It'll work," he assured her, thanking her with a small grin afterwards.

Naomi returned the expression.

During her cadet training, Naomi took some time to spend a night out with her mother. It was rare for them to find the time to simply go out and enjoy each other outside meals or in passing, the mother en

route to duty, the daughter consumed in her studies, and thinking on taking on yet more.

They chose the holodeck. At the end of their shift, Commander Kim had told her mother that the movie theatre would be running a fun film called "Star Wars," and that quite a few people were going to be there. Naomi didn't know what it was about--could only imagine, considering what kinds of "art" had played there in the past--but didn't mind. Times could still be hard on the ship, and any excuse to participate in something completely mindless was welcome enough.

When they arrived, Naomi immediately noticed Captain Paris and Commander Torres in their usual seats--in the back row. Their nine and five year-old daughters and three-year-old son were some rows ahead of them, giggling over their popcorn and sodas as Commander Kim arrived with Megan Delaney.

Naomi and her mother grinned, too. Kim had been trying to land a date with the elusive lieutenant for ages. His latest attempts had caused so much gossip on the ship that, indeed, even the youngsters were impressed and amused by his success.

"You two better save that popcorn for your stomachs," warned a voice behind them--the even tenor of Captain Paris when a few of the little white balls flew a few rows ahead.

Naomi knew that voice well, unconsciously froze at it.

Despite his watchful stares and cautiousness, that subtly firm tone of his, Captain Paris wasn't what one could call 'stern.' He never needed to be, because everyone had learned by then how very well-controlled and timed his temper was, usually knew how far they could go. It was when his generous line was crossed that there'd be trouble.

Their less pleasant encounters with alien species always occurred when other captains or representative took his subtle warnings for granted. He'd let them push and prod just far enough, played it both fairly and cleverly for as long as he decided it should last. After that, he came down from his facade of neutrality like a tricobalt blast, often *shocking* their opponents into a defeat.

The trouble with that was that one had to know his particular tolerance for a particular issue in order to predict how far they could go. Sometimes, it was hard to tell. Other times, it was impossible.

Needless to say, the popcorn did not fly again, and the girls settled down to watch the movie, which had just begun. Naomi did the same, cozying up next to her mother as the dramatic summary faded off and the spaceship rolled onto the screen.

Despite her expectations, Naomi found herself liking the film, even sharing a grin with her mother from time to time as the plot developed. Silly as some of the gadgets were, ridiculously impossible as the technology was, it was an engaging study of war and resiliency, youth and redemption wanting to happen--and sometimes not wanting to admit as much. To her pleasant surprise, she discovered it was exciting, those characters' adventures.

Better still, it was nice to witness struggles that weren't their own.

About an hour into the story, during the "light-saber" training and the amusing holo-chess game (where she made a mental note to create one like it sometime), Naomi found herself distracted by a shuffle in the corner of her eye, and an unmistakable snicker. She looked over.

Miral had turned around in her seat. Then the other two children looked behind them--

"Mommy and Daddy are *kissing!*" Miral announced gleefully, laughing harder when her little brother and older sister giggled, both at them and at her. A rumble of chuckles spread through the surrounding

area.

At that, Naomi couldn't resist glancing further back. There, she saw the captain and commander cracking up as they barely broke their kiss, their arms still wrapped around each other.

Then, without warning, Captain Paris flipped up the armrest and lowered himself and his wife into the privacy of the seat, disappearing there.

"Tom!" Commander Torres shrieked a moment later.

A wave of laughter echoed her.

Ironically, Naomi didn't join them. Though her lips were inclined to turn up, they somehow didn't, maybe because it was so unlike the captain, because she simply hadn't thought of him being like that anymore...for a long time...again.

They rose, still laughing, and Commander Torres waved their onlookers back to their own business. Naomi turned quickly back to the screen, wanting to enjoy the rare moment but ultimately puzzled by it. Maybe Captain Paris was just in an exceptionally good mood, or maybe he wasn't *everything* she'd thought he'd become...not completely. Or maybe he was finally starting to feel happy again.

For thinking on the latter, she had to blink several times to concentrate on the movie. Not ironically, she wanted to believe it, but didn't, too.

She didn't want to be disappointed again....

Naomi held the pilot's eyes, making him believe--making herself believe--that it indeed would be all right, no matter what came out of their efforts there.

It wasn't always miserable, she reminded herself. Even with their struggles and conflicts, they had managed some happiness, became more of a family than they had ever been--a tight family, protective and determined to achieve their goals. And finally--finally--they were almost home.

Almost.

But now they would be set back again, if everything went as planned.

Behind them, Harry Kim cleared his throat. He had been staring at the man since his arrival, wanting to say something, but wary to get between the signals that were passing between Paris, Torres and Naomi.

When Tom turned, though, he managed an offhanded smile. "You clean up well," he told him.

Tom laughed. "It's good to see you, too, Harry," he said warmly. With a quick look back at Naomi, she blinked a nod. The pilot gave another smile of thanks and moved forward to shake the ensign's hand. "I don't think it'll be much use to say anything," he continued, "but you haven't changed."

"Really?" Harry asked, looking like he wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not. "Well, you look like you have--a lot."

Harry had glanced at Tom's other hand.

A quick look told Naomi that B'Elanna had somehow missed that one, having rolled her eyes towards a

smirking Ayala.

Naomi was almost glad she did.

"I guess you're not going to tell me who she is," Harry said aside.

A pause, but Tom played it off perfectly with his most careless grin. "And ruin the surprise?"

His arms crossed as he said it.

Naomi let out her breath.

The warm summer sun poured down over the coastline they'd recreated for the event. Everyone there had dressed in white, tan, and shades of pink, like seashells on the shore, in keeping with the mood the couple had wanted.

It certainly wasn't the first time in his first fourteen years in command of Voyager, but when Captain Paris moved in front of the two, he couldn't have been prouder. It quite possibly was the *only* time he was glad to be what he was.

Harry and Megan were visibly as pleased.

The music, soft and exotic, faded away, and Captain Paris took a breath to say the words Katrina had gossiped he'd been practicing since Harry broke the news.

The practice made perfect in that case. To Naomi's memory, Captain Paris had never been so eloquent, so warm and outwardly feeling. He talked about friendship, on the trust he'd been given so long ago, when no one else would go so far. He ruminated on change, about struggles, and moving on from them. Looking to his friends, he talked about growing up, growing together--the miracles that life affords, especially when it's least expected. He spoke about the joy and terror of finding truth in love.

"--But as I *hope* you know by now, the joy's the bigger part of it," he added.

Despite the lighter moment, his heart was full in those words, which were not only for Harry and Megan, but also for them all. There could be no doubt that he meant what he said, and that he was grateful that they had survived to enjoy that day together.

Harry Kim smiled bravely through it all, gently caressing Megan's hand. He knew. He'd always known.

Seven months later, Captain Paris and Commander Torres gladly relinquished the bridge to Rollins so they could go welcome Doreen Kim aboard Voyager....

Would it be? Naomi mused, watching the ensign and lieutenant regard each other again. Or would they be taking it all away? The children, the friendships, all the possibilities made in her future?

She looked at Icheb, pleasantly observing the scene.

Would *she* be very different, too?

Or maybe, as Captain Paris was fond of saying, it really was worth the risk?

She wondered if Captain Paris and Commander Torres would be thinking as heavily on it if they were there instead. Would they risk having the children they did, their proximity to Earth and everything else

to get back the crew they'd lost so long ago? To prevent those deaths and possibly be happier than they had been?

Naomi really didn't know.

"Rollins! Fire!" the captain bellowed, practically flying out of his seat to the conn. Baytart immediately resigned it so Paris could do what he needed to do.

"Their shields are holding!" Rollins responded.

The captain pulled Voyager around even as a coolant tube hissed behind him.

"Sensors are offline!" Commander Torres announced.

"I don't need any sensors," the captain said, tapping furiously at the panel while staring up at the viewscreen. "I know where I'm going. --Warp drive's still online?"

"For now," she told him.

"We only need a few minutes."

Naomi watched from ops as they began to pull a sharp turn around the long side of the Prevolan ship, feeling her gut tighten. It'd been a while since they'd come across a ship as hostile and able as the Degolans had been.

"They're preparing another torpedo," Rollins called out.

"They won't have time to use it," Captain Paris said, still working. "I've been watching them. They're defending that dorsal array--their shields are weaker there, where we hit them first. When I come around, fire at will."

Rollins almost smiled. "Yes, sir."

"Everyone hold on."

It was taking a long time to get away from this one, mainly because the opposing ship saw Voyager's maneuver and compensated for the move. "Oh, they're good," was the captain's response to that. Captain Paris wasn't daunted, however, but rather seemed amused by the challenge. As the coolant steam poured, a couple isolar bundles crackled, he calmly tapped in another coordinate...waited a moment--then tapped the initiator.

Voyager groaned and hurled itself around the other way.

Everyone grabbed their consoles.

"Inertial stress is at eighty-six percent!" Naomi croaked. Despite the warning and the captain's reputation as a pilot, she hadn't expected Voyager to be *that* maneuverable.

"They're almost ready, Captain!" Rollins warned.

"Good!" Paris responded and cranked Voyager around in a hairpin. A new angle of the enemy ship appeared. "Fire!"

The last of Voyager's compensated power whizzed into the phaser banks and ripped out into the

vacuum and to the Prevolan's dorsal array. It cut a clean line through the shields....

"Keep your finger on that button!"

"Yes, sir!"

"Main power is failing!" Torres told them.

"Reroute power where you can, B'Elanna. We need that warp jump."

"You got it."

...The phasers finally tore through and struck the Prevolan's hull, then, with a little adjustment, directly into their torpedo bay.

"We got it!" Rollins cried.

"Get us out of here!" Torres ordered.

The captain did just that, punching the conn and turning Voyager away and directly into warp. The explosion from the ship behind them buckled their warp field, lurching Voyager's trajectory. As soon as it did, Naomi jumped out of the way of her console as it sparked and popped, throwing a charge into the thick air of the rear bridge. Another wave and she hit the floor as a series of klaxons sounded across the deck.

Commander Torres mercifully turned them off. "I know what's wrong with my ship," she growled.

A few moments later, Voyager's path stabilized. The systems still groaned and crackled, but they were moving again.

As she pulled herself unsteadily up, Naomi could see the captain leaned over the conn, his hands holding both sides of the panel, head bent, taking a deep breath. Baytart had returned, patting the captain's shoulder. Paris looked up to him, grinned slightly and nodded.

There was no expression of achievement in his face when he relinquished the conn and surveyed the rest of the bridge, only relief. Tired relief.

"How's it look?" he asked blankly.

"What's *left* of the sensors show no other ships in the vicinity," Rollins reported. "And it looks like we're out of Degolan space."

Captain Paris released his breath. His shoulders sagged slightly, though he had enough presence to keep himself straight as he walked over to the engineering station. "Take us out of warp," he ordered quietly. "And let's look for a place to stop for a bit if we can, make repairs."

Seeing the fried terminal on the other side of the bridge, Rollins immediately went to it.

When Paris leaned over Commander Torres' station, put his hand on a rail, she placed her hand on top of his for a moment. He breathed again, rubbed her back gently with his other hand. "What do we have?" he asked softly.

"Not much, I'm afraid," she answered, then opened a channel to Kim, who had been in engineering during the attack.

Naomi, meanwhile, returned to her crashed console, still catching her breath and shaking her head. "I just put this thing back together," she muttered to herself in disbelief. She knew she was new at it, but she couldn't believe that the older crew had done that every day only to see it blow out again, when she was little, when things were far worse.

"*We've got multiple systems failures,*" Commander Kim reported over the comm, "*Too many to name--all the usual, plus power relays on decks six through ten.*"

"Damn," Paris muttered. "How long do you give it?"

"*I don't know off hand,*" Kim said truthfully, as always. He never tried to mince times with their captain. Everyone knew better not to. "*We're all pretty strung out down here. It'll take a while.*"

"We're *all* tired, damnit!" the captain barked. "You think we've been having a *party* up here?" But a second later, he reigned himself in, shook his head, then quietly said, "Sorry, Harry."

A pause. "*It's okay.*"

"No, it's not," he sighed, bending his head. With a light squeeze on his wife's shoulder, he straightened and turned. "B'Elanna and I will be down as soon as we've got the bridge stabilized--and power returned to the turbolifts. Do what you can. I know it's your best. I always have."

"*I know, Tom.*"

Naomi still remembered the pound in her chest when she heard him, and the stony, sad look in his eyes when he walked up to Rollins' station. Had he any less control...or a gram more....

If never before, he really hated it there that day, and couldn't do a thing about it but spend the rest of the day--the rest of the week, considering how much damage they'd taken--correcting what had been destroyed yet again.

Naomi wondered how old it was to him by then. He'd been doing the same thing for fifteen years, after all.

It showed.

That night, Naomi and Icheb had managed to meet for the first time in a few weeks, though they only had the time to take dinner together. Worse, she barely felt in the mood to enjoy even his wry and gentle-tempered company. He was getting better at convincing her to take some time out, however. That evening, he simply reported to her station in engineering and, standing patiently out of her way, waited for her to give him her attention. Then, as soon as she refused the need to eat, he told her he could wait, and leaned casually against a bulkhead to do just that.

Seeing his small, sly smile follow that statement, she pushed her tools aside with a foot. "The cause can wait a bit, I guess," she relented.

Upon their entry, Naomi was instantly returned to one of the reasons she wasn't in the mood to go out: The captain and his family had come for dinner, too, and appeared as drawn and introspective as she was feeling after their morning.

To their credit, though, Paris and Torres did try to be a little upbeat for their children, who were all chatting and eating and glad things were okay. Naomi remembered evenings like that, the optimism she felt when she saw her mother come home after a bad day on the bridge. Somehow, she almost forgot the trouble she knew had been happening, if only to see her mother come in and hug her with relief.

It was the way things were on Voyager, Naomi knew from the beginning.

Captain Paris' eyes were especially dark for seeming lost behind them, even while he gazed at his children's faces. His grins were not of amusement, but were rather more similar to the relief he showed earlier on the bridge. He was thankful they were all right, maybe even grateful they forgave their parents for having them in such danger, even if they couldn't help it.

Naomi's mother sometimes still talked about that, giving her no other choice but to live on a ship in almost constant danger. "I wouldn't have had it if I'd had the choice," she had said once, but then smiled as she touched Naomi's cheek. "At the same time, I don't know what things would have been like if you hadn't been here with me....You make me keep hoping."

Maybe that's what Captain Paris and Commander Torres were thinking about when they let their children go on and on, even if they were too tired to respond much to it. As usual, Captain Paris wasn't eating much. Instead, he listened as if he needed to hear their idle chatter, feed off their energy and hope.

"Dad, do you think we can go tomorrow?" Kian asked, his round eyes full of light--and his mouth half full with food. His mother tapped his back and whispered at him to swallow before talking. With a gulp, he tried again. "Can we, please?" The girls were curious, too.

The captain almost looked like he'd say no when he blinked himself out of wherever he'd been. Yet, as soon as his eyes focused, and seeing B'Elanna's shrug, he managed a grin and a nod.

"I think we can make the time. And maybe I'll think up a new aero coaster later on."

Three cheers went up at the table.

The captain's smile was a fine attempt, but all it reflected to Naomi was resignation.

"What will you two be having tonight?" Neelix asked, annoyingly cheerful to Naomi's overtired ears--and she immediately reproached herself for thinking poorly of Neelix's efforts.

She really was too spent to enjoy anything, even if she wanted to. She finally understood why things were so terribly dark when Voyager was falling apart. Only a day into their many heavy repairs, and she was already feeling it.

Icheb shrugged. "What's on the stove?"

Naomi barely heard the list that Neelix had conjured up from the airponics bay. Her eyes were still on the Paris family, on the captain, who had reached out to caress Miral's curly brown hair with his long, gentle fingers.

"Whatever," Naomi said, echoing Icheb's shrug....

The Maquis Torres shifted on her feet, eyeing them with even more curiosity to hear them. If she was on Voyager, Naomi knew, then she would remember Tom's having come for them on Ocampo (one of Commander Kim's favorite stories about his old friends). Maybe Torres resented them leaving her out of their conversation because of that, even if she was with her own friends there. Tom had turned entirely away from her.

Maybe it was too hard for him to keep looking, knowing her feelings for him at the time. Naomi wouldn't have been surprised.

She was right on both counts.

"So tell me," Torres said abruptly, "did we *all* clean up well?"

Tom's face stilled at the sound of her voice. "What?"

"If Chakotay's wearing a Starfleet uniform and following Janeway around," the engineer continued, "anything's possible."

She had no clue how "possible" things had become.

Drawing a silent breath, Tom turned around again. He nearly winced before speaking, sensing the ire in Torres' steady gaze. "Do you really want to know?"

"I wouldn't have asked otherwise," she replied.

Tom paused again, then said, "You 'cleaned up' very well, B'Elanna. We all did."

"We?" she said, her eyes narrowing.

"Yeah. We."

His simple tone held nothing but that truth. He seemed determined not to give away any more, even while teasing her with what he knew. How familiar it was, though not nearly what it became, Naomi knew.

"We all grew up a lot," he added, "More than you'd expect right now. A lot of things happened on Voyager after we were stuck out here. --Trust me on that."

"I don't have to trust you on anything, Paris," she returned coldly.

He took that one for what it was worth: Not much anymore, but a true enough assessment of what he had been, nothing to be proud of. He shrugged and turned away again, trying not to show whatever was going on behind his frown.

Naomi almost grinned at the irony. B'Elanna was unwittingly beating a man who was already down, while Tom wisely refused to ease her willful ignorance.

Torres really *hadn't* expected much from herself at the time, Naomi realized.

She was so tempted to tell the woman--let her know all the wonderful and amazing things she'd done, what kind of role model she became, about the man she finally allowed into her heart and did so much with.

But she knew she couldn't--shouldn't.

She definitely shouldn't tell her what kept popping into her head when she looked at them: Playing with Katrina on the planet, out in the deep green field, Tom Paris hurrying up behind his wife to hug her warmly and caress her belly; B'Elanna's laughing smile, turning her head to accept his kisses while their daughter giggled at them....

It haunted her more every time she glanced back to the young Maquis, who stood apart from everyone. She had chosen that place, as if to insist she would at least control something there, and didn't have to do anything she didn't decide to do.

Naomi knew much better--and knew Torres would too, someday. So, for the meantime, she said softly, "You can trust him."

Not that her words would mean much, but Naomi thought she'd might as well.

To her surprise, though, Torres blinked and looked away, a silent agreement to back off.

Naomi couldn't guess why, really. Then again, B'Elanna always had processed her opinions a little differently. Sometimes, a little went a long way.

Thankfully, this was one of those times.

About a year ago, Commander Torres had crawled up behind Naomi when she announced her discovery of the dysfunctional sensor node. "Pull open the auxiliary access panel," the commander said. Naomi gave a nod, yanked the plate off its brackets, then moved aside to allow the chief to access it. By then, the procedure was mere routine.

For the last year and a half and with the help of the Pathfinder crew at Starfleet, they had been using Borg technology they'd scavenged from an old, dead cube to make "mini-jumps" via transwarp. They didn't get very far before the components burnt out, and they always took several systems down for a time, but it was worth the trouble. They were getting closer and closer to the Alpha Quadrant, bit-by-bit.

"You're getting really good at finding these," the chief grinned as she took her place. "Give me a spectrometer."

Naomi did, then watched the commander work. Even after she earned her lieutenant's pip, she liked observing the chief's methods and efficiency. It always reminded her of Seven's comments on the same. Though she'd been impressed before, for Naomi to know after all her own training that Torres had learned her skills mostly outside formal schooling made it all the more clear what gifted engineer she was.

Then again, Commander Torres was still her chosen idol, someone she tended to look to when she was unsure, obeyed without question and sought to emulate when she could. It was almost amusing after all those years that she still felt like she was a teenager and Torres' shadow.

She wasn't the only one, though. In a way Commander Torres had wryly called "twisted and desperate," the crew had come to look to her as their "maternal" figure. B'Elanna even came to look the part more as the years went by. Her shoulder-length hair boasted a few streaks of gray, and her eyes had grown lines like the captain's, half from stress and half from smiling at her children. She had similarly come to care very deeply about every person on the crew as one of her own, was almost as outwardly protective of them as Captain Janeway had once been.

It was strange now that Naomi could remember avoiding Lieutenant Torres--particularly if she thought she might get in trouble with the chief, which was often considering the places she used to sneak around. She couldn't have imagined how, sixteen years later, things would be so very different. It almost seemed wrong that they hadn't talked once.

While she mused and handed tools, Torres glanced at her a couple times while retrieving them. "You're awfully quiet today, Naomi," she commented, returning her attention to the open juncture. "Something wrong?"

"No. Just watching. Do you mind?"

"I haven't yet," the older woman smiled, then looked back again when Naomi snorted. "What?"

Naomi shrugged. "I was just thinking."

"About what?" Torres asked, pulling a few parts out of her case while her other hand demagnetized the sensor grid.

"About how things used to be when I was little. You weren't as easy-going, then. --I liked you, but you could be..."

"Intense?" She laughed lightly. "I suppose I was. Still am sometimes, I think."

"You were always so busy--driven."

"You were scared of me," the commander grinned, laughing again when Naomi did. "Well, I'm glad you got over it."

"And with the captain, it was the exact opposite," Naomi added, then realized what she said. A moment later, the color drained from her face. "I apologize. I didn't mean--"

"No," Commander Torres said, her smile as knowing as it'd ever been as she extracted a burnt relay. "A lot of people misunderstand him. I suppose it's a part of being in charge, even if the crew knew him before."

Naomi felt a small quiver in her gut to hear Torres' simply put explanation. "Misunderstand him?"

The commander didn't say anything at first, seeming to concentrate on what she was doing before deciding what to say. "To be honest, becoming the captain was Tom's worst nightmare come true."

Naomi's application to be the "captain's assistant" flashed behind her eyes.

"In a way," Torres went on, "he's been forced to live the life his father designed for him when he was a boy--one Tom never wanted. All he wanted to do was be a pilot. Rank didn't mean nearly as much to him as doing what he loved. Being in command, ambition, power, were all the things he didn't want--even if you have to admit he's handled it well."

"He has," Naomi whispered, knowing that as a fact. He had indeed become a very good captain, even if everyone knew he hadn't liked it. She never thought it was *that* deeply rooted, though. She always thought it was about losing Janeway, Chakotay and the others.

"It was worse when his father found out," the commander told her, "and...well, let's just say that the admiral has a way of making his feelings known. He was sad for Captain Janeway, of course, but he was proud to know that Tom had taken command. As a result, he had a way of 'advising' us that wasn't very...comfortable." A tiny smirk curled the edge of Torres' mouth. But it died away as she continued, "Tom had always wanted his father's approval, but he'd wanted it to be on his own terms, for doing what *he* loved and being who he wanted to be. Unfortunately, that didn't become the case. And his father--good a man as he is--still wants to mold Tom in a way. He can't help himself, so Tom's had to tell him quite a few times to keep out of it. It works, but only for a while."

Naomi said nothing to that. There, she knew she didn't understand, and wouldn't pretend to think she could.

"Every day, Tom's tried not to be that person, while still living up to his duty, which is very important to him. It hasn't been easy for any of us to do what we have here, but it's been especially difficult on

him. Sure, there've been good things over the years, times when even he's been *glad* to be in charge. But it's the last thing he would have chosen for himself."

Commander Torres rooted through her parts case for a new relay and turned back to the node. "I can see why you'd think what you do about him, growing up like you have, seeing things change so much on Voyager--seeing us change. But in many ways, he's not that different from the man you used to know when you were little, Naomi. It's just that we look around at the crew and we see our responsibility, more than we see crewmates or friends--this on top of everything we feel about our children and the other ones on board. In a way, it makes us feel vulnerable--and neither of us likes that at all. So we've had to...protect ourselves, keep parts of ourselves more private than we used to. --To that point, this stays between us, okay?"

"Definitely," Naomi nodded, then reached out for the compositor she knew the chief would need next. Without having to think about it, she knew that her mentor had trusted her with something she probably had never voiced before, knowing her.

What Naomi did wonder later, however, was why she had....

The silence that followed, while still a little tense, was at least a peaceful one. The pilot hadn't given up his ground, and neither had Torres, but they had quieted again. Harry looked like he didn't dare say a word. It was good enough for the time being, Naomi thought.

Touching her arm, Icheb led Naomi aside.

"They've taken longer than I calculated," he whispered.

"They could have had to go around a different way, the way the ship's fractured," Naomi suggested. "Or maybe they're having trouble explaining everything."

"What's going on?" Paris asked, and grinned when Naomi almost pulled herself to attention. "Relax, Naomi."

She shook her head. "Sorry."

"It's okay." He eyed them both, though. "Look, we're all in this together, so if you think there's a problem, I think we all have the right to know."

Icheb nodded. "Maybe you're right," he said. "But I still think it'd be best if we all stayed here. I only thought that Captain Janeway and Commander Chakotay were a little later than before."

"Judging by what we had to go through from the mess hall," Tom said, "I wouldn't be surprised. We just have to be patient."

"Yes, sir."

Tom chuckled. "Call me that again, Icheb, and I'll see you on the holodeck with car keys at noon."

Icheb laughed. "Any day, sir. You know, I'm not too bad at it."

"Not anymore," Naomi clucked.

Tom's brow rose. "Now this is something I'd like to see."

Naomi's smile faded only slightly, mainly for an effort to keep it in place. "I hope you still will."

On the other side of the corridor, Torres huffed a breath. "This might be a nice trip down memory lane for you all," she told them, "but if Chakotay's in trouble, I think we owe it to him and Janeway to help them out."

Tom rolled his eyes before looking back to her. He still had to steel himself before holding that gaze, but he did it without blinking. "Go right ahead," he said, "if you think you can get around the ship without getting lost. Watch out for Species 8472, though. They didn't like us much--except as hosts, and I'd hate to drag you back here covered with tendrils."

"For all we know," she returned, "*they* might be the ones who were attacked, and you'd rather sit here and wait it out."

"They haven't been that long," Tom countered. "And just because I'm not running out after them doesn't mean I'm not prepared to if it comes to that."

She pursed her lips. "Must be that new leaf you turned. I'm impressed."

He squinted at her sarcasm. "If I remember correctly, I came down after you and Harry. Right?"

"Yeah, and you were compensated well, I see," she sneered and leaned back against the wall again. "So nice to know you care, Paris."

Tom re-crossed his arms, his left hand notably lying on top that time. He drummed his fingers on his arm for effect, as if to ensure she'd get it.

"How do you know I don't, B'Elanna?" he asked softly.

B'Elanna's lips parted to respond when her eyes caught his ring, then his straight and sober gaze.

Naomi had to stifle her laugh--and even Icheb turned away to press his lips firmly together. Torres had unthinkingly just reached *the line*. She wasn't across it, but she was getting very, very close. More, knowing Paris as Naomi did, he was probably enjoying putting what he knew would be an insane idea into the Maquis Torres' mind.

It worked: B'Elanna's final response was a certain degree of paling.

Naomi could only imagine the dropping feeling in the young woman's chest as she madly tried to decide whether or not his implication was the truth--and of so, how she could ever have come to such a thing. To her credit, though, Torres didn't ask him to validate his seductively put suggestion--didn't say another word, in fact.

Tom let her keep her dignity by not offering a clarification. He'd won enough.

He had always been good at that, Naomi grinned to herself, whether that was a good or bad thing for whoever was at the other end of it. He always used opportunities rather than go out of his way to make people get his point, when he had one to make.

She thought sometimes that it was one of the reasons Voyager had survived as much as it did. No matter what Captain Paris could be in other times, he was a cool competitor who knew when to show his cards--and how many.

At the same time, it was how Naomi--and others, she was certain--had so easily mistaken him, even

while coming to know him rather well.

The strangest part about it was that he never had *tried* to be a puzzle to them.

Katrina had celebrated her sixteenth birthday several months ago, on the holodeck in her favorite program: A British estate in the early nineteenth century, complete with expansive equestrian trails and shady forests. The girl had always been a romantic, far more than her parents were--though she did possess their same adventurous spirit, a part of which made her excel in horseback riding and expressing her literary imagination. Captain Paris and Commander Torres had, not surprisingly, taken every pain to make her birthday the best it could be, sprucing up the program with some new surprises and a formal dinner with music and dancing. They made such efforts for all their children, but sixteen, the parents decided, should be special.

Their efforts were not in vain. Katrina, an attractive young lady resembling a bubbly version of her mother, worshiped her parents, and enjoyed her day as much as they could ever have wanted her to.

The next day, they all went back to work, and Paris came onto the bridge as he always did.

Walking down to the second level with a simple, "Morning, Harry," to Commander Kim, who moved out of "the big chair" as he returned the greeting. Sitting, Captain Paris picked up the ship's reports and nodded as his first officer and friend filled him in on the day's activities. The captain added anything that Commander Torres was planning that day--which Naomi always listened intently to--and then what he wanted to do. Kim gave a nod and added them to the agenda.

That done, plus a bit of their usual small talk, Kim set off for his morning rounds. When he was gone, Captain Paris leaned back in his seat and began to read the PADDs with a chin on his hand and half an eye on the conn. He skimmed a lot--he didn't like a load of too-well-known details when it came to daily operations--and took notes on the chair's arm panel. He barely seemed like he was there, especially when his eyes wandered out to the viewscreen, to the stars.

It didn't bother anyone to see him like that, though. He snapped up soon enough when there was a problem.

Naomi knew that as a certain truth by then. She knew the sight as well as she knew any panel on the ship, or turn in a corridor. She had also learned enough to know that most of the time, his disinterested facade was somewhat deceptive.

She learned exactly how much it was only a few days later.

She had meant to check out Icheb's new program, the mock-up of a new shuttle they were designing together, which the captain had approved for development. With a PADD in hand, she moved into the deck and opened her mouth to call the program up when she noticed a glint in the corner of her eye.

"Captain, I'm sorry!" she said, seeing him leaning against the entry wall. "I didn't know you were using it."

The captain blinked, looked at her. "I'm not," he said, adding a small grin behind it. "I was just getting some air. You're welcome to it."

With that, he pushed himself off the wall as if to leave. Before he reached the doors, however, he paused, turning to stare at the holo-grids around them. Then, it didn't look like he was going anywhere.

"Funny how we take things for granted when we're enjoying it," he said suddenly, wondering in his gaze around the deck. He almost looked amused, in a bittersweet sort of way.

Naomi said nothing, though she couldn't help but stare at the man.

He looked at her again. "Icheb gave me the latest astrometric reading after our transwarp jump yesterday."

"He got it already?" Naomi was surprised. Despite several more upgrades to the sensors, it still took a while for them to get them back on line. Their systems could only do so much, after all.

"He's getting too good at rejuvenating twenty-five year-old parts," Tom nodded. "Have you read it yet?"

"I was going there after here, sir," she told him. "Yesterday was my mother's birthday, so I took a day's leave."

"I know," he replied, subtly reminding her that of *course* he would know. That was his job--or at least it'd be Harry's to tell him. But her obvious statement didn't seem to bother him, even though he let his pause sit for a few more seconds, as he mulled whatever was going on in his mind. Finally, he spoke it: "Naomi, we're only about five years away from Earth. If we make another mini-jump, we'll be only a few years. This last one really made a difference."

Naomi's eyes widened to match her smile. "From twelve to five? That's great, Captain!"

Paris nodded, calmer, but pleased nonetheless. "Starfleet's considering sending a ship out the same way to meet us. Either way, we're almost done. Pretty soon, B'Elanna and I can get on with our lives." He paused, a small glimmer of light appearing in his steady gaze. "It'll be about time."

"Get on with your lives?" Naomi queried.

"Retire." He gave her another look. "You did know that's what I'd been planning, didn't you?"

Despite herself, Naomi's head turned from side to side. "No, I didn't, Captain. I thought...I thought maybe you'd finally gotten used to it, in spite of...despite the trouble." Unconsciously, her hand floated up to nearly touch her own pips, so gratefully earned under his command and gladly given by him. "I thought you'd at least stay in Starfleet."

Paris snorted. "There's no way I'm taking a desk job in *that* place," he assured her. "No way in hell." Drawing a long, silent breath, he let his eyes roam the grids and panels--so orderly, so workable. He seemed to count each node.

"I'll let you in on a poorly kept secret," he said, quiet once more. "Starfleet was in a way how I got everything I have, but it took a lot from me, too. It took years away from me that I'll never get back, made me do things I'd rather not have done....At least I can make the most out of the rest of what I have. Frankly, B'Elanna and I can't wait to pack it away. We talk about that more than anything when it comes to home."

Naomi continued to stare he explained himself, and found herself less and less surprised. --Then she wondered why she'd been surprised in the first place.

At but fifty-one years old, he looked ready to retire. Though he still had the strength and energy of a man with half his years and was still quite handsome, he had aged without question. He'd cut his receding hair very close to his head, which brought out his steady, calculating stare and accentuated the length of his frame. Rather disposed to be a little heavier when times were good, he remained quite lean since taking on the captaincy, thinning his slightly wrinkled face and adding a subtle severity to his presence as the years went by.

After everything she'd heard and known, then seeing him there so clearly, Naomi thought she should have expected he'd get as far away as he could as soon as he could.

"Another thing," he added, more softly still as he held her in his stare, "I hope you know that you *can* call me Tom. You did when you were little. I don't know why that changed, even if I'd become the captain."

Naomi shrugged, grinning weakly. "I don't know," she said, almost a lie. "It just seemed...proper, to address you by your rank."

He smirked. "Well, I never really liked it, to be honest. I've never been much for formalities. Off duty, at least, I wouldn't mind if you called me by my name, like you used to."

She nodded, almost shrugged again. "I'll try. It's a hard habit to break."

"Understood." He took a deep breath, rolled his shoulders to stretch them. "Well, I'd better break the good news before B'Elanna does. It is my job, after all."

"And I'd better get to astrometrics," Naomi nodded.

He seemed to understand that, too. Holding out a hand, he gestured for her to lead the way....

The ripple in the corridor, somewhat familiar by then and rather relieving, made them all turn to see who would be the last of the arrivals.

Janeway came through first, wearing a slight grimace. "Sorry we took so long," she muttered.

"What happened, Captain?" Harry asked.

"We had a little conversation about efficiency." She rolled her eyes and checked the rifle she'd brought back with her.

A moment later, Chakotay came through to give Tom a nod. "We're set. Sorry about leaving you here like I did."

"Not a problem," the pilot replied, the tiniest grin twitching the corner of his mouth, which grew with a snort to see what they'd brought back.

The others looked, too, and even as Harry immediately backed off, Torres' eyes bolted wide open. "What is a *Borg* doing here?!" she snapped, her muscles readying for fight or flight.

"Don't worry," Chakotay told her. "She's an ally."

"The hell she is!"

"Take it easy, Torres. If you haven't been assimilated yet, you won't be later."

Naomi, however, had gasped when she heard an old, oddly familiar whirr--then saw where it had come from. "Seven!" Icheb echoed it, though less surprised to see the Borg in her more complex array.

"Seven of Nine," the drone corrected, examining the woman.

Chakotay nodded. "I don't think you've met Naomi Wildman or--"

"Naomi Wildman," the Borg said, "we have seen her record. She was young enough to belong in a maturation chamber, according to the data."

"Sub unit of Ensign Samantha Wildman," Naomi said gamely, knowing the drone wouldn't get it--and wouldn't have cared if she did. Still, it was worth it just to see Seven again, and know what she became, even if for just a short time.

Seven of Nine's ocular scanner moved over Icheb as well, noting his one remaining implant. "State your designation."

"Icheb," he answered, unaffected by her query.

"That is not a Borg designation."

"That's right," he said pleasantly. "And we don't have time to explain why."

The drone paused, then said, "We agree." She looked at the commander. "Clarify our 'plan.'"

Naomi blinked. Realized.

They had finished collecting volunteers.

Chakotay began to explain their strategy again, along with some adjustments they'd made with a little more thought.

Naomi listened with only half an ear. They were going to do it.

It was time.

"It's about time you take some time off and enjoy yourself," Commander Torres grinned as they rode in the turbolift together to the bridge. "If I could do it, so can you."

Naomi sighed through her patient smile. "I know, I know. And I *like* Icheb. He's my friend. I don't want to feel like I have to get too serious, though."

"Then don't," Torres replied simply. "You and Icheb grew up together, so I can see why you might think about taking it up a notch--and why you might hesitate. But I see how you are with him--and happen to know he cares about you. So, why not at least see if it feels right, let a little more happen between you? You can't keep dangling him along...well, not for too long, anyway. It's worth it to see if there's any potential. Either way, you'll still have his friendship."

Naomi held the commander's sage stare, remembering that Torres was not much older than she was when she and Paris came together, and had been as relentlessly dedicated to her work then, too--if not more. "You're right. And I was the one who said I wanted to do something...." Suddenly she growled. "Is it supposed to be this complicated?"

"Only if you make it that way."

"Did *you* make it that way?" Naomi asked.

"Are you kidding?" Commander Torres laughed aloud. "Every single day!"

Naomi giggled and nodded. "Okay. I'll give it some thought."

"God, not that. Knowing you, you'll think it to pieces." The commander patted her arm. "Just *do* it, Naomi. And have fun. You're young and pretty and full of yourself. Enjoy it while you've got it--and whenever you can."

Naomi's responding grin wizened, then. That advice was definitely the voice of experience, and she knew better than to take it lightly. "I will."

The turbolift doors opened and they walked onto the bridge. The commander moved down to greet her husband and Harry while Naomi took her station, saying a friendly hello to Parsons, who gladly gave the night report before escaping for the promise of sleep.

Within a few minutes, the shift was changed and the day had begun much as most of them had of late--which was a good thing. Normality, so to speak, on that ship was another thing Naomi knew never to take for granted.

Captain Paris breezed through the reports much as he always did, a chin on a hand, one leg propped up on the opposite knee. "Think we can reconvert those last Borg nodes?" he asked B'Elanna as she took her seat.

She didn't need much time to answer. "I don't know," she said honestly. "They're pretty bad off. I don't think they're worth the repairs to Voyager after."

"We haven't detected any Borg cubes in months," Kim thought aloud. "But since they'd done a lot in the Beta Quadrant, they'd have to had come through this region of space. We might find something along the way."

"Hmm," was the captain's only reply at first. He drummed his fingers on the armrest, then looked to his wife again. "You're right about them not being worth the damage, but I'd like to see if we have any options with what's left."

"We *might* be able to transplant some of the last nodes together," she suggested. "It would give us one instead of four, but it'll be more functional for certain."

"Sounds good to me," Captain Paris nodded, then peered back to Naomi. "Lieutenant? Feel like taking a trip to astrometrics?"

Naomi nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Get with Icheb and see what you can do with those nodes. I also want your opinion about our last leg into the Alpha Quadrant. I don't want to deal with the Romulans. The Klingons would be a lot easier."

"So to speak," Torres quipped.

Paris chuckled. "Well, if I could handle it for twenty years, so can Voyager."

She laughed and pretended to throw a PADD at him.

The doors closed in front of Naomi just as Commander Kim laughed at them.

There had been more of that lately, laughter and teasing, among other pleasantly casual moments. Naomi didn't have to guess why. Since discovering their proximity to home, the whole ship was enjoying an assured anticipation they hadn't felt as much since first making regular contact with Starfleet, when she was little. More, as the pressure decreased, the captain was relaxing. His confidence was showing, rather than just his determination.

Or maybe since their talk, she'd noticed it more?

Either way, it was nice to feel the increasing morale. More than willingly, she joined in it.

Maybe, Icheb would enjoy the old Gondola program that Megan had suggested. Then again....

The doors opened again on deck eight, and Naomi propelled herself out of them, saying good morning to the various crew and children she passed en route to astrometrics. Coming around another corner, she stopped for a moment to heft little T'Lia onto her hip and wiggle her nose on the girl's brow before Lieutenant Vorik caught up. The father of two, he and T'Nar both tended to be strict about their children's socialization, particularly since the middle sections of deck eight had been converted into family quarters several years ago.

Not that Naomi ever understood Vulcan logic, interesting as it could be.

A few sections and several greetings later, she pressed a button and opened the doors to the old, familiar room she'd haunted since its creation. Though they'd made changes over the years, astrometrics was like an old blanket to her, totally familiar and full of good memories from long ago. Among them was Icheb, who smiled and welcomed her from his place near the platform.

Maybe he'd like the Antigua program better, Naomi mused, but put it aside for the time to get to their work.

When she asked, Icheb told her the captain had already contacted them about their plan. Though he was doubtful they would recreate a completely functional node, Commander Torres was correct in that it would be far more efficient than what they had.

"We'll have to replicate some of the primary compositors, though," he said. "All of the ones we have are useless."

"I'll get to work on that, then."

"You don't have to program it, at least," he nodded. "We have them in file already. But they won't be as stable as the original."

"We can compensate," Naomi returned, "considering they won't last long, anyway."

"I agree."

She hadn't gotten halfway to the replicator, though, when Voyager lurched to a stop. Then, a rumble echoed through the deck.

The red alert came on a moment later.

"*Bridge to astrometrics,*" came the ghost of Captain Paris' voice. "*We've found something here.*"

Icheb was already working on his scans. "Icheb here. Captain, I have a spatial rift on sensors--but I don't think this is possible. It must be an error in the databanks."

"*I don't think so, Icheb,*" Paris said, almost a whisper. "*B'Elanna's already seen it, too.*"

Naomi moved beside Icheb and saw what they were talking about. Her heart froze in mid-beat a moment later. "The same anomaly?" she breathed. "Right down to the radiation levels? Forgive me, Captain, but that *is* impossible."

"*Not when you're dealing with a temporal rift, Naomi,*" the captain responded, still obviously in awe of the same view they'd pinpointed, yet with an ironic...curiosity. "*We're just as powerless to get away from it as before, too--or if we try, the same thing might happen as before. I need some suggestions.*"

"Perhaps we should do nothing," Icheb said. "Allow the wave to pass."

"*I agree,*" Commander Kim said. "*It's highly charged with trionic radiation and chronotons. If we try to activate a warp field, it could ignite a surge.*"

"*That's what happened last time,*" Commander Torres joined.

"*Agreed,*" The captain said. "*But I don't want this thing to run us over, either. That'll be even worse if our shields don't hold up. We need to find a way to get around it without causing a discharge. Or....*"

He stopped, and a long pause sat on the comm after. Naomi cocked her ear, almost able to see the change in his expression as he considered whatever had popped into his mind. "Or, Captain?"

"*Maybe this is the other end of the loop.*" His voice was light years away.

Naomi felt a chill to hear it.

"Can you clarify, Captain?" Icheb asked.

"*There has to be a reason this thing is appearing again," Captain Paris said, a little stronger, then. "The very same rift? Again--it *should* be impossible, but now it's not. There's a reason why we've come back to it--which could be that we're on the other side of its...threshold. I'm not putting that well, I know. B'Elanna knows more about those mechanics.*"

"*Barely--though what you said could be right,*" Torres said, almost as affected as her husband. "*We don't have that much data on chronoton fields, mainly because the evidence is gone by the time someone realizes anything's happened. But they are known to create stable temporal loops.*"

"I've studied such occurrences, too," Icheb agreed.

"*We should find out, then,*" Captain Paris affirmed. "*This might be a chance to find the people we lo--*"

Without warning, his voice cut off.

When Icheb ran another fast scan of the ship and Naomi looked down to it, her lips fell apart. "My God," she breathed....

"Naomi?"

She had stared at the rift, then again at the sensors, seeing the computer detected one after another fracture in time, first in engineering, then the transporter room, the bridge....Suddenly, she could see what the captain meant, that there was a possibility, that maybe there was a chance--if they could only pull it all together.

They had to pull it all together....

"Naomi?"

She blinked, caught Captain Janeway's stare, so warm and pleasant and asking her....The others were looking at her, too, curious, hopeful, wanting to get it done.

None of them knew. Only half of them would survive the future she knew. That half would fight for their joys, sometimes day-to-day, minute-to-minute, but they would have them.

They would always think about their losses, though.

Captain Paris almost sounded hopeful when he realized what the spatial rift could be. But he didn't say anything about turning it all back again....

Tom touched her arm. "You okay, Naomi?"

She shivered at the touch.

They had almost made it. They were going to make it after all.

Now she had to prevent it.

In many respects, and though it put a pain in her chest to realize the enormity of the events she would help to change, she knew that they would have chosen it in the end...if they knew it would be for the best.

Even so, she refused to believe that her future hadn't been meant to be. It just wasn't meant to last--though that wasn't a much more pleasant thought.

Thankfully, they would never know--and neither would she. There was an odd comfort in that, if anything. If it worked, then they would never know it. If it didn't, then she would see Earth in a few years. Either way, it would be all right.

She looked at Torres, who had curiously watched Naomi in her last, furious thoughts, then up at Paris, who was still gazing down to her, his sober blue eyes honest in their concern. How she knew that look, even if she had misinterpreted it for so long....

Maybe she wouldn't...the next time around.

Drawing a breath, she nodded to collect herself, straightened her back.

"Let's do it."

Naomi was very still when it ended, not glad nor upset--not much of anything at all.

There wasn't much time left.

She took a breath when she realized she hadn't done so in almost a minute.

"After Chakotay initiates the warp pulse," Janeway told them, "he should find himself back at the moment Voyager encounters the chrono-kinetic surge."

Naomi stood near Icheb, almost needing him near her as she saw Janeway's grateful smile.

How well she did remember it, would remember it, always....

In the middle of engineering, Captain Janeway, so young, vibrant, shining with their accomplished task, had turned to face them all, to speak to them all as she always had.

So familiar and sweet, that childhood memory....

Though still, if Naomi closed her eyes, she could still see the haggard, weakened woman she'd last known in her time, how Janeway's knotted hands shook when she tried to access a turbolift's damaged touch pad.

If all went well, that memory would be gone, hopefully never to appear again....

"He's only going to have a few seconds to reset the deflector polarity."

Nearby, Harry Kim was almost at attention, taking in his captain's words as well as any new officer might have. How he would grow into his role, into the man she knew him to be, would probably have amazed even him.

Naomi could see Kim holding Doreen over his head, smiling so brightly it made her heart beat to see it. He spoke softly to her, as if she was the most precious jewel in the universe. The baby girl kicked and babbled, unmindful of her father's worship and having a wonderful time suspended in the air.

Standing nearby, Megan jokingly accused him of emotional adultery. Commander Kim only laughed and told her they could "talk about that one later tonight."

Megan bit the lip of her smile to hear it.

Naomi knew that Ensign Kim deserved as good as he got--and would probably get it...someday....

"If the timeline is restored, the rest of us should have no memory of what's happened here."

B'Elanna Torres' posture was straight and sure, her complexion still bright from the excitement. She stared at Janeway, though probably no one in the room might have guessed what was going on behind her eyes. Paris' not so subtle hints to her ignorance had all but completely silenced her throughout the rest of their experience.

Naomi suspected B'Elanna was discomfited because it *was* something she wanted, but believed was not possible for her--yet.

For Naomi, it was a common sight to see the chief engineer strolling through the corridor with her children, often with one of their hands held in hers, the other arm filled with toys or lessons or an extra pullover, even the old picnic basket that the family often took to the holodeck. Her greetings to others in those halls were kind and completely familiar--she greeted them as though they were her extended family. By then, they all were just that.

When she met her husband, their kiss was simple but warm, their touches soft, as comfortable as they should after almost twenty years of marriage.

It was as natural to Commander Torres as it was foreign to that young Maquis.

Naomi was certain that the familiarity would win again in the end.

"So I'd like to thank you now for putting your doubts aside and helping me put mine aside as well."

Tom still stood near to B'Elanna. Maybe he was just doing it unconsciously, being used to simply having her by him. She had always stood by him, no matter what. He revered her if for that alone.

In a park-like setting on the holodeck, near to where Kim played with his daughter, the captain and chief made themselves comfortable while their daughters and son ran around with the other children who had come. Aside their picnic, their children's toys and hats and sandals, they reclined, she on her back to soak in the sun, he propped up on an elbow.

The smile he gave his wife was so warm, genuine, full of a new hope soon to be fulfilled--and as always, to be shared with his wife. From time to time, he leaned down to kiss her, not caring who might see.

Naomi wasn't surprised. Soon to be a free man, he had increasingly opened up to them again. In Naomi's opinion, it was worth the wait, even in her case.

One day, Tom Paris would have what he wanted. Naomi knew without a doubt he had the strength to make it happen...someday...somehow.

Naomi hoped she would, too.

"Good luck to each of you."

Naomi closed her eyes for a moment, opened them slowly, and then turned as Icheb did to leave the bay.

It was over.

For a reason she didn't take the time to figure out, no tears came to her eyes to know that the life she knew was likely about to end.

It was more a numb resignation, really.

Behind her, Harry Kim said, "It was...It's good to see you're okay, Tom."

The words seemed a million miles away.

Paris chuckled. "Good to see you, too, Harry. And I guess I'll see you later."

"Yeah, I guess so. --Or at least I hope so."

"You will."

...She'd helped make that happen.

She barely noticed that they were passing through the times again, times past, some to be recreated, others yet to come--but not to come....

"I'm still trying to get over Chakotay in a Starfleet uniform," Ayala smirked.

"Don't be so amused," Gallagher warned. "If all goes as planned, you'll be in one too."

"Great," he snorted. "Go ahead and leave it on the positive."

Torres remained silent.

It was understandable.

Naomi and Icheb slowed together at the turbolift, turned to see the other five, then looked at each other again. Neither of them showed any expression.

Harry shifted on his feet as he considered the others there. "I should wait for the captain," he said suddenly.

Tom gave B'Elanna another look, then nodded at Naomi. "I'm going the same way, so I'll stay behind, too."

Naomi nodded slightly. "Sounds good," she whispered, swallowing afterwards.

It was ending...and beginning. She could only hope.

It was all she had left....

Looking up to Tom again, she held his eyes for several seconds. Memorizing his expression all over again, she blinked herself out of her reverie, realizing....If it was going to end, she decided, she had might as well finish it properly.

She never had said it, after all.

"Thank you," she told him, "for everything."

Tom furrowed his brow. "For what?"

"For being..." Naomi paused, smiled again. "For being a good captain."

Tom took it with a slow blink, a returned examination. Finally, he gave her a nod. "You're welcome," he said, not too comfortably, but ultimately accepting the compliment.

The turbolift doors opened. Naomi finally broke their stare to walk inside with Icheb, who gave Paris a final nod. The three Maquis joined them.

Once they were all situated themselves in the lift, Paris caught Torres' gaze, which narrowed to find him staring at her again. Recovering from his unease with that look alone, a spark of light caught his eye. The corner of his mouth curled up.

"See you when I get home, B'Elanna."

When the doors closed, the last thing Paris saw was Torres' eyes fly wide open.

"Deck eight," Icheb ordered, barely suppressing his grin.

As soon as they started moving, Naomi likewise let herself snicker at Paris' last word. Somehow, one way or another, she knew he'd have it.

Torres snapped a glare to her, but Naomi chuckled more at that. "I don't see what's so funny," Torres said evenly.

Naomi shook her head. "Don't worry. You'll get used to him." Her amusement fading to fondness, and

taking a step forward when she felt another wall pass through them, Naomi gave the other woman her full attention. "You're going to do a lot of great things someday," she told her, "and you're going a great mentor."

Torres blinked.

"You were to me," Naomi added, reaching out for Torres' hand. She squeezed the half-Klingon's fingers, which were gentler than even Naomi expected. It only made her want to say more, noticing that, made her reluctant to let go. "I hope we know each other as well someday," she added. "I want to think we will."

"I..." That statement--on top of everything else--visibly took Torres aback. She did manage a twitch of a grin as she considered it, however. "I look forward to it."

That was all Naomi needed to hear.

When the doors opened, she left with Icheb and without another word. It was ending, but at least she would know she had finished it as well as she could, saying what she should have said, knowing all that she did as well as she did, knowing it indeed *was* possible....

She grabbed Icheb's hand to get around the bodies half blocking their path, knowing better than to bother to try to help them.

Only a minute later, they were in astrometrics again. The spatial rift they'd left behind floated on the viewscreen just as they had left it.

The end of the loop. The last piece in the puzzle.

Or was it yet?

As they neared the panels in front of the viewscreen, Naomi glanced to her side a couple times.

She suddenly saw Commander Torres as she appeared only hours ago, smiling across the lift at her. "Just *do* it, Naomi," she had said. "And have fun. You're young and pretty and full of yourself. Enjoy it while you've got it--and whenever you can...."

Naomi laughed quietly.

Icheb he looked down to her, asking her with a turn of his head.

"Oh what the hell," Naomi grinned and put her hand on Icheb's cheek, pulling him directly down to press her lips to his.

She did not let go--nor did he pull away--for nearly a minute. Barely parting, she smiled again as they both drew a deep breath.

"That was...nice," she decided in a whisper.

Pleasantly surprised by her kiss, Icheb pulled back a little more to give her a long look. Neither of them blinked. "Why didn't you do that a year ago?" he asked softly, placing his hands on her hips.

She grinned sheepishly, shrugged slightly. "I guess the timing wasn't right."

Slipping her hands onto his shoulders, she allowed him to return her gesture, a slow, gentle, searching

kiss that made a delicious quiver reverberate through her entire body, and a soft moan rise from her throat.

Definitely nice.

Then, as a different kind of surge rolled around them, they parted again.

When the room began to phase, her eyes darted back towards the door. Her fingers clasped his shoulders. "Do you think...?" She didn't finish.

"Don't be scared," Icheb said, regaining her attention immediately. "Like you told Tom, it'll be all right." He smiled, wrapping his arms around her waist. "It'll be all right, Naomi."

"Yes," Naomi whispered, reaching up to touch his cheek once more, then leaning her head upon his chest. "It will."

As they embraced, the room filled with light....

She squinted a little against the light, though she didn't think to move out of its warmth just yet.

She didn't want any of it to end until it had to.

For that matter, she had a feeling their conversation on the matter was only beginning. Oddly enough, she was enjoying it.

"You're young and pretty and full of yourself. Enjoy it while you've got it--and whenever you can."

"I know, I know."

"I know you know. It's a matter of you making use of it."

Naomi leaned back in the plush chair of the patio, crossing her legs and taking a sip of punch, then breathing the fragrant air, deliciously heavy that morning. Not too far away, buoy bells rang out of time with the gull cries. Nearer was the steady hum of insects feeding in a nearby grove. It was hard to believe the city was only five kilometers away.

What a good job they did when they chose their home, she thought for probably the hundredth time. The place truly was intoxicating.

"I just don't want to think about making anything serious right away," she finally replied, pulling herself back into the present.

"But knowing you, you will--think about it." B'Elanna grinned at the young woman across from her. "You always did tend to think things to pieces. Then again, you're only as bad as I used to be." She shrugged, stretching her legs out so they could catch the late morning sun. She pulled a strand of her gray-tinged hair behind her ear, then relaxed again. "You'll get over it. Just have fun--and just *do* it. It's worth the risk."

"I guess you're right," Naomi said, not about to doubt the voice of experience, much less her favorite former instructor, who'd already had her say about the business Naomi initially came down to discuss.

How it had turned into a conversation about her non-functioning love life was beyond her. At the same time, it was an aspect of their relationship that she had come to treasure: They could talk about anything and not mind it. "I'll see what I can't do."

"I'm sure you will." With that, B'Elanna looked back at the chronometer. "He and the kids should have been back from town by now."

"But didn't you say he had to pick up Miral's graduation present, too?"

"It's on the way. Maybe he took one of his famous 'alternate routes.' I wouldn't put it past him, anyway."

Naomi snickered. "You wouldn't have him any other way and you know it."

"Much as I'd like to deny it," B'Elanna returned wryly.

"Anyway, it's all right. I can see him when we come back this way--and I'll warn you next time I come by for a visit."

"But it's been six months, Naomi."

"I know." She shrugged. "But that's a part of being in Starfleet."

B'Elanna rolled her eyes. "Don't I know it."

"*Janeway to Wildman.*"

Naomi straightened to hear the all-too-familiar sound from her comm badge. "Wildman here."

"*You in the mood for reporting back to your ship, Lieutenant?*"

Naomi's brow rose slightly. She knew that crisp tone all too well. Janeway was ready to go, and would prefer to believe that her officers were in line with her mood.

Before she could say yes, though, B'Elanna leaned forward in her chair. "Leave us alone, Kathryn," she told her. "We're having a serious discussion down here."

Janeway snorted. "*My, how civilian life keeps growing on you, B'Elanna.*"

All three women laughed.

"Tom's always been worse and you know it," B'Elanna returned. "For that matter, are you *ever* going to let them give you a position on Earth--let you stay home for a change?"

"*Not if I can help it,*" the admiral replied gamely, then said, "*I apologize for cutting your 'meeting' short, Lieutenant, but our rendezvous with Chakotay is in three days--not four, as we'd been told. Icheb has also requested that you and he should begin the core conversions as soon as possible, before we get to Starbase One Twenty-eight. Have you and B'Elanna gone over her suggestions?*"

"Yes, Ma'am," Naomi responded, giving B'Elanna a warning look when the woman's grin turned aside. "I'll bring my report to you immediately, if you like."

"*I'll be in my ready room by thirteen hundred hours. Bring it to me then.*"

"Yes, Admiral."

"Send our regards to Chakotay, Kathryn," B'Elanna said, her eyes still shining at Naomi's, "and Icheb, too."

"*Will do--and thank you again for your help on these upgrades,*" Janeway responded, her voice warm with a smile. "*It makes me feel better to know you've had a look at them.*"

"It was my pleasure," B'Elanna said, meaning it. "Take care."

"*You too, B'Elanna. Janeway out.*"

Alone again, Naomi set her glass upon the table and pushed herself to her feet. "Well, I guess I should get going."

B'Elanna stood as well, and almost agreed. Then her eyes focused on a point beyond Naomi's shoulder. Her lips turned up; her arms rose to cross comfortably on her ribs.

"Not just yet," she said, and pointed with her chin to the yard.

When Naomi turned, she saw Kian rocketing up to the house with Trina not far behind him. Their father, neatly trimmed and healthy as he had ever been, was taking his time coming down the long, stony path of their property. Unbuttoning the coat of his linen suit as he swerved around an orange bush, he snapped his fingers softly at a nearby dog. It bounded up to greet him, then zipped past to chase a squirrel. He chuckled, shook his head, his pace unchanged.

Then he looked up and saw who was waiting for him on the porch, and readying to come down.

Setting his packages on a garden bench, he smiled and opened his arms.

Naomi gladly hopped down the steps to fill them, hugging him tightly once there.

"Great to see you, Tom!"

(fin)



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