



The Word Painter

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We shall say, therefore, of whatever happens that it was going to be that way.
And this is a comfort, both in fortune and adversity.

We shall say of him that turns out bad and mean that he was going to;
of him that turns out happy and blessed that he was going to;
neither praising nor berating fortune, crying over what had been,
lamenting what was going to be....

Shall we then, sit idly by, passively observing the changing scene
without participation, never testing our strength and our goodness,
having no hand in what happens, or in making things come out as they should?

Some people do little or nothing with their lives,
and might as well have never lived, they make such a waste of it.
Others do much, and the lives of a few even shine like the stars.
But we knew of this before we ever started talking about fate.

In time, we will all know of which sort we were destined to be.

--Richard Taylor*

The Word Painter

"Captain, I think I have a solution to the problem."

Kathryn Janeway looked up to the engineer from her pile of damage reports. "I'm listening," she said, etched with a grin as she flicked her fingers to that mess.

Torres barely glanced at it. Instead, she set another PADD in the captain's hand for review.

"We've gotten everything we could from this nebula," Torres told her, "including our full sensor array--so I asked Ensign Wildman to scan the plasma field we detected when we came in here to see if we could get anything out of that. And there is: There's enough raw sub-nucleic particle matter in there to repair and charge our injector coils and more than enough trace deuterium to collect and store. The dilithium matrix is still going to take some work, but we can at least get the rest back in shape in the mean time."

Her eyes still flicking over the readouts, Janeway found herself very interested--and glad to see her engineer excited about something positive for a change that week.

"That's going to be a rough trip, with all that spectral instability," she noted, though she knew well that B'Elanna Torres was set on her idea and certainly wouldn't be put off by a few bumps. "With the unstable gas streams inside the nebula, not to mention working inside a plasma field, you'll have to refit the shuttle's deflectors."

"I've already set aside what we have left of backups."

Janeway turned a wise, pleased look at the young woman before her. "It looks like you have this all planned out, Lieutenant."

B'Elanna pressed down her smirk. Her captain was starting to know her maybe a little too well. "I wanted to know we could get into the field before bringing this to you," she said.

"The trip into it is still going to be a bit rough. I'd like to have Voyager there as a backup."

"I'm not afraid of the risk, Captain," the engineer returned, but remembered to whom she was speaking and thought quickly. "Paris could navigate it. He could get us through the field and hold a good position while we mine the energy streams." B'Elanna grinned. "And he's got nothing else to do until the engines are back online."

Janeway nodded, knowing B'Elanna of all people would understand that. She and Tom had been working with Harry Kim on the Cochrane project for a few weeks by then, constructing, proposing and running simulations in every ounce of their spare time. Janeway had noticed a mutual respect for each other's ideas and abilities growing nicely from that...after a few initial mediations by Ensign Kim, as it were.

Naturally, the captain was gratified to see the crews really working together after that fateful year they'd been trapped in the Delta Quadrant.

More, though, the captain smiled at the chief engineer's enthusiasm. She'd missed it during those recent dark days and the near constant attacks by the Kazon. Determined and intent she had always been, but not so hopeful. Just then, however, B'Elanna practically radiated for thinking she could do *something*.

Janeway could hardly blame her. She was feeling better just looking at those readings, herself. And Torres' staff was well underway in their various repairs. It wouldn't take too long to get what they needed and get back, provided the Kazon stayed out of their way. Either way, Voyager would already be defenseless without that power...

"Assign your away team, Lieutenant. Keep an open channel with Voyager and get what you can to repair what systems we need. --But no more than that. Voyager can come for whatever else you find

once we're up and running."

"Yes, Captain," replied the engineer with a crisp grin.

"Good work. Get going."

B'Elanna took a victorious breath and tapped her commbadge. "Torres to Engineering: Nicoletti, Bendera, collect the storage canisters and portable refiners and meet me in the shuttle bay."

Standing, Janeway stifled a laugh. B'Elanna was just too efficient sometimes.

Following the half-Klingon out to the bridge, she looked at Chakotay as she crossed. "Looks like we might get out of here sooner rather than later," she told him. "Lieutenant Torres has found a viable plasma and deuterium source in our little haven. If all goes well, we'll be on our way within the week."

"Good work, B'Elanna," Chakotay said.

"Thanks," was her reply--but she was already leaving. She was already mentally collecting plasma particles and setting up the refiner units and had barely heard him.

Janeway eyed Paris at the conn and gestured towards the quickly disappearing chief. "Mr. Paris, you're with Torres. Recheck the Cratow's shield inverters before you go. Use what you need to make them resistant to a particle-rich plasma field."

"Yes ma'am," Paris smiled with a nod and skipped from his seat to catch up with Torres, already ready and in the lift. "Thanks, B'Elanna."

"Don't thank me," she replied. "The shuttle needs a pilot and you happen to be one."

"Oh? And here I thought you just wanted to get me to tap on your panels."

Janeway glanced over only to see Paris' crooked smile--and Torres' responsive glare--just as the lift doors closed. Snickering, she turned and took her seat, noticing Chakotay also enjoying the byplay.

It felt good to laugh, even if it was at those two.

Not an hour later, Tom gave Bendera a pat on the back as the two moved to pick up one of the refiner units. Torres was already in the shuttle. "Heard you and Annie had a nice time last night," he commented. "Valada-three in the moonlight, was it?"

Bendera cracked a laugh. "Damn, I hate this ship. Too small to have a life of your own here."

Tom chuckled, too. "Don't worry about it, Kurt. Someone else'll have a great time soon enough and you'll be yesterday's news."

"I need that stabilization unit," came a distinctively commanding female voice from within the shuttle.

"Yes, *ma'am*," Tom responded then looked at Bendera again. "Seriously, it's nice to know you were able to get out for a change... *Did* it go okay? I'm just curious."

Bendera relented, having not put up much of a fight to begin with. "Yeah. It was real nice."

Tom smiled at the admission. Bendera hadn't had much of a social life since coming on Voyager, if not much longer, even if he was smart and easy going. Despite his openly talking about his experiences and many losses in the DMZ, he remained upbeat and forward thinking. He kept his eyes open all the same, and though he never caused any trouble, he never tried to look like anything but a Maquis working on a Starfleet ship, which had made his acceptance by the Starfleet crew almost as slow as Tom's had been. It was good to see that change for the better.

Jerking his chin toward the hatch, Tom said, "Come on, before the slave driver pulls out her whip."

Nicoletti passed them both with another armful of equipment. Turning a straight eye to the pilot, she said, "Knowing you, Tom, you'll probably tempt her to it."

"You really sure?" Tom asked with mock enthusiasm as he and Bendera set the unit on the lift.

Pulling her chin higher, she ignored his response and stepped up into the shuttle.

Bendera had laughed at the quip, and now he regarded again the "traitor," with whom he'd formed a passing friendship and respected more than he'd expected to at first. "You enjoy that a lot more than you should, you know," he said.

"I usually do," Tom replied, visually checking off the load before tapping the lift controls. He was in good spirits for being able to get out for a while, get something done. He'd been alternating between a dead conn and the guts of the navigational array for way too long. "But you know she gets a kick out of the challenge if she asks for it that much."

Bendera nodded, knowing its truth, but then reconsidered. "Torres isn't that bad, you know," he told him, probably just to know he'd said it. "She can come down on you pretty hard, but she's a good person."

"Oh, I know she is." Right behind it, though, Tom's lips twisted up. "It's just that she can really bring out the worst in me."

"As long as you don't bring out the worst in *her*, that'll be just fine."

The chief engineer appeared a moment later in the shuttle door. "I'd like to get out of here sometime *today*, Paris."

The pilot instantly began to whistle an ancient requiem, easily sending the engineer back into the hatch. He knew she'd really get on his case later, probably when they ran through another test on the Cochrane. There, in their separate elements but working on a mutual dream, they could both be extremely annoying even without a reason to be problematic. That time, it would definitely be her turn. Tom could see Harry shifting around nervously already, and his resulting chuckle finally silenced him.

The cases finally shoved into a wall bearing and activated, Tom slid into the conn and ran through some last systems checks. Torres moved into the ops space beside him.

"Alone at last," he said, ribbing her only enough to acknowledge her presence.

"I'm so honored," she replied, tapping her panels to life. "Everything checks out."

"Initializing impulse drive." He looked back at Nicoletti and Bendera, who were still organizing the equipment. "Fingers and toes in, kids." With a series of communications with the bridge and a sweep of his fingers over the panels as the engines activated, Paris moved them out of the shuttle bay.

Looking over, B'Elanna could see a particular look of contentment fall over his face as they moved into the bluish, gaseous clouds. She'd come to know it pretty well since she'd met him, came to expect it the more they worked together and often wished he'd show that part of his presence when he *wasn't* behind the controls. Either way, she'd begun to enjoy watching him fly, on the bridge or like there, in the shuttle--or best, in the holodeck when they were running simulations and he was getting a real challenge. There was a kind of presence--peace--in it. For her own love of her engines and skills with them, she understood it. It was as if he truly belonged there.

Knowing that, she'd lately even been less annoyed by his...

"Where to, my lady?" Tom drawled, turning a raised brow her way.

The corners of her mouth pulled inward for want of a smirk. He really did like to push it when he thought he could, but she didn't feel like continuing it in front of her staff. "Wherever I tell you, Lieutenant," she replied coolly.

Behind them, Nicoletti's mouth pursed and blew the refrain of the same requiem.

B'Elanna couldn't help it that time: She grinned. Tom caught it and laughed. But she didn't really care, just rolled her eyes and looked ahead.

Somewhere within the surrounding nebula was a rich plasma field that would keep them busy enough for the time being.

Desalia Rising

In the court of Ara's house lay a soft teal grass below several willowy trees, which swayed gently with the sweet daschis in the cool, dry air of evening. In the corner, by the stone wall, a fountain spring tickled the pond below, amusing also the fish and frogs who lived there. The garden stretched well past it, into the trees, hiding the pebbled path. The glow of the capital city above the trees and beyond the garden walls did not disturb the family milling by; they were well accustomed to their urban surroundings. For that matter, the Sroleta moon would soon share its pleasing warmth with all of Desal.

There were, that evening, more family members than usual in the Allanois house. A good portion of five living generations already lived in that city estate, in the Desalian way. Those who had ventured out with their mates to begin their own houses, or be a part of another family's house, retained their closeness to their home. Nevertheless, there were many reasons for them to bring themselves to the court of their elders: It was Babaki's seventy-fifth ralkle since birth--for which three of her elder siblings, Kyori, Mar'lli and Petalla, along with their families, had traveled from Cezia and Ivliisa to join in the blessing. It was also nearly the birth anniversaries of Kolana, Orina, Namdali and little Dilsu. Also, Havetsi would be consecrated into her chosen trade education that tbrass, effectively graduating the novitiate's primary spiritual studies and solemnizing her relationship with Cera, who was already a scholar. In two du'ave, they would claim each other as bondmates.

It was a time to celebrate, a time for the proud, vital family to come together.

This was a common occasion.

There in the courtyard, leaf-wrapped haridse was served alongside mial cheese and sliced fruits. To drink was cool sirril--and sirril wine for the grown people, who laughed and recalled, related and complimented the day that brought them. Music played and children giggled, darting about like anxious bugs--and to Ara, who caught them in his heavily robed arms, tickled and kissed them, gave them more chisak than their parents would have liked, showered his love upon them. The children, all, worshiped their tola, their elder-father of Allanois.

Similarly, their nali was adored. The elder-mother, matriarch of the Allanois, watched with an eye both wise and kind her bondmate entertain the little ones while she lovingly petted and paid regard to each and every of her kin that had come home to her and Ara. It was her duty as well as her joy.

"The Charis Accords progress well, I would think..."

"Jehva bears all his teeth now! I'eva tsa ka! He shall take his robes and a bondmate in but suns, I should believe!"

"An atrium shall be built before the rain season's arrival; yet the spirits' breath has already blessed the land before us in but three seasons..."

"Kabli tells that adding jarhat to the sauce makes them firmer when boiled..."

Thanking the spirits for the blessing of such talk, their nali walked among them all, smiling wisely, laughing with them, agreeing, accepting and advising all as she slowly made her way to a stone dais in the center of the garden. This trip took her well into the evening, until her family had worn their tongues, played their games and fed their bodies thoroughly enough that they would sit without regret.

When she lifted her robe and gown to climb onto the stone dais, the family slowly gathered to share the tradition and the honor.

The more anxious children hurried down to the flagstones surrounding the dais, wanting to be at their elder-mother's feet. Older children made themselves comfortable on the lawn. The adults filled their drinks again and eventually found a comfortable spot for themselves on the terrace, or on pillows or padded squares they carried onto the lawn. Taking her seat, their elder nali pulled her feet up beside her, tucked her heels beneath her hip and adjusted her robe and gown to cover her feet and flow over the front of the seat. Finally, the house patriarch joined his woman, climbing up, scooting up behind her then arranging himself in a similar position.

She looked back at him, feeling his shortness of breath, the pain his chest and in his arms. In return, he sensed her unease, easily read her for the quickness of her feelings. She commonly worried of late when he tired, since his collapse. Shaking his head with a smile that knew too well and too much, he reassured her silently and then with words.

"For the children, Anai," he told her, "bear no concern for me this moon. We shall take ourselves to Doctor Gihora upon the next sun should it please."

"It would, my spirit."

"Then we shall take ourselves," he replied simply.

She watched another moment, assessing him further with the gift their bonding had enhanced in her long, long ago, nodding with her eyes before turning to their family again.

Seeing their beautiful faces, their wide-open eyes, she knew he was correct: For the children...

Pulling her headscarves forward upon the crown of her soft, silver braids, she touched her temple markings then held her fingers out to her audience in a gesture of regard. Breathing, she spoke, marked with time and treasure:

"Ninety-one years past, I, much as our Asi'eda shall this coming Kibren, entered through the Arch of Azlre and was accepted into the novitiate. At that threshold, I left behind the remainder of my girlhood. Beside me stood my spirit's partner, who similarly would consecrate his status as a man.

"They brought me into a hall of waters and slid away my blue cloak and hood, my maize coat and

gown, my leggings and my woven headscarves, baring me fully. They bathed me in the essence of marlai, cleansing my body and my senses, releasing the heavy world from my shoulders, the ache from my overburdened spirit. Lledri bid I sleep there, on the edge of the warm water, as on the threshold of my mother's womb.

"I awoke a time later revived and pure, and then drew myself from the water.

"My hair was wrapped with woven gems and covered with clouds, and my body was graced in the sheer skies, waters. Upon my arms was laid a silken robe, and they led me to the altar of the silag to pray for my spirit and its blessings.

"My bondmate came, like me, dressed as had been our blessed ancestors. His cloth were umbers of earth and fertile wood; his robe was the light of a white moon over the distant sky. At his headdress braid, scarves were triply plaited, thick with silver de'ihhr beads. As such, we knelt at the altar and offered our spirits to the ancestors together, as is the way of the bonded.

"We prayed for our transformed spirits, for the journey we would take together. We prayed for peace. We prayed for what we nourished in my womb and set forth upon the future. We prayed for Desalia. We prayed for Bakali, our elder-mother who had led us, for Bala, our gentle elder-father who had guided us. We prayed for Susik and Gatra, Yasis and Derra, our siblings in the closing of the war. We prayed for Miztri and Dalra, who bore our way upon Uillar and long after. We prayed for the peaceful deliverance of Be'i and Toma, whose noble sacrifice had finally brought us to that altar.

"For all those blessings, we prayed and dedicated ourselves...to our children, to the future of Desalia, and for the promises we had sworn, yet to fulfill..."

"Try it again. Divert power from wherever you can to boost our sensors."

This was not a suggestion.

Captain Kathryn Janeway was not necessarily known as a patient woman--and known for hunting with a passion that which she sought. For the eighth day, she was doing just that.

A stubborn woman, a caring woman, she would not accept that her away team was gone, not like that, not disappearing without a trace on a mission for supplies. Not after what they'd just survived with the Kazon...

Actually, in *any* case, she wouldn't have given them up.

The warp drive was still down and would remain so until she had the supplies she sent the team for in the first place. That in mind, she set Voyager to follow the shuttle's estimated course at impulse until they could pick up any sign of a precise flight path.

It'd been too long, she mulled. If they were injured, if they were in trouble, if they were drifting, without but perhaps some emergency rations in that shuttle... They'd had over a week in it. It would take a lot more time than it already had.

"Captain, I am reading an unusual energy fluctuation in an area four million kilometers from our

current location."

"Energy fluctuation." Janeway craned her head around, tired, hopeful and cautious in the same stare. "It's a plasma field, Mr. Tuvok. Can you be more specific?"

The Vulcan did not answer at first. He knew his captain was not in the mood for anything not pertinent to the situation at hand. Being human, being the captain, she was worried--and annoyed.

"I have detected a ion fissure within the fluctuation."

Resisting her first vocal urge, she asked him, "Why didn't we detect this 'ion fissure' before?"

"There is also a temporal instability within the plasma field, which with the volatile nature of the particle gas prevents our sensors from collecting accurate readings of the phenomenon. I have compensated for the disturbance, though the readings remain indefinite."

Janeway released her breath with deliberate slowness, turning forward again. Feeling a sharp twinge, she rubbed briefly at the bridge of her nose then straightened again.

"Is there any way around it?"

A pause. "I have reviewed the shuttle's original trajectory: The stream Lieutenant Torres hoped to mine leads toward this particular fluctuation, Captain. It might be advisable to investigate the area."

"How long until we can reach it?"

"Approximately twelve hours, Captain."

Damn. "Well, at least we know where they might have gone."

Pushing herself on the knees to stand, Janeway sighed thoughtfully, staring again at the viewscreen for no purpose but to focus on something before her for a moment longer. "Plot a course and take us to it, full impulse, Mr. Tuvok. Continue scanning the phenomenon and transmit all data to my quarters. You have the bridge."

She walked off, ignoring the familiar headache building in her temples.

Worse, there wasn't much comfort in leaving, as the latest problem was easily replaced by an existing one. And no route she traveled didn't reveal at least a little of what the Kazon had done to her ship in their last attack. No route disguised the tired looks in her crew's faces.

She knew she probably looked as stressed, much as she liked to think she was beyond such signs of effect.

Voyager was lucky enough to get to the nebula it did to make repairs, thanks to Neelix's quick memory and Tom Paris' knowing hand at the conn. Once again, the unpredictable pilot had gotten them out of that twist and into a safe haven, and Janeway found herself thankful for his talents again.

Of course, getting *out* of the nebula had proved to be another matter. Soon after they parked themselves safely inside the gas cloud and began repairs, a systems failure left them without impulse--this in addition to the damaged dilithium chamber. Even more compromised than when they began, they'd spent over a week trying to make do with what little they had, to little avail.

They needed options and there weren't enough firm words or hard stares to make that happen.

She'd tried those already.

It rolled again through her unwilling conscience: Torres gave her that option she'd been hoping for. Without much hesitation or wrong feeling about it, Janeway had approved it all. It was a routine and necessary away mission. There were no more Kazon in sight. They desperately needed the power supply. Torres and Paris could easily handle it--and each other. Nicoletti and Benders were high up on Torres' list of worthy technicians.

But as they neared the stream, communications collapsed. Moments later, they disappeared from the sensors.

Selfish as it might have been, it was the last thing Janeway needed that day--and they were the last people she could afford to lose at that point--at any point.

And we eventually got the damned impulse drive online without the extra materials, she harped privately, grinding her teeth.

"Captain?"

She buried her breath as she turned to find her first officer's unwavering stare pointed at her. "Commander."

"I was on my way to the bridge when Tuvok informed me of his findings..." Chakotay began, and then asked her wordlessly.

Janeway nodded quickly. "We'll be there by tomorrow morning. When Ensign Kim reports for duty, have him reconfigure one of our probes to handle the plasma radiation. If we can't penetrate the field, then we'll have to find another way to them."

"We'll find them, Captain," he told her. "They're a good group, trained as well as anyone to handle difficult conditions."

Janeway shook her head. "The problem isn't their abilities, Commander, it's not knowing even how we'll find them once we get to this...field. But if our probe shows nothing, I'm left with no choice but to go after them."

Chakotay furrowed his brow. "I don't think Voyager's ready for that much, yet. We barely have enough power for minimal shields."

"We can refit another shuttle if we scavenge the others," she clarified. "And I can take it in."

"You?" Chakotay was immediately put off by that idea, though he showed only surprise at first. "Captain, the Cochrane is unavailable because of the warp project and the other shuttles may not--"

"I sent them in there," Janeway cut in firmly. "I don't want to risk the ship further or any more crew than is absolutely necessary. I have experience navigating through plasma-fused atmospheres." She held up her hand to any further reply. "We can argue about it if we get to that point, Commander. Tomorrow morning. Oh-five hundred hours. We'll pick it up, then."

He nodded, glad she didn't want to discuss it. Janeway had been consumed with the situation since

Paris' last words rode over the comm: "Just a walk in the park, Captain." She had gone from shock, to anger, to tightly bound determination, which held together for nothing but the crew's well being. When they finally got their engines back online, she would speak of nothing but finding the away team. Though that was natural, and he felt the same way, he knew well she wouldn't rest until they had their people back. That was both good and bad, he knew.

At least they now had a chance to go after them now. The rest was just a matter of discussion and good advice. On that point, he knew he had six hours to come up with a good argument.

"Sleep well."

She nodded back but didn't bother to reply with what was already on her tongue. He probably knew she wouldn't sleep. She hadn't in days, in truth. She never could when she was in wait of a solution, when her ship and crew were in jeopardy.

Another night wouldn't be unique.

A few hours later, she made her way into the mess hall with PADDs in hand and a long night of studying ready on her mind. Moving to the dim replicator, she easily decided to part with a couple of her remaining rations for a cup of coffee. She deserved at least that for the day to come, much less the night.

"Is that you, Captain?" asked Neelix before he peered around the pantry well in the kitchen.

"Don't mind me," Janeway said. "Just doing some homework."

Neelix nodded, pulling off his apron as he rounded the bar. "Still looking for the away team?"

Janeway sighed heavily, but didn't mind his redundant question as much as she might have. "We think we've detected the area where they were lost." When the Talaxian drew near to her, she looked up at him, offering one of the PADDs. "Have you heard about this phenomenon in your travels?"

Neelix flipped through the report, skimming it with pursed lips. "Can't say I have. Of course, I've *heard* of this area--the nebula, as you know. But I don't remember any records about the plasma field. Guess nobody's really studied it, only mined it."

"Or maybe they disappeared, too," Janeway added, leaning back into her chair.

He hesitated a moment, but then pulled out a chair to sit. "Captain..." He peered up to her. "I know Tom Paris and I weren't on the best of terms for a while, but even then, I knew he was the best pilot I'd ever met. If anyone could keep that shuttle together, it'd be him. And if he was unlucky, Lieutenant Torres could put it back together."

"*If* they survived whatever happened to them out there," Janeway pointed out, unusually confessional in her pessimism, now.

Maybe I should try for some sleep after all.

Neelix pulled a deep breath. "I'd like to believe they have," he said hopefully. "It's just as possible they're still in that field and just can't communicate with Voyager."

Janeway grinned, a little pained, but glad for the man's attempt to be optimistic. Then again, it

seemed everyone but her was more willing to look for the better than the worse. She wanted to be, too, knew they were right to keep their chins up and their eyes forward.

But not knowing what happened, much less the team's condition, and being powerless to do anything, had drained much of her hope and had begun to test her nerve--as if being in the Delta Quadrant hadn't proven test enough already. Whatever happened out there, she wanted answers and her people back. That was it--and she didn't want to wait any longer.

"We'll see," Janeway replied and took a sip of her coffee.

Havetsi of Allanois and Scholar of Desal yanked her white headscarves up into the proper position, pinning the sweep of one side under a dark crown of braid rows, pulling the other side forward and down, over one side of her forehead and temple. At the braid pin just above her ear, she attached the long bead vine she earned with her scholarship and hooked it to her ear cuff. The latter was not necessarily traditional for working dress, but she chose not to mind for the moment. She would likely regain her sense and pull it off before she got to the assignment hall.

Satisfied that nothing was bunched up on her shoulders, she made sure the rest of her scarfing fell neatly in the back, covering most but the ends of her long hair, and then that another end was tucked correctly into the open bodice of her tailored uniform kneecoat.

She curled her toes in her new wrap boots, feeling the softness of the cloth around her feet, willed down a happy flutter in her chest.

She looked at herself again before backing away from the mirror. Her eyes shone with the memories recently passed into her. She drew those eyes over every detail of herself, taking a deep breath and pulling a wide smile. She was--finally--a...

"You forgot a thing," sang an ancient voice behind her.

Havetsi turned and smiled at her nali, who had come into her chamber and plucked up the missing item from the bureau. Shuffling across the room, the elder peered appreciatively at the recent graduate's choice of working clothes, which were simple yet proper in status and rank. She held up the pins. "You should not take yourself without this, I would think."

Havetsi touched her temple, and then her great-great-grandmother's. "Shall you honor me, my elder-mother?"

The old woman smiled and reached up to the young woman's drape collar. Momentarily, she touched the soft, indigo cloth with her bony fingers, admiring it again, and then opened her mind to fully sense the young woman's unabashed pride.

Gently, she affixed the diamond shaped pin and bead chain. Then she straightened it. "*Captain* Havetsi."

Havetsi beamed at the title and to her elder-mother. "You and Tola truly believed in my choice, Nali," she said, taking and kissing Anai's wrinkled fingers. "You assisted my defense, even when Cera disagreed. I bear such gratitude."

The nali freed her hand and patted the woman's face affectionately. "Were one wise thing in my life learned, it would be to mind one's instincts, Havetsi, to bear freedom in your spirit, whether in pleasure or challenge. It is the task of the strong and the blessing of our ancestors."

"This is much agreed, Nali." Turning back to the mirror, Havetsi examined herself one more time and giggled at the wise expression she caught in the reflection, in her nali's memory-brightened eyes. "Prihar take this vanity! It is but a support craft I oversee. When did such particularities overcome me, Nali, these many ornaments and titles?"

"When you consecrated yourself to your scholarly education and spirit's discipline, I would believe, child," she replied, "when you grew into your fate and accepted your truth--in the face of your bondmate's being more pedantic than sensible."

Havetsi laughed. "Yet I bear such anxiousness. I fuss as does a unburdened prichava."

"You bear but newness," the old woman pleasantly dismissed. "All the suns of Bihla's prayers remain for digging in engine waste. This is the sun of your entry, your first assignment. Best it is to be neat now and roll your coat sleeves later--which is not doubted. It is the way of things, and *your* way."

"This would be truth."

She looked her spirit-child over once more and, seeing no uncertainty now, gave a nod. "Now, take yourself to your work. You have absorbed your education and training. Now it must be put to a use your love of it demands. Take to mind the examples our honored spirits have left for us, which as Allanois you bear fair knowledge of. Make use of your own spirit also and you shall bear wellness."

Havetsi reached out to caress her nali's temple once again. "My thanks again, dear Nali, for all you have given. Yet may Tola be greeted before I take myself?"

The elder sighed. "He presently sleeps, child. I trust you shall not make yourself into filth and disarray before sunset. He shall present himself at dinner and greet you."

Havetsi swallowed the reminder of it as they walked together to the rear stairway. It was about the only time of late when her great-great grandmother was not affected by her spirit's bond with Ara, when he was sleeping. His illness had drained both their vital bodies over the past several years, and they spoke of their meeting the long honored ancestors more commonly both with expectation and disappointment: Waiting as always for their final duty to present itself, yet wishing for peace among the spirits.

"Nali ka," the young captain answered then kissed her elder-mother farewell.

Anai watched the woman skip down the steps to the doors at the bottom. She raised a robed arm to wave and offered a proud parting smile. Havetsi had earned the attention well, and not only through her education. The girl had long been a secret favorite of hers, always reminded her of a lady she once knew well--and still did, deep within her crowded memory.

Moving herself from the staircase and down the center hall of the sprawling house, she soon found herself again in her chamber. There, a greater love still, yet so opposite in carriage, remained.

On their soft bed, Ara slept, so still it sometimes frightened her.

Gently, so not to wake his age-beaten body, she stepped to his side and pulled the cover over his thin

frame, smiled sadly at his tan, heavily wrinkled face, evidence of too many years of choosing to write his lectures in the sun, and faint reminders of a youth which had marked them both, long ago. His freckled skin spread slightly on the pillow he reclined upon; his breath rattled slightly with each intake.

They would not remain among the living much longer, she knew.

Soon, he would pass; as his bondmate, she would, too.

She yet could see him as he was when they were children, running across the Cezian savannah.

She stood with some effort, breathing into her move, and then went to her bureau. There, she looked over her memoir boxes. She did this often, making sure her histories were properly arranged and she had forgotten no one.. Their five surviving children, close relatives like Vansura and Beshelli, whose roles in the house would be changed...

The Institute, of course, already had a copy in its catacombs, collected past her and Ara's education long ago and periodically after. The scholars there waited only for the regents' passings to release them to the public. It was the way with those of their rank and professions, an old tradition they did not mind upholding. Admittedly, the two had been more selective with their verbal accounts of the past, as well.

She and Ara had easily kept their people waiting during their own vigil.

Their memoir boxes were all in order, including the one she and Ara had set aside and specially prepared many years ago. They had mutually agreed it was proper, to preserve all that they had for those who would certainly desire the information when they--if they--ever came.

"You search them again, my spirit?" It was Ara, of course, though only barely, it seemed. The whisper from the pillow was but a shadow of the voice she knew.

"Yet again," she confessed.

"I would not think they have moved since you set me here, good lady."

Her lips turned up and she glanced back to him. His eyes remained on hers, projecting himself to her with an ease that belied his condition. Feeling it, she thought to do nothing but go to him again, sit by his side, touch his fingers. His hand turned and enfolded hers.

She felt his spirit in that touch, and her nerves eased.

"I pray each sun that another sun shall see us, Ara, so that we might finally meet them, hear their voices; so I may finally paint the words that have been sequestered to others' records. All these years to wait and pray and wish but that."

"As do I, wish to see that sun," Ara admitted, swallowed a breath. "And yet," he added, "would I pass beneath this sun, you with me, I would be content to meet the spirits at your side with no more to claim of our lives."

She felt her eyes twinge with her smile, both sad and enriched by the man by her, decrepit in every faculty but his mind and a gentle spirit that had loved her so deeply and without fail. She leaned down into his arm and closed her eyes upon his chest.

"And I, my spirit," she whispered. "And I. Our places among Ts'aitsa have been well earned. I would

accept it without regret should that indeed be meant."

"I only hope it truly lies there," he smiled. "Else we shall be lost together among those many stars."

"You bait me, sweet fool. Of course it lies there," she rejoined with a light laugh. "And our youth once more would grace us upon entering the hereafter: I would wear the coat and gown you kissed from my body the moon of our bonding, and upon you would be borne your fine coat and sash, your headscarves pulled poorly and you smiling at me as when you were a child."

"And I would call you my blessing, as I call you now, dear lady."

When he turned his head to kiss her, she pulled aside her veil and bent up enough to press her lips to his; then she lowered herself again, resting in his softness.

"I shall pass in peace at your side," she confirmed, "without regret for a moment of our lives. Yet, I would still have dreamed...dreamed it could have been, that we might have met them, that we might have made peace with our promises in the way they designed."

"We are not passed yet," Ara pointed out.

"This is truth. We are not passed yet."

She turned her face into his robe. He smelled of fresh soap from his bath that morning; his robe was scented with the sunshine he'd been sitting in after breakfast. She loved those aromas; since the war's end, she had sworn to never take them for granted.

It was a day she had sworn many things, in fact--including wait and hope. As long as she and Ara lived, they would. And they had.

"Oh, my spirit," she breathed, "like Bihla and Sa'alli, for merely others and for our cares would I wish we remained among the living. It is selfish, yet it is truth."

"Then I shall tell the spirits they must wait a while longer," Ara whispered and closed his eyes again as he felt her wide smile press against him.

Their lives had been lived fully and had been blessed with every happiness save that one desire, which still bore the faint promise of fruit.

Not two years before that day, an alien probe entered the Barrier and struck an asteroid, destroying itself.

If the woman who likely fired it lived up to an iota of her reputation, she and her own would follow soon...relatively.

"Shields up. Have repair teams standing by." Captain Kathryn Janeway spun on a heel and took her seat.

"The metaphasic shield array is online and holding at eighty-nine percent capacity."

They'd investigated; they'd all met to discuss the situation--even if the captain had already settled herself into her plan. Their second probe, more carefully positioned inside the field, promised any entry to be a strenuous journey, but a survivable one.

Immediately to Janeway this meant that the away team may well have survived their own trip through, though it was likely they suffered at least moderate damage.

This left her with her original decision--which actually was a relief.

Chakotay had fought the idea of taking another shuttle in, mainly because it could just as easily end up like the Cratow. Janeway finally agreed--but only once Tuvok and Kim reported on exactly what they were up against.

However, Voyager still wasn't in the best condition to push through a plasma field, particularly one with such an erratic temporal instability, according to their sensors. More, the heat of the plasma could buckle the hull even with the metaphasic shields in tact if Voyager was exposed to it too long. But they'd managed to collect enough of the same energy to boost the inverters to ninety-five percent for almost a minute and for a return trip. It would be enough to keep the ship together.

For that matter, Janeway was determined absolutely to find her missing crew--as if anyone expected her to feel otherwise. Shuttle or no shuttle, she was going in after them.

"Take us in, full impulse, Mr. Baytart."

Chakotay glanced over at Janeway. Her face was tight and ready. He drew a deep breath, turned also to the viewscreen and the looming, red-streaked field before them, its flickering radiation taunting them to stay away.

"All hands," the captain said crisply, placing her hands on her command chair arms, "brace for impact."

The ship crept forward, rumbling as it entered the gaseous layer of the field, and the bridge filled with its reddish glow. It was there that the Shuttle Cratow paused before positioning itself more snugly within the field.

"Steady Mr. Baytart," she said evenly.

The rumble strengthened and the glow intensified. A rhythmic shudder, sounding low and deep within the starship's bulkheads made Janeway press her back in her chair. It was not as violent as she imagined it would be, though, more like passing through thick, red rapids, her boat shuddering but not flipping in the hard current. She prepared herself for a surprise all the same.

A shake--then a creak from somewhere on the ship echoed through the bridge.

"Hull stress has passed sixty percent and is rising one percent per second. Shields are holding."

The Vulcan's cool nerves stilled her further.

Thirty more seconds...ninety percent...

"Divert all--systems but navigation---and life support--to the shields."

"Captain..." came Kim's voice--and it seemed suddenly far away. She turned. He was still there,

staring at his panel.

His mouth moved out of synch with his words.

"...we've come to...the edge--the edge of--of the fie--"

"Shields--have dropped--Shields have dropped to--six--ty--sixty-two percent--"

The shudder became a sharp tremor. Janeway felt herself burning a hole through the viewscreen with her stare to save her lurching heart, fixing it on the waves...

"---Ste--steady--steady---"

The computer beeped and echoed across the bridge. "***Warn--warning...hull--warn--hull stress--ing--hull stress--reaching--**"

"Shields--shields--are--shields are buckl--buckling---"

"Ta--ta--take us--us--us throu----"

...

...

...

Kathryn Janeway pulled her head up, could barely see at first but a blur on the floor before her, moving so slowly then hauling itself up.

She felt like she'd been spinning for an hour on a turnstile she played on as a child. As an adult and a captain, she didn't enjoy it that time. Her head swayed to try to keep up with the rest of the ship, and her stomach fought to follow.

Her hands were still clutched firmly on her command chair arms.

She could feel a cool sweat all over her body, a chill on the edge of her nerves, though not rising, only holding. Finally, she shuddered; she felt goosebumps from her scalp to her toenails. Then she felt nauseated, and she swallowed to bury it as best she could. Behind her, she heard the unmistakable sounds of coolant steam hissing from a few panels, several blown panels crackling beside others about to go and the groans of crew pulling themselves up from the floor. Shamefully, she didn't have it in her yet to turn and look for herself.

"Status?" she rasped.

A pause, then Tuvok's voice: "We...have passed through the plasma field, Captain." Even he had been affected, though predictably, he resisted revealing it. "We have suffered substantial damage."

She rolled her eyes, but then decided against voicing her first response to that as she swallowed her bile again. "Sensors?"

"Captain," Kim croaked, "I'm detecting a ship approaching off our starboard."

Janeway blew a held breath. That was not the kind of confirmation she wanted. "I need more, Mr. Kim."

He paused, probably trying to focus on what he was reading. Her own vision hadn't quite recovered, either. "It's a...approximately half Voyager's complement," Kim finally reported, "heavily shielded."

"Their weapons are minimal," Tuvok added. "They are hailing us."

Janeway glanced at Chakotay, who like the others was just getting his own bearings back. She hoped she wasn't as pasty as he looked--though she could certainly imagine she was. "Onscreen."

Squinting, Janeway saw a sleek, white ship approach then float to a stop upon reaching its position beside Voyager, like a dove resting beside a magpie.

Drawing a firming breath, she stood and moved forward to the rail. She would need something to hold on to, she belatedly realized.

"Open a channel, Mr. Kim," she said quietly, straightening her posture.

Sooner than Janeway expected, a woman of around thirty years appeared in full view of the bridge. Wearing a dark, knee length coat and white scarves arranged around her fair face and braided into the crown of her brown hair, she bore a look of both surprise and concern as she let her eyes fall over her view. In that glance, she took in the bridge crew as if to memorize them and everything else there. Then her stare found the captain's.

Before Janeway could open her mouth, the woman touched a fan of delicate markings on her temple with a hand likewise marked, and then she spoke.

"Zha lastnya. Cost ira'ic lo fro'utisla. Ye vasu i'i bra'ell lutsridro ak i'aftsill ra'oll."

The lady's assured yet comforting tones were gibberish--and even she realized it, still examining the crew one by one. She sighed, speaking more slowly. "Zhall ye'i. --Your forgiveness, good lady. Bear you understanding of me now?"

"Yes," Janeway nodded. "I--"

"I greet your sun in peace, and it is seen your ship has been damaged, I have said," the woman repeated. "You bear injury. Assistance shall be provided in every facility you would require, should this be wished."

The woman had already decided, however, and she turned to set her crew into action with several kind suggestions and praise, the way it sounded.

"We came..." Janeway started, regaining the woman's attention, "...into the..." She stopped to grab hold of the rail again. It was getting better, but each time she realized that another wave hit her, disrupting her equilibrium and forcing her to swallow her bile again lest she lose it.

The woman understood. "Do not attempt great effort. Stories of ones surviving the Barrier are known to us, and it was noted that they experienced nausea." She then furrowed her brow before peering at Janeway again. "Records among us recall an alien scanning apparatus which brought itself through the Barrier. Shall I confirm it belonged to you?"

"It did," Tuvok told her.

"It passed through the Rrillov Asteroid Field and was crushed upon impact," she informed him then looked at Janeway again. "We were near Rrillov, in truth, when your similar entrance into our region was noticed. You have suffered good fortune, yet it would be advisable to accept our help."

As if I could get so many words in, Janeway thought, collecting herself again. "You're very kind, b--."

"You bear severe damage," the other woman noted, looking briefly down to her panel. She pursed her lips at what she saw there. "Revealed in my analysis are hull fractures patterned over your stern. You might not have brought your ship through so slowly, as the pressure from the plasma waves creates more damage, our research tells. Yet your warp drive is already inactive, by the spirits' blessings, for at your pace it would have made your plasma conduits like trees leaking sap. Your shields boast but minimal power, viable plasma and deuterium is perilously lacking, and hull scarring is..."

Pausing to draw a breath, a shocked stare rose to meet Janeway's that time. "You have been attacked before this sun. War has been waged with this ship."

"We have had some encounters," Janeway admitted, taken at first by the other captain's surprise. "There's a group of people who are not taking kindly to our passing through their territory. We're on our way home, which is very far away. We intend no harm."

With sigh and another examination of the alien captain, the woman finally nodded. "Then they shall be pitied for their interference. Allow me to assist you, Captain..." Suddenly, she laughed. "Yet now I would ask you permit me the manners taught me as a girl! It is not upon each sun a ship brings itself through the Barrier. I suffer much distraction."

Bowing to them, she touched her temple again and said, "I am Havetsi of the Allanois, bondmate to Cera, scholar of Desal and co-captain of this survey ship, the Ki'ial."

Janeway couldn't help but smile back at the captain's amusement, a complete change from the concern and shock of a moment before, but no less welcome. "Captain Kathryn Janeway of the Federation Starship Voyager," she responded, managing a bit more pleasantry in her tone.

Captain Havetsi bowed her head again, curiously meeting each set of still foggy eyes when she lifted it again. "Zha lastnya. My honor, Captain Janeway, and all claimed as your own."

"Thank you," Janeway returned and let the appropriate pause pass. "So, you are aware of this...Barrier?"

She nodded. "I'eva tsa, ka. Our region of space is comparatively a pin-dot in the vastness of what is the universe. --Ka, we bear awareness of this. At sixth level warp, our ships require but three t'brass to cross our space."

Janeway didn't pretend to know what that equaled, but it couldn't be very large, probably a good deal smaller than Federation space. "And it's completely surrounded by the plasma field?"

"It is."

Janeway had to shake her head. "Amazing. I've never known of anything like it."

Havetsi grinned. "In ancient times, when ancestors peered at the stars from our sweet home upon

Desalia, it was said the Barrier was the end of all things bodily, with existence only non-corporeal lying beyond. Therein lay the realm of both our spirits and all those who came before us. --Far more was known an age later, coming by the weary sacrifice of scientists who dared cross it in nature's curiosity."

Janeway sympathized, considering how she felt having just come through it. "Long ago on my homeworld, it was said they thought the Earth was flat and that sailing too far might take the ship off the edge."

Laughing aloud, Havesti turned to tell her curious crew of it. They took it with equal good nature. She turned back to Janeway with shining eyes. "We bear many words to paint for each other, it seems! Yet first, your repairs should be set about. In this time, we shall learn why you have brought yourselves here."

"Actually, I would like to see to the last item first, if you don't mind," Janeway told her, regaining enough of her senses to get back to why she was there in the first place. "You see, we didn't come here by accident, Captain."

"Tsid ka'e, your entry seemed not to be met with resistance," Havetsi confirmed, looking over her panel again. "Thus you seek a thing? This is not surprising. --Your supplies shall be replenished, Captain Janeway. Bear no concern on this matter." She held a finger up to Janeway's reply, wanting to finish. "My people enjoy great prosperity, our thanks to the spirits' blessings and our dedication to their wisdom. We give when it is needed and of proper use. I would trust you bear goodness and shall take responsibility for you."

Janeway gave a polite--and relieved--nod. "Thank you. But we didn't come here looking for supplies. We came looking for our missing crewmen."

Captain Havetsi stilled, a sudden paleness washing the mirth from her expression. Again, she looked at the outsiders. "How long ago have you lost them?" she finally responded.

This sudden question took Janeway aback, but then it clicked. "We noticed there was a fluctuating temporal variance in--"

"How long?" the other woman pressed, completely serious.

With a blink, Janeway let her know: "Nine days."

A glaze appeared in the other captain's eyes. She might even have shuddered, but otherwise accepted the news with a slow breath. Behind her, her crew had also stopped to look. Their captain waved them on with a gentle hand. They moved away, but not without another peek.

"Your 'day' is a single rotation of your homeworld on its axis?" she queried solemnly.

"Yes," Janeway answered, feeling a cool dread at the captain's question. She watched her calculate it briefly, almost unwillingly as her eyes turned askance then closed. "Captain Havetsi?"

"Saletsa, zhobrul llesk ye. Most sincere sorrow is felt," she breathed then opened her gaze to the other woman's, nodding. "Allow me to lead you to Desalia, my homeworld. My Aunt Babaki, bondmate to Osna, the Prime Minister of Desalia, shall be consulted."

Janeway looked back at Chakotay, likewise entranced by the other captain's apology and equal call to action. With a look alone, he seemed to want more--and she had to agree with that desire.

"Your weapons must be disengaged," Captain Havetsi continued, "as it is the policy in our space. Yet you are allowed every freedom to retain your shields, however they suffer. Please bear trust and allow my guidance. It would be best were we to take ourselves now, however, and commit to your repairs as we move."

Janeway eyed her. "First, I'd like to know why, Captain. Is there an unusual effect with the temporal instability within the Barrier?"

"It does not vary here, or there," Havetsi told her, hesitating at first, and then consigning herself to the rest with a sigh. "Yet what was discovered by those unfortunate scientists was that time in your home region passes much more slowly than in Irliae. Our scientists set out on their studies, managed their way through the Barrier and returned...three hundred years later. Only their proof of scholarship and our oral records claimed them as our own. All they had of their own life was lost."

"You mean our away team was lost *years* ago?" Chakotay questioned.

Captain Havetsi returned his stare. "Your sensor apparatus entered this region several Desalian years past, good man. I was yet a novitiate when I learned of it. Its remnants lie at our colony Llatso'a, at the research center in the dluma city."

Janeway had slowly lost her breath again as the captain explained, and a shrinking, sick feeling inside her chest replaced the nausea she'd had before. She believed she'd have preferred the nausea. "How much more quickly does time pass in this region?" she asked slowly.

"For each Desalian year to your approximate day? It is twelve to one."

"What?" rasped Janeway. She swung another look back and saw Chakotay's face reset with astonishment. Just as quickly, she couldn't look at him--nor at Kim, or anyone else but the other captain, who seemed perfectly certain of what she was saying, though regretting being the bearer of that news. Even then, Janeway could only shake her head to herself. When she asked, she knew it wouldn't be what she wanted to hear, but...it was impossible. It had to be.

Recovering a little, Chakotay's eyes narrowed with skepticism. "Are you telling us it's been over a century here since our people passed through your Barrier?"

"More is known..." Havetsi paused, knowing the weight of what she had just said, and also knowing the stiffly dressed and predictably cautious people would learn the rest soon enough, if they sought the party she was beginning to suspect. The timing alone could not be denied. "In that time," she continued, "our world among all in our region was in a dreadful state. A necessary war with the Unar approached. Unar had conquered the whole of Irliae to serve a terrible turn of power and philosophy among them. It is very likely, particularly for their uniqueness as outsiders, they were captured and sold."

"Sold?"

"To service," Havetsi replied, more simply than she meant to. "This was common at the time. --Yet more ideas shall not be put into your heavy spirits. I wish only to offer you preparation. The wiser course, however, would be to find fact, not assumptions, so no more at present shall be said. I ask only that my suggestions are accepted."

Janeway was more than willing to do that. "What do you recommend? We are obviously out of our element, Captain."

"We shall take ourselves to Babaki and require her to search the records we bear of that time, which the Unar kept diligently during their occupation. She is a library technician at the Institute." Captain Havetsi moved closer to the screen and met Janeway's stare again, solidly. "In the interim, I shall endeavor to procure repairs and assist with the casualties you have suffered in your unfortunate journey. Yet we would leave now, lest any more precious time is lost to your good memory."

Giving the younger woman another, longer look, Janeway finally nodded. She knew she could do nothing else, secretly wished she were instead in a some strange dream than that strange region, despite her natural scientific curiosity and the other captain's friendliness.

It was impossible to believe that her crewmembers, whom she sent out only a week before, were dead generations before that woman was even born. It was too much to believe. Still, Captain Havetsi was being sensible too. Voyager did have several other concerns to deal with--and those were ones she could at least do something about for the time being.

"Mr. Baytart, set a course to match the Ki'ial's at full impulse."

"Desalian space lies not far," Havetsi told her. "With your approval, we shall perform what repairs my supplies may support in the interim to speed our journey."

Janeway looked up at the captain's bright yet pained face, not knowing whether to mourn, to feel humiliated for her obvious need of help or to kick herself for ever allowing Torres to go off chasing plasma streams without Voyager's backup, despite her and Paris' talents.

Yet they were there now, with a captain who certainly looked to be regretful of their circumstance and willing to see to their problems.

Now was all they had to make the best of.

"Thank you."

Havetsi's white scarves floated off her thigh-length hair as she led her guests through the inner avenues of Desal, Desalia-Four's capital city. She walked purposefully and seemed completely in her element doing so.

The downside was that she walked a little *too* swiftly.

Truly, it was paradise in clean, naturally curving arches and gently angled structures, with lush teal and green trees lining every whitewashed street, trails of small coral and blue flowers running down almost every window and around every door, scenting the air. In sunnier turns, those vines bore coral-colored, oblong fruits. A wide avenue they eventually turned onto bustled with travelers and denizens. Lines of colorfully clothed children apparently off to school were delightfully distracted by the gurgling fountain and small, splashing birds as they passed. The equally colorful but relatively refined adults milled, strolled or relaxed on warm stone benches, though none were idle, but reading or writing or chattering quietly amongst themselves. A pang for their homeworld might easily have struck both Janeway and Kim for the familiar peace and community they passed.

From time to time, Havetsi slowed slightly to bow in passing to some of the citizens, but continued

without bothering with introductions, despite the surprise her fellow Desalians aimed behind her. Her gait remained swift, her steps assured as she swerved around groups and gardens on the streets, even as she looked back at her guests.

"Babaki expects us in Bala's Court at the Institute," she said. "My apologies for the absence of transports, as they are not permitted within the city walls."

Beside the captain, Harry Kim furrowed his brow. "Why not, Captain? --If you don't mind me asking."

Havetsi grinned. "Tradition, Kim," she replied. "We are full with them, peoples have said, and indeed our tendency is to honor the spirits, our ancestors, those who laid the paths we walk well upon. Transporting within the city is avoided for respect of those before us, who tread with but their feet upon the salvation of this city then rebuilt it with their own hands. --Vya, we arrive now."

With a spin, she turned them under a low arch between two domed stone buildings. Within them stretched another whitewashed mall surrounded by a flush of red willows and bright flowers, populated with white-robed adults and hurrying youths.

Janeway noted those people, the men with boxy, white headdresses braided at a side with beads pinned in, generous white robes over tailored kneecoats and brightly embroidered sashes tied at the waist. The women there, much like Captain Havetsi, wore sheer white scarves draped around and braided into their long hair, white robes draped on their arms like shawls, fitted shin-length coats cut low over richly toned silk gowns, loose leggings and carved bead chains. In their stature, they reminded her of a formal Vulcan assembly.

Unlike any Vulcan meeting, however, those people were rather like the Desalians she had encountered on the Ki'ial, laughing often and animated in their otherwise intent conversations, whatever they might have been discussing. The universal translator had all but given up trying to decipher the dense advanced language. For their benefit--as they did with other peoples they knew--Havetsi and her people had been speaking the "children's tongue" for them.

Had it been any other situation, Janeway would have rolled her eyes for the meaning in that.

Still, as she had been when they first arrived, Janeway was impressed. The people, again, seemed as pleasant and cultured as a peaceful people should be, and the crew of the Ki'ial gave every evidence that their people were as helpful as Havetsi's every promise. It truly was a beautiful world, too, a sort of place where its inhabitants seemed to take a particular pride in making it clean and welcoming, lushly decorated but eminently natural. Helped on by a fragrant breeze and a warm sun, Janeway wished she wasn't there for the business she was, and might easily have felt guilty for appreciating it so much. But she hadn't forgotten for an instant her purpose.

More likely, she unconsciously was welcoming the distraction.

"This is the Institute of Desal, where my oaths as a scholar were taken," Havetsi continued as she maneuvered them around a concerted discussion with but a nod their way. "It was the first place of scholarship recovered on Desalia past the Unar War, consecrated by Bala of Na'ihaj. Ab, my great-grandfather's sister awaits."

Janeway grinned despite herself. Havetsi spoke as if they'd stopped once since entering the city.

At the corner of a nearby pool, a tall, elderly woman stood. Her clothing was not unusual, though her

coat seemed finer in its embroidery and texture, and her braids and scarves were more intricately fashioned. Unlike the others in the mall, too, she patiently bided her time without company, seeming to enjoy the view of the playful fish and dotted water flowers. Spotting her reason for being there, however, she instantly gave up her solitude and set forward to meet them, offering her slim, wrinkled hands from the folds of her white robe as she approached.

Havetsi immediately bowed and sank to a knee to humbly kiss her aunt's fingers then brush them over her temple markings, her breath hardly quickened by their excursion.

Janeway took that opportunity to check hers.

"Yeshalli zha lastnya, ye'i va'as jllai," the younger woman said, oddly making the elder laugh. Havetsi stuffed a responsive snicker and looked at her guests. "My friends, I am blessed with the honor of acquainting you with Babaki of the Allanois House, bondmate to Prime Minister Osna and scholar of Desal."

Babaki was still grinning at her niece's introduction when she turned her gaze to the others. "Yet Babaki alone may be said, should it please. What a mouthful I have become!" Without waiting for them to introduce themselves, she eyed her niece again. "Havetsi, claim you our honored guests?"

"Yeshalli, ka," the young captain promised. "I have found them good-spirited, sense well their truth and much their pain, this by more circumstances than what was has brought them directly here."

Babaki nodded. Looking curiously to the guests again, then seeming to decide in another blink, she extended her hand. "Consider your travels paused for as long as required by you. Great sorrow is mine for your trouble, and I do feel responsibility for it--should it indeed be truth. I shall attempt to rectify what I might."

Janeway accepted her hand. Gently, the elderly lady brought their joined fingers to her temple with a small bow. Then Babaki then touched Janeway's temple, causing her breath to catch a little. There was a particular energy in that touch, which was a little surprising, though not unfriendly. At last, her fingers were lowered then softly released. "Thank you, Babaki."

"And you are called Kathryn Janeway. Your officer, Kim." Though pleasant, Babaki had not asked.

"On behalf of my crew," Janeway said, "I'd like to thank you for any and all of your efforts, Babaki. Captain Havetsi has been more than helpful in assisting us on Voyager."

"Fate has proven her a fine captain," Babaki replied with an innocent gleam. "How well our nature is found with further suns upon our experience, blessed by the spirits' guidance."

Havetsi was not fazed by Babaki's mischief, but rather laughed and touched her temple affectionately. "And I, good Babaki, should be a poorer one should I fail to update my co-captain as promised."

"Dejorra brings himself from Saha'aten at last! His son has been well settled with his bondmate and her aunts? --A young couple, Captain Janeway, assisting a small house's growth with their migration there."

Janeway only nodded.

"Ka, they are all contented," Havetsi reported, "and at next sun, Dejorra is happily reinstalled on the Ki'ial as contact for the Voyager's many procurements are arranged and carried out. --Your humility is unnecessary, Captain Janeway. I see already that this is not the way of your own. Allow me to honor my

people in this." Again, she addressed her aunt: "Your forgiveness for my absence now, good Babaki."

"You shall bring yourself before sunset?"

"Yeshalli ka--myself as well as Dejorra's details."

The elder woman smiled. "They are much anticipated, Child. Take yourself in the spirits' light."

With a bow to Janeway and then to Kim, the young captain backed off four steps then turned to walk briskly out of the court.

As it turned out, Babaki set them off in another direction. Thankfully slower than her niece had, as they started down the pristine mall, Janeway had a feeling it was for her age and not her temperament. She had been as verbally energetic just before.

"It is understood you may have lost your friends recently in your history," she said quietly, her eyes straight ahead.

"We came into the Barrier to find them," Janeway affirmed. "Havetsi says there's still a chance that they might have gotten caught in the streams that surround your region."

Babaki considered that. "It has been known through the ancient stories, sometimes myth," she said. "Yet the possibility should not be discounted, as it has touched our histories." Turning her gaze to the captain's again, she tried to reflect that glimpse of hope she saw there. "We shall take ourselves now to uncover the Unar records of the century past. They diligently maintained accounts of every poor spirit who happened into their camps."

It was a grim business, Janeway knew, but she did want to be sure--and hoped more that she would *not* find her crewmen there "Thank you, Babaki."

She nodded once in acceptance. "Should your friends lie not there, we shall ask our word painters."

Kim peered over at her. "Word painters?"

"Our oral historians," Babaki clarified. "Desalia has an ancient tradition in the oral history, from the times well preceding the establishment of blessed regency. Though it paled considerably during the occupation, when all knowledge was banned, our memories and events continued to be related to others, often in public."

"Forgive me for asking," Janeway said, "but is it a reliable source? On Earth, there were civilizations who passed their knowledge down in a similar manner, but it was not always...accurate."

"Fact is sought, not tale. This is understood." She held her hand out to guide them around a garden wall to cross another wide, stone-laid mall. "Some who are not of Desal bear belief that it is not as precise or scientific; however it is a science and the result of long study and dedication to its details. Since antiquity, it has been a dear trade among Desal, dearer still when our technology was taken from us, when we were consigned to what Unar designed as nothingness. During the Unar occupation, though necessarily suppressed and hidden, it was our only available system of recordation, our latent mnemonic skills and great love of community and communication."

They came upon a multi-figured statue built in a semi-circle, a group of ragged children holding bowls up to a giant urn, from which a woman ladled their portions. Two children were sitting and drinking

theirs. Janeway found her eyes drawn to it as they neared.

"Even past the sun this world was liberated," Babaki continued, "resources could not be assigned to databanks, but rather we bore immense amounts to recover. Only the memories of those who would later paint held our histories together during this time."

"But they might not have known my officers."

"This is truth." The elderly lady brought them around the statue and into a fragrant, bowered pathway, hung with deep green trees, white blooms and deep red fruits. A host of small, yellow birds danced between the limbs upon their arrival, and Babaki turned a brief smile up to them before continuing, "Yet the oral histories are an invaluable source despite that. We shall try every turn to find fact."

"It's as much as we could ask for," Janeway admitted.

"And yet more. Many peoples reside in Irliae--what our region is called. They too might bear some record of outsiders among them."

Janeway looked around the sun-dotted path. It seemed like they were going deeper into the woods and farther away from the buildings. "You could ask them to search their databanks?"

"What is borne of that era, ka," Babaki answered. "I would place more hope in the Unar records, however, which are kept in the catacombs of the Institute. They may yield scientific data, as well, which perhaps might show a disturbance in the Barrier when--"

"Those old, tedious records shall do you little good, Child! Why should innocent spirits be tortured with such pedantic, unfeeling drivel?"

Janeway and Kim together spun towards the craning, thickly accented voice that rang out from their side. En route, Janeway also saw Babaki's face flush to scarlet.

Beyond her, Janeway saw a fossil of an old woman leaning on the pedestal of a statue in a niche between two trees, her thin, skin-draped fingers woven upon her belly. She was fashioned in a blue coat and gown, with a finely embroidered white robe that hung low behind her back. Airy leggings would have hidden the thinness of her legs were it not for her narrow, cloth-wrapped feet. Several strings of amber beads showed through her fine, white headscarves, which were braided with and pinned into the thick tiers of silver plaits on her crown and draped around her shrunken, sallow face. The remainder of her hair fell behind her to her knees like curls of smoke against a mist of trailing scarves.

To add to her relatively formal array, her posture necessitated respect. Her stare, a bright hazel aimed at the prime minister's wife, also spoke of her place. It struck even Janeway with its depth.

Nearby her, on a short stone wall encircling the small clearing behind the statue, sat an equally ancient gentleman in a voluminous white robe over a long green coat and grey trousers, reading and eating one of the red fruits from the tree with a trembling hand. He glanced over at her and Kim from beneath the opening of his heavy white headdress then went back to his book, muttering to himself inaudibly.

Babaki was quickly conciliatory to those elderly people and bowed deeply before speaking. "Nali, these are honored guests, searching for their own. By blessed example and by my desire as well, I would of course offer assistance in every manner possible."

"By torturing them?" the elder returned, creaking in her interrogative. "Bearing through those dreadful files of death?"

"They bear some use, Nali."

"As does joth manure."

"Good sirril pods grow for it," the old man said and took another bite of his fruit. That said, he turned his attention away again.

The prime minister's wife did not return the favor. "Tola, why have you brought yourself at this high sun?" Babaki asked. "You shall needlessly tire yourself, when you have only taken fresh treatments this early sun."

"I am eating sirril and reading," was his simple reply, as if to say he need not explain himself.

Babaki gave up, shrugging. "I would beg you excuse us, then. Until sunset."

The ancient woman lifted her hands to the sky. "Vrill yat ho'all cich arr! So'at ye'i jacne'e agl a so'a garr. --Wisdom was taught you, Child, yet it is believed we said it should not be thrown into the air as seed for birds."

"Nali, I act only as I--"

"Grrikal shast yo'i," snapped the man, still not looking back at them.

Babaki sighed and looked worriedly at Janeway. "Your gracious forgiveness, good lady. These are my parents. The Unar records disturb them greatly."

"With proper reason," the elder woman added, staring plainly at her child then up to Janeway, "particularly beneath this sun. My youngest child bears nothing but a fine spirit, kindness and a mind worth all its speak. She is adored, my youngest. Yet she on occasion, for her many fine qualities, bears little sense."

Babaki snickered at that, even if it was a jibe aimed at her. She found more comfort to see her mother relax somewhat, too. "Then what shall *you* request of me, Nali? Your guidance would of course be respected."

"I would request you bear silence so I may ask these guests myself, Babaki," the older woman replied with a small grin then eyed Janeway. "It is plain my elderhood among the living is well borne; by my many scars, I and my bondmate recall well the Unar occupation, those among a vast number of memories, long borne within us. Whom have you lost? Tell me their callings."

Janeway decided to be patient. She had much rather have kept going to that information she was anxious to see. But even Babaki was obedient to the mother. She had a feeling it would be best to follow suit. It couldn't hurt, anyway.

"Two of my bridge officers: Tom Paris, my helmsman, B'Elanna Torres, my chief engineer. And two other engineers, Susan Nicoletti and Kurt Bendera."

The elderly woman's eyes flickered over the outsiders' faces as the names were said, reading the heavy strain of regret and worry those names called up. In that pause, the woman's expression gentled, her lips

closing lightly together. She had almost looked away to her daughter, but instead glanced back at her bondmate.

Babaki, meanwhile, remained anxious to recapture the elder woman's attention. "I have heard no mention of these names in our histories, Nali, not in the common files, nor among the Worlds Council records. Such interesting titles should have been recalled."

The mother did not speak at first, but found her bondmate's glance, drew a short breath, and then another atop it. She closed her heavily creased eyes, opened them again. "Babaki, my child," she breathed, "bear you rather a recollection of our friends, Susik? Or Derra?" Her voice cracked with a sudden, deep emotion, and she paused again.

Babaki's small mouth parted--and Janeway and Kim shared a stare as well before focusing again on the elderly mother's profile. For the woman's heavy inflection, even they wouldn't have connected the names she'd listed if they didn't know to whom she was referring.

"...of Be'i and Toma?"

Babaki gasped, flushing red, and she looked at her guests with a sudden and equal emotion to her mother's. She had been told it might be, could see why her niece had suspected it for their forward bearings and uncanny timing, but *those* people? To look upon them once with their hard, sterile clothing and steely faces, it was little wonder she had all but discounted it--and she corrected herself for taking such a quick and narrow view of them. Shaking her head in her bemusement, she whispered, "Birthpeople of our honored spirits, they have indeed brought themselves..."

Janeway felt her heart drop.

"Honored spirits?" Kim asked, too taken to think what it meant at first.

"Our honored passed," Anai told him softly, regretting her words more when she saw the young man's features pale, the woman start aback.

"Dead," Janeway breathed, looking at the ancient mother again. "When... How long did they live here?"

The elder woman turned her gaze toward a trellis of yellow flowers hanging off the edge of the wall. Slowly, she blinked then said, "Susik passed twelve ralkle past her life mate, Gatra, not twenty years before this sun, here, at Desal. Derra remained among the living for some ralkle past that, yet remained at Cezia with his Antral wife, Yasis."

Her breath remained restricted, but Janeway fought it--also the painful water that found her glass hard stare. Those conclusions, so simple to the elder woman, Janeway had been somewhat prepared for, but...

Perhaps the woman, she imagined, was mistaken. Maybe she was trying to keep them from the Unar records for some reason more pressing than what Babaki had barely explained.

But the captain needed to hear it: "And Toma and...Be'i?"

"They passed near the end of the war that had liberated our people," was the response, "sacrificing themselves for the blessed fate of Desalia."

This was not a comfort.

The elder woman looked at Janeway again, finally stepping away from the wall to touch the captain's arms with her time-wilted hands.

"Ka, I knew them. Be'i and Toma bore particular closeness to me and my bondmate, good lady, those honored spirits, from their first sun among Desal, at Uillar."

Babaki looked at Janeway and Kim in turns. "By all that is blessed, I did not believe you would be of their birth."

"This is for that the full details of that time lie within your tola and me," the mother said. "Susik, Gatra and Derra passed with this unspoken, as have most of the others who knew of them. It is yet retained by Yasis. By Be'i and Toma's wishes, as Ara and I remain among the living, their full history would be recognized first to its appropriate audience. I and my bondmate have waited a long time for you to bring yourselves to us."

Janeway didn't have the momentum or the nerve to escape the warming touch on her arms, nor her gold-flecked eyes, which regarded her with such regard, she felt the stare penetrate her nerve.

It was too much, she thought yet again, and had to confirm, "You've been waiting for us?"

"It was known you might bring yourselves, someday, when Be'i and Toma learned of the temporal variance in the Barrier," she replied.

In the elder's pause, she watched their faces, falling more as the news she had dreamt of telling filled them. They did not want to believe and yet they had no choice. They had been somewhat prepared for that information, since they knew of the difference in time. But there, facing the reality of their friends' histories, lived quite fully in but a day of their own lives, truth was bearing down hard upon them both.

Especially the boy--young man, she corrected herself, trying not to smile at her perspective. The young man's face was terribly pained...

Their friend, she remembered. Kim had been their friend.

So, she moved to him, touched his arms as she had the captain's then reached up to place her cool, wrinkled hand on his face. He blinked, staring down at her with dark, childlike wonder. Again, she had to force herself not to smile at that. He was so young.

"Mourn them not so zealously," she said softly. "Your people lived nobly on Desal's part, on one another's parts. Even while they had not expected to see you again, they thought dearly of all of you. They passed, ka, yet with pure spirits, dedicated absolutely to the salvation of Irliae. Through their efforts and sacrifices, all of this," and she waved a graceful hand around, "all you see upon Desalia and beyond, may not have been returned to us as happily. They gave of themselves readily for this purpose."

"How?" he asked. It was a plainly spoken curiosity in a thick throat.

A tiny smile crossed her mouth for the simple word, a vast understatement of the relief she felt to hear the question she'd been waiting for, hoping to live long enough to answer. She did not answer Kim, however. Instead, she stepped back and returned her attention to the captain. Touching her temple markings, she bowed as low as her body would allow.

"I am Anai of Cezia, bondmate to Ara, matriarch of the Allanois House, Scholar of Azlre and alongside Ara, Regent of Desal."

"Captain Kathryn Janeway of the Federation Starship Voyager," was her polite reply, tempered by the elder's admission of rank. For her ornaments and stance alone, it made sense--and she wished Babaki had said something earlier about it.

Then the elder touched the captain's fingers, willing them to wrap around her own. As Babaki had done, Anai brought their fingers to her temple, then to Janeway's, making the younger woman blink. Where Babaki's energy was noticeable, Anai's presence was potent, and last well after their fingers parted.

"Good Captain," Anai continued, "I am also what is called in Desal an akarr tiras--a word painter. Since my induction into the scholarship over one hundred years past, I have painted the stories of the many lives I bear within my vast memory--all save four. For all my time upon Desalia, but two things in my trade have been sought: One, that my children and theirs, and all those children's progeny, would bear understanding of that which preceded them, so that they would never forget the lessons and sacrifices that made the good life they now lead. For this, we have lived long and with great purpose. My bondmate has performed much the same service. We preserve and tell both our life's histories and those of our ancestors, kept within our spirits, with great pride, for the children and for Desalia, for our people, our region and our future.

"My second wish has been to paint in full the words of Be'i and Toma, of Susik and Derra, these four we have withheld, to my family as well as the ones who bear every right and need to hear it: You."

Janeway felt her breath only beginning to return as the woman now took both of her hands in her own, unbroken in her stare.

"I am what your people would name a 'dying' woman, Captain Kathryn Janeway," she continued. "My spirit's partner, since beginning his descent ten years before this sun, shall soon take me with him to our blessed ancestors. I shall pass willingly at his side, as is the way of our kind, of the bonded. "Yet to paint the words of their lives to you and your kind has remained our great desire. I and Ara have brought ourselves here this sun with this one proposal. You were sought by us when I heard that aliens from outside the Barrier were bringing themselves to Desal, with prayers it was meant, that you have finally brought this fate to truth."

"Mrs...Anai..." Janeway sighed, swallowing back that next layer of all that had happened already that day. "You have to understand that this is very difficult for us to accept right now. Just over a week ago, we sent our officers out on a supply mission, and now you're telling us that..." She shook her head.

"This is understood," Anai responded. She firmed her hold on the captain's hands. "Permit me to paint their lives with my words, for my children and for you. Let us finally, fully, celebrate their lives and vindicate their memories, and let us assist your understanding as well. This was what was wished by them--one hundred and one ralkle past, this final wish was put upon us."

If asked, Janeway would readily admit she was overwhelmed. Not only was the terrible weight of what she was discovering still spinning in her mind, but the elderly woman's sudden passion, the depth of her emotion, the quick, dry warmth between their clutching hands. She could feel Anai's energy pulsing from her fingers.

Whether or not she trusted Anai's information, that she would prefer to see the Unar records instead,

was not the issue anymore. The matriarch was bound to her will.

Then again... "Are you certain, Anai, that these are the same people?" Janeway asked. "Not that I don't think you believe what you're--"

"Toma was borne of an upright gentleman, good in standing, who was your trade-guide," Anai cut in. "In his youth, he betrayed his elder's way and brought much suffering unto himself in consequence. Likewise, Be'i's ancestry was betrayed for her fears of loss, so keenly realized in her youth. For this, they yearned for vindication, for correction of their perceived emptiness--if not through true rectification, then through their works. Susik was a woman consumed within her craft, which found her both searching and willing to drift--and thus both caught and comforted within what she perceived as safety. Derra brought himself from a land of sufficient strife to make his being one of justice and constant care, while bearing the easiness of a man with few ties left but those of his own making."

That was more than enough to settle Janeway's doubts.

The matriarch Anai was pleased to see it. "Good lady, allow their words and the words of those around them to be painted," she repeated. "Let the compass of their lives be revealed; let us bring their beings and their desires life again and return them to you as best my humble art may do, in the only way I can."

The same unwavering stare began to shine, and her time worn voice was crackling with longing.

Longing finally given the chance to manifest itself, Janeway realized.

"I beg you, good lady, let their sacrifice be celebrated, brought alive with their last wishes, and let me and my sweet Ara find our spirits with peace. I beg you my final wish among this living world: Permit me to finally paint the words of their lives for you and for my family, my people. Zhras ye'e. --Please."

Their hands parted, and the elder woman drew back a pace then waited again, patient and willing to hear either answer. She had made her plea.

"This fate is chosen by you alone," she said quietly.

As if she'd come through the plasma field all over again, Kathryn Janeway felt her head spinning, was at a loss for several precious seconds as she tried to reign the effect of Anai's declarations, presence and offer.

Her voice was rough with unwillingness despite her efforts. "Very well."

Anai closed her eyes, letting free her breath after holding it throughout that pause. "My gratitude, Captain Janeway," she whispered. "You and your own are charges of my noble house, as I claim you this day." She opened her stare upon the captain's again. "You and yours shall be brought to the house of the Allanois this evening to dine and take rest among my family. Following our evening meal, I shall take my place and begin to paint their words to you. This shall require four evenings, should my bondmate and I remain well."

Without waiting for a reply, Anai moved to her daughter and touched her temple. "Tabri'elko ye'i, bablisull, a'o gye ak'ollisht o'ad. Ya'o broll patsige'a Unar zatsik. Gychak a'i ak sane'arr pa'a zhallov."

"Nali ka," Babaki returned faithfully, kissing her mother's ink-marked, skeletal hand. She then looked at Janeway and Kim again.

"I shall take you to review the Unar records now, should it please," she said. "A half quarter before evening meal, Havetsi shall bring you to our house. Whomever you would wish or would desire to attend may bring themselves. Our garden is large, and all shall be welcome as honorable members of our house for your visit's duration. Nali has bestowed this in honor of your dear ones."

"Thank you," Janeway said emptily. The reason to see those records--*generously* permitted by the elder mother--was now moot. They would likely pale to what Anai had to say.

She didn't know if she wanted any of it now.

Conversely, Anai was satisfied, and she moved away to wake her bondmate from his unplanned bed on the wall. Ara, the ancient patriarch, roused with a start, as if he had not known he had drifted off. She spoke softly in their tongue to him.

Glancing over, he only gave a nod to each guest then smiled gently to his daughter, who returned his affection wordlessly; he touched her temple, bowed slowly. Content, Ara let his woman take him down and set his shuffling pace out of the niche, across the bowered path and away to the mall.

In that fashion, they disappeared.

Janeway did and said nothing, rather watched the ancient scholars move away, bowing their heads to those who moved to give them room, greeting others who bowed low before them, until they at last disappeared beyond the garden. Even after they were gone, she stared after them, still fighting back the bitter tears in her eyes.

In her heavy heart, she could admit to herself she dreaded returning to her ship and cursed herself again for ever letting her people go, cursed the fact that they could do nothing at that point but mourn and wait for supplies.

She looked at Kim and forgot herself a moment when she noticed his own mourning had already begun. She placed her hand on his arm comfortingly. "Mr. Kim?"

He collected a long breath, met her eyes. His own were misted. "I'm sorry, Captain."

She swallowed. "I am too, Harry. I know how good a friend you'd been to them. If you'd prefer to return to Voyager, you have my permission."

Harry shook his head. "If you don't mind, Captain, I'd like to see what happened to them, too. That they lived all that time, when we were still..." There, he stopped, cleared his throat. "It's hard to believe. But I guess it's true."

Janeway sighed. "It seems so." Turning her attention back to Babaki, who had politely taken a step away to allow them their privacy, she offered her a blink of approval then said, "May we see the Unar records now?"

The old woman bowed in respect. "This way, my friends," she replied quietly and continued to lead their way down through the arching trees and succulent fruit. When the portico of an ancient looking stone building came into view, she gestured to the large, arching doors tucked within, but remained silent.

What could be said that would not be said by Nali, after all? she asked herself, her eyes thoughtfully downcast as a tiny smile pulled at her lips.

Captain Havetsi was plainly subdued when she returned to Voyager to bring her new friends to the house of her elders. Decidedly straight-backed, her entire presence seemed to be conscious of her responsibility, her facade a mix of awareness and formality similar to the other scholars she'd breezed by earlier in the day. Conversely, she had changed from her uniform into colorful versions of her gown, coat and leggings; her translucent headscarves were changed to an opaque, embroidered sort, woven into her crown braids and tied around the rest of her hair. Though she appeared comfortable, her formality seemed to clash with the more casual array.

Not that makes any difference at this point, Janeway sighed to herself.

"I greet you in peace, good lady," Havetsi said softly. "Nali--my great-great grandmother Anai--has spoken with me regarding your way, on your people's fashion of mourning. I shall endeavor to assist you with whatever shall please and bring comfort to you in this time."

"Thank you for coming, Captain," Janeway said and gestured to some of the others in the room. "I don't believe you've met Kes and Neelix, yet."

"I have not until this moon," Havetsi confirmed and bowed formally to them both. "I greet you in friendship and in sorrow for your losses."

"It's very nice to meet you," Kes said, offering the captain a small smile despite her still-swollen eyes. She had indeed been torn to hear of the strange fate her friends had encountered.

"Thank you for coming to take us," Neelix said, jerkily nodding his hello.

"My honor," Havetsi told them. "It brings my Nali great rest to bring alive their memories, as is the way, and it pleases to bring you to her painting."

She looked around at the others there: The commander, so solemn, troubled--angry, perhaps, too--tried not to stare, not to hurt openly. Kim, who had come to the planet earlier that day, was more uncomfortable than before. Carey, with whom she had worked in engineering, was stiff-jawed, but he met her eyes without complaint and a nod.

And Janeway...Janeway's look of loss and a leader's blame was evident. Havetsi could only imagine what she might feel in her place, if it had happened to her own crew.

Then again, Havetsi knew the difference between them.

"Your situation bears a sad duty," she told all those in the room, "yet among Desal, where our elders and ancestors are revered, it is more certainly a celebration of life and not so much the reminder of loss. It is known that for your people it is different--most people of our acquaintance are not of our belief, of course. Yet I should hope, somehow, my elder-mother's stories may balance your conscience to some extent, bring comfort in knowing their spirits, ease the space that is left for their absence."

Janeway reached out. Havetsi's hand immediately met hers. "Thank you."

The younger captain bowed deeply and brushed Janeway's fingertips against the markings on her

temple. "My honor, good lady," she whispered then straightened again, allowing an appropriate pause to pass. "Shall we transport now?"

But a minute later, they materialized on the Desal city limits and waited for the next group to transport down. There would be six groups in all.

Once they had all arrived, Janeway motioned them to follow Havetsi through the west gates and into the late afternoon shade of a gracious Desalian neighborhood. The homes there were enormous but graceful structures, light in color and smoothly textured, rising high from within thick trees and expansive gardens. Ahead, Havetsi mentioned that she had grown to womanhood in that district; she still resided at her elder-father's house with her husband, and always would. Desalians commonly lived in large, multigenerational households, she continued, thinking belatedly to inform them, thus the reason for the multi-winged structures and generous surrounding gardens, each comprising a large block of the city. Their neighbors and great allies, the Antral, while different in many other ways, had a similar familial structure and resulting architecture. That said, she waited for another to speak.

Meanwhile holding pace beside Chakotay, Janeway contented herself to remaining a few paces behind and off to the side for the time being. A little more private, it allowed her the opportunity to relax a little, enjoy the quiet that wouldn't last long after they reached their destination. They turned onto another wide, flagstone avenue, rich with the scents of other families' meals wafting out of their homes. Looking back at the guests, Havetsi promised them generous foods and drinks awaited them at Ara's house, and that they would arrive soon.

Having faced much hostility in the Delta Quadrant, Janeway truly appreciated the hospitality, though she wasn't hungry. Much the opposite, really.

Beneath the Institute's stony foot, deep within the winding "catacombs," the scholars there had searched and at last found in the Unar records the "claimed" names of Susan Nicoletti and Kurt Bendera, who had been assigned to service and purchased at a planet called Horaaet by an Antral trainer representing Aldrun of Kichyryn's ship and house. Their bodies were "paid for" about two seasons later, the Kichyryn representative having signed an affidavit of their deaths and payment a sum of forty "kibo." According to Babaki's explanation of Antral currency, it was not a great loss to a good family--even then--only an annoying one.

With further examination, they found the claimed names of Tom Paris and B'Elanna Torres, drask prisoners at the Uillar Labor Camp from the same date as the others' assignments. There was no other record of them.

Though their mentions were slight, they were indeed in the Unar records. Her people had been there.

Her heart lurched anew just to think about it, to replay her confirmation of her officers' fates after returning from the surface.

When she related it to him and Tuvok, Chakotay's face seemed to crack with the truth; not surprisingly, he said nothing. Not long after she stopped her explanation, he left without more than a request to leave--off to deal with it in his own way, no doubt. Later, he reappeared to take the news to the other Maquis on the ship, help them with the loss of their old comrades and be the strong one when that news sunk in. He probably needed to be the good leader, at that stage. Janeway knew the feeling.

Though for him, she imagined, it would be harder, as those Maquis had been through far more times and trouble before Voyager had even been commissioned. Paris' and Nicoletti's losses were just as dire,

but they were new on board when Voyager set off on its ill-fated mission only a year before. The Maquis' feelings were stronger in general.

As if sensing her concern, he said, "Funny how things work out, for better and worse."

"I'd say that's true here in more ways than one," she said.

He almost laughed, seeming to suddenly picture the memory behind his dark stare.

"I remember one day, I was cursing about the fact that our supply ship was off selling our parts for more latinum, and before I knew it, we were scouring Cardassians off that ship. I found B'Elanna there, took her on my crew. She was young, just trying to do something with herself that felt right to her." Chakotay looked at Janeway. "B'Elanna was totally dedicated to what we were fighting for. She wasn't born out there, and she was as troubled as anyone else I knew in the Maquis, but she was a good friend, loyal to the crew, gave her all, all the way through."

Janeway smiled sadly. "I'd only started getting to know her, but I admired her, her conscience and intelligence. She reminded me of myself in a small way, that...determination of hers." A short laugh escaped her--and even Chakotay grinned, knowing what she meant.

"The way she came in," the captain reflected, "all on fire about that damned plasma stream, I thought I was looking at myself at that age. She was troubled, you're right about that. But she had so much potential."

She turned her gaze ahead to the group, their people, that remaining crew.

Harry was walking somewhat alone. It was much harder on him than he was openly admitting, though he made no pretense of hiding it in his features.

Janeway sighed. "Tom...All he wanted was to start over again, get his life back on track. I didn't know how much until after we were here, working probably harder than anyone else sometimes to prove he could do it." She glanced up at her companion. "I know you two had your long-standing differences, but you can't deny he was trying to make good on himself, that he was finally starting to use his assets."

To that, Chakotay did nod. Janeway looked forward again. "I believed he was going to do it," she added. "I wanted..." She shook her head, swallowed in a thick throat.

"Captain?" Chakotay asked.

"I wanted to see him finally succeed," she said. "I wanted to see them both succeed. And Lieutenant Nicoletti, a fine officer from a good family, the youngest of four... She was raised by her father; her mother died when Susan was three. --Did you know that? Susan had been on a fast career track before we ended up out here. I'd talked with her a couple times, at Sandrine's, in passing. Quiet, but always there right when we needed her, always..." She cast a guiltier eye towards Chakotay. "I hardly knew Mr. Bendera."

Chakotay grinned despite himself. "Hell of a left hook, thankfully. He'd gotten us all out of some scrapes at one time or another. "Hell of a left hook, thankfully. He'd gotten us all out of some scrapes at one time or another. His parents were members of the colony resistance. He joined my crew a few weeks after they were killed in a skirmish. I found out right away that he was pretty used to living outside the edge. Funny, quick...always there when you needed him, even when you didn't know he was

there..." The commander laughed quietly, a memory he didn't elaborate on. Instead, he more simply concluded, "He was a good person."

"They all were," Janeway whispered and shook her head again. Her stare turned outward, hardening even as she took another breath. "Chakotay, I can't accept this. I don't want to accept this."

"Then why come down here at all? You didn't have to."

She knew his tactic as soon as he voiced it, but admitted it. "Because I need to know what happened to them after I sent them; we all do. I also represent this crew--and them. It wouldn't be right for me not to be here." Letting out her breath, she shook her head bitterly. "I was wrong to let them go out there...out here."

"You accepted B'Elanna's idea because it was a good one," he told her, "and I agreed with you. What happened to them was an accident--we both know that hundreds of officers have been killed by lesser ones. They probably couldn't see beyond that plasma field any better than we could at first--and for that matter, that's not how they died."

"True," Janeway allowed. "But it doesn't change the fact that I wish I hadn't approved it. After everything we've gone through..."

"Yes," Chakotay said gently, firmly, "we've been through a lot. But--"

"I know," she nodded, focusing again ahead of them. "We can't do anything about that now. But damnit, I wanted them to succeed."

Chakotay looked at what the captain had turned her eyes to.

Captain Havetsi had reached her elder-father's sprawling, well-kept house, and she hurried ahead a few steps to open the gates to the back terrace. Inside, from what he could see at first glance, sat an abundant garden that stretched well within the ample corner of the fragrant street they still walked along, surrounding three sides of the estate.

Seeing it, he had to remind himself of what he'd been told already: Just over a century ago, that city had been occupied and abused by Desalia's enemies; for seventy years, their people had been subjected to refugee status at best. Chakotay knew personally of similar conditions.

In that same era, their crewpeople had somehow earned names for themselves among the honored of those people.

"Maybe they did succeed," he mused. "Just not with us."

She patted the commander's arm, her lips upturned but barely grinning. "That would be something, wouldn't it?" she said mirthlessly.

He returned the half smile. "It *is* something," he said and escorted the captain in the rest of the way.

The dinner, considering its occasion and the alien company's unease, went considerably well, or so

thought the Allanois family members as they milled and mingled and came to know the visitors. Predictably, they were quite curious. Not often did outsiders tread upon the doorstep of Desal--and certainly the Desalians, being naturally inclined to collect information to pass on to others, queried them as much as tact would allow. The history behind those outsiders' reason for being there only compounded their wish to know all they could about them.

Thankfully, most of the "Starfleet" and "Maquis" were willing tellers, despite the unfortunate reason for their visit. They told their tale of how they came to be so far from their birthplaces. They spoke of their families, distant or passed, related the trying but determined lives they now lived on the ship ironically called "Voyager." They spoke, too, of their passed friends.

For this, the listeners to their words, from youth and elder, were fully attentive. Sincerely, they felt for those people's struggles, breathing prayers to the spirits for the violence they had endured and hoping sincerely that fate would see the crew returned to their own successfully and soon, and they again they would know peace.

The elders had not attended the dinner. It was explained by Kyori, Babaki's elder sister, that Ara had grown unwell for his activity earlier in the day, and so they rested for the telling, which would be soon. "Their strength shall indeed be required," the well-postured scholar commented, "considering what times shall be remembered this moon."

Surely, soon arrived. Twilight began to fall over the city, painting the cobalt sky with a violet hue, and small torches were lit about the yard for light and warmth. The talking began to ebb and flow and ebb again, as the speakers' tongues became worn in expectation. The trays of food, emptied nicely, were quietly taken away and replaced with a few selections of wine and spiced water.

Then, as a sharp, cedar-like smoke scented the court, the partitions at the rear of the house opened. A few moments later, a small but finely dressed couple appeared and began their entry onto the terrace. Anai, who looked barely strong enough to carry the thick white robe draped over her arms, all but completely supported Ara, who stepped stiffly upon the unforgiving ground, shuffling off the patio and into the well-populated garden.

More than the family, who gave their elders warm but casual greetings, the alien crew stopped to see them, cutting off their sentences midway to catch a glimpse of the regents. Though the garden quickly quieted, they continued through, oblivious--or perhaps merely accustomed--to the attention.

The regents stopped briefly for introductions, to greet Janeway and to meet her first officer. Chakotay returned the patriarch's polite but silent bow then looked down at the old woman, accepting her hand when she brought it down from her temple and offered it to his. He bent a little so that she could touch it comfortably.

"Thank you for inviting us here," Chakotay said, trying not to look surprised by Anai of Allanois' ancient face and soft, bony fingers. Janeway's report made him expect someone who didn't look like she would break in a decent wind, not so shrunken as she had every right to be. But then, he could see in her warm hazel eyes an undeniable awareness and an assuredness that was both observant and kindly, while picking at his unease. "Thank you for waiting for us."

She took a shallow breath as she held his dark, honest gaze. "Then, you wish to hear the words I shall paint?"

"Among my people," he told her, "storytelling, passing down lessons for the younger generations, is a

long tradition, too. I have to admit, I'm curious to hear yours."

Anai nodded. "This is good." Her eyes went to the captain, then. "And you, good lady? Have you reconciled yourself this moon?"

Noting how pale the elder appeared in comparison to earlier, Janeway didn't have to heart to say no--even if the perceptive old woman had cornered her into politeness.

"I know how important this is to you, and I think it'll be better in the long run for my crew to have some answers, to help them deal with this."

"Perhaps you as well, Child?" Anai queried.

Janeway laughed without cheer, more at Anai's title for her than anything else. "Maybe. I'd like to think so."

"Then perhaps it shall be," Anai replied. With no further words, they elders moved away from them, taking Ara's arm in hers to ascend the dais in the center of the yard. Once there, she seated him in his usual place then settled herself before him, spreading out the length of her scarves and robe gracefully upon the white stone. She wore no coat that evening beneath it, but a full-length gown of deep violet.

Once she had pulled her feet up and to her side, Ara's shaking hand moved forward. She took it, resting it upon her thigh, and then her hand atop it. The identical patterns tattooed over their left hands, designating their bonded state, merged in that union when she curled her fingers around his.

On that natural cue, helped on by the gathering of the children at the elders' feet and other family members also finding their usual places on pillows and cloth squares laid about the area, the crew in attendance likewise gathered around and made themselves comfortable while the elder-mother patiently waited. When the yard finally stilled and the sound of the trickling water nearby became the only sound in that space, the time worn woman raised a finger to her spirit-daughter. The young captain stepped to the dais then turned to her audience, her fingers brushing across her temple markings, then held out to them all in greeting.

"Zha lastnya. Nya'i ina'ic cost la'aill. I am Havetsi, great-great-grandchild to Ara and Anai and future inheritor to the Allanois legacy, which histories they now hold. By them and their living children, I was requested to speak for our own this moon, and to welcome you to our home."

Standing straight but easily, Havetsi's gaze drifted over all those in presence; a gentle smile upturned her mouth.

"Since the suns that first recorded time graced our people," she began, "our ancestors and other honored spirits have passed their spirits' experience unto heirs, so that we may learn in their currents, grow our branches from their food and never forget the path that brought us to our present earth. For all time, our history has bound us, has brought us life and has immortalized our memory among the living.

"It is for this we have brought ourselves together this moon."

She paused, letting her eyes fall over the guests again. "Three hundred and thirty-six years past, Desalia bore both richness and was elder in its society. The Allanois Regency had begun a prosperous leadership, benevolent to its own, humbly dedicated as Desalia's voice. These blessed ancestors cared for great lands across eleven star systems, maintained a rich trade and peaceful alliance with all they knew

and truly were at one in spirit with their people.

"The times then were lush and fertile, like the Hanis Valley in the rain-soaked spring. Our arts and sciences, our scholarship and our relations thrived, teeming with creation, with vitality, variety and steady growth. This was a blessed time, ours a society grown over several thousand revolutions of Desalia.

"Yet that which lives and thrives requires sleep in its existence, a rest, a cleansing of its spirit's sun. In our region called Irlae, this became so. Yet sleep came through a seeping poison, which crept through the spirit of our beings, whispering prophecies of our civilizations' impending night.

"Upon Desalia that era past, good regents called Sharana'i and Mi'ejara passed unto their spirits, passing their legacy to those who could practice but impressions of their ancestors, impressions whose ways slowly grew into another manifestation of leadership. At first, for nearly fifty ralkle, this was not apparent. When conflicts in Irlae made themselves a part of our fate, however, shadows in the mind of the regent M'hida allowed the lessons of the wise to fall aside for his own slighted sight, enough to weaken the structure and balance on which our society depended. Poor practice sprung from the well of a long blessed people, Desal had grown careless in our life-giving sun.

"In the Shihahjk Realm, another people called Unar likewise underwent a poor transition. Once friends of Desal, known for their active philosophy, they in their turn took on a fateful arrogance, and they adopted violence and the desire to dominate all races not their own in order to cleanse Irlae, and thus be purified themselves. This transition flowed slowly through the many sects of their people, seeping and festering. Like with our Regency, this shifting wind went at first unnoticed.

"And yet their turn grew, spreading its influence, grasping at all reaches of Unar society and destroying any who would stand against this apparent reform. At last, the militant Plodischik sect rose from the white coals of Unar's internal struggle to spread their ashen wings over our neighbors in Irlae. Yet pleas for assistance were countered by Desal's complacency with fate, excuses of historical passivity and resistance of interfering in neighborly matters flowing from unwise tongues, while those sympathetic among Desalia, among any who stood against the regent M'hida's policy, were cast away to live in exile, shamed and abandoned. They passed to their spirits unseen by the community of Desal--a terrible price.

"The Unar continued its path of fire. Desalia sat in its wet valley still. The life-giving rains ceased. Desal yet fed, largely unaware of its unbalanced habit. Finally, when Unar came to the Desalians like fire in the forest, the Regency was in no form to prevent its own destruction. The remaining lush waters became fuel, and there was laid Desalia, its belly open to the predator's beak. Some did flee and hide, yet any remaining pleas were but a fleck of dust in the ashes Unar had laid upon our worlds."

Havetsi brushed her temple again, sang quietly:

"Shirr al ye sho'ivl ak;
Kek'litsch hana som yaj;
Zhall ye'o vesi'id cost mya'e;
Omi'id rallesh."

The response echoed, "La'a iv ye'as. Zhall ya'o."

With a slow breath, Havetsi continued, "One hundred and seventy-two years past, our fertile ways were parted from us. Our scholarship, technology and histories were snatched from our very fingers as our homes and communities were scorched and scattered. Forced labor was the fate of many, and they were

sent far from this home; others were consigned to colonies as base refugees, whose only hope for food and health was through the offering of their labor. Some were kept upon their home-soil, bereft of all but their lives. Remaining proud regent families and all but a scattering of our scholars--one-fifth of our population--were committed immediately to the very earth we had devoured unto its despair.

"In but years, the citizens of Desal became but items for purchase and for use, slaves to the desires of others, breathing, bleeding machines for Unar industry and households. A Desalian was drask--nothing, as defined by Unar.

"The title could be said to be due reward for their Desal's laziness and disregard. Our honored spirits had taught us well, and Desalia had grown to ignore that wisdom. For this, Desalia paid with its known life.

"Yet no creature earned the cruelty endured by our predecessors and allies of fairer times; no creatures earn the horror of nothingness, nor do their children and grandchildren, which Desalians of every rank and status came to accept in their penitence.

"There was resistance at turns. They became like mice and crept in the shadows of Unar nights, fed from nests--yet with no more than minimal gain, only a temporary meal and blessing of supply. These were spotted attempts, but these were but an amusement to the hanek-owls who preyed on the mice and other rodents in the dank forest those hunters claimed as theirs.

"For sixty Desalian years, the prey and hunter coexisted in the darkness. By nature, however, owls grow old and blind in the night, wax infertile while the rodents breed and carry their nests in their migrations...and acclimate too well to the dark.

"Yet then, our word painters have told, in that cold stench of night, there had crept creatures small, who burrowed without intent but passion and life into the nest of Desalia as it also lay alive, one hundred and eleven years past.

"Zha hevrra. Ye'o tsal nost, abralla'ad."

Havetsi had quieted in her final intonation then stepped off the dais, again revealing the elders of their house, both unmoving. The elder-mother's eyes were closed.

The terrace was silent for nearly a minute. Engaged with that respectful stillness, not even a child stirred.

A breeze rustled through the garden, tickling leaves and wind chimes on the branches. Then it stilled again.

Anai opened her eyes, devoutly brushed her thin, wrinkled fingers across the markings on her temple.

"Zha hevrra," she said softly, etched with distance. "I shall speak all of what is known to me. I shall speak from the many memories I and my bondmate bear, of my own in turns, and from those who have been largely sequestered these many years in respect for our honored passed and with hope of this moon."

Her gaze floated over all those before her, catching a few eyes, but holding none. Then her stare pointed aimlessly, unfocused.

"For one hundred and one years, the materials have laid in pieces in our memories, collections of

witnesses of that time. Now, the history shall be built completely: All those colors, all the voices, they all shall be painted into words, to create the portrait of lives we celebrate and treasure.

"It shall not be abstract--to spare these honored guests, who are not accustomed to our way of speaking, I shall instead speak with plainness. For I wish them as well as all of Desalia to understand and to see what I and others have seen, to know what has been known to us, and to carry it in their spirits as I and Ara do.

"For my children," Anai whispered, "for the children all, for Desalia, my people--and for you, our honored guests--I shall paint the words that were our dear ones' lives. I shall, in it, make them all live again and onward, as is the way, and also as was requested by their blessed spirits."

Silence blanketed the garden once more. Anai of Cezia's stare turned faraway in the oncoming darkness of night, ancient hazel flickering now with torchlight and not the remaining sun.

In the moments of silence, Anai likewise faded from where she was to where she would remember, so distant her time-buried eyes became.

Only her voice remained, soft yet audible, heavily trilled and dialectal but clearly spoken:

"It was upon the hot, dry Uillaran soil they were thrust," she began, "four in clothes not too dissimilar to the black and ash of Unar--and yet they were alien to even the wisest there in detention. In the Uillar Labor Camp, once a rich mineral trading station, all its occupants stopped their work to see the clean, groomed strangers. The stare of one inmate, standing within the trodden trench behind her deep hood, was of unenviable prescience.

"The aliens would not bear cleanliness for long, it was whispered among the others. The inmate blinked her dreadful acceptance. Ka, fate sees it so, thought she, for they are of Uillar now, and her spirit stirred as she watched, waiting.

"So they would not lift themselves, the strangers were snatched up by guards and thrown against the barricade for inspection by Commander Hychar. This was standard procedure, and the prisoners did not disappoint the commander's regard for interesting subjects.

"Two men stood angrily yet without offense. One, a fair, tall man, had need to hold back a third person, a dark-glared woman who cursed and resisted Unar hands on her collar. She would have earned their fists in her first moments there were it not for that fair man who claimed her side and whispered firmly to her ear. The fourth, another dark-haired woman, stood rigidly still, not daring to be anything but beside her comrades

"Despite their costume, all who watched their entry knew without question that they were of another place and people, well-kept, educated and proud. Though they were vulnerable, defiance and pride shone through their sun-pained eyes and asserted their beings all too plainly.

"Yet as eventually they would bear understanding, for their presence there alone and for being not Unar, they had become--like all Desalians--nothing."

2. Acquainting Opposition

"In truth, it required the darker woman two moments to earn that fist..."

Walking around them, brushing a jot of dust from his black and grey tunic, Commander Hychar cursorily glanced over the four standing before his barricade. There were two males, two females--two couples, by their associations and positions.

Though affected by the heat as all newcomers to the camp were, they appeared strong and healthy. A delicateness and non-committal stance about one of the pairs that was acceptable. On the other end, one of the men, with vain protectiveness, claimed responsibility for them--Hychar grinned to himself at that--and stood by the ugly woman who squirmed and scowled like a child.

The delicate two were better off indoors--they were prettier, smaller. They would work well in smaller, prettier places. They would make good sales, would likely train easily with supervision. Perhaps they could ease his last debate with Commander Frouwid as well. They would make a good gift.

The market would be more lucrative, he decided again. He was an officer of good regard throughout his society, for both his generosity with his drasks and for his high recycled ore output rate. His offerings at the bazaar would bring good yields.

As for the others, the woman's eyes were disgustingly defiant, and the rest of her was marred by her gross, inappropriate skull and sickly skin. Even her hair, which *might* have had some redemptive value, had been mutilated. Had she less proof of female glands, he would not have named her as a woman. Beside her, the man was rude and straight, thin haired, squint-eyed and obviously had poor judgment for his protecting that other creature.

Her markings... Nothing disturbed him more than that, glaring out at him like the wild fire streams of Gozhor, the curse of his people from the days of myth. Certainly if a myth might live, that female would

certainly be the embodiment of it...

He controlled his distaste for the practical there, however. Their bodies seemed strong, their health looked very good for the time being, they likely had technical training if not a full education, and Hychar knew he and his people could tend to any difficulties they might cause.

Naturally, Commander Hychar also knew that those drasks, though they appeared as did unmarked Desalians, were unlike any beings he or any Unar had known before. They might be rather obstinate, for all he knew; they could sicken easily or be prone to physical difficulty or may require too much food.

Still, he also knew, considering where they were reportedly from, that he had plenty of time to learn what he'd been delivered. They could not be certain precisely where the four had come from due to the inept handling of the small and badly damaged craft from which the drasks had been collected--a matter he still needed to attend to. The Desalians were uneducated enough about outer-Barrier space after two generations in service to be of no assistance to his curiosity.

It would indeed be interesting to see how the drasks fared.

"What the hell does he think he's looking at?" B'Elanna whispered. She was still halfway behind Tom, per his advice not making herself any more obvious than she already had. Even so, she couldn't keep herself from sneering at the contemptuous looks the hairy, long-nosed official was giving them--especially her.

"Just be quiet," Tom whispered, almost inaudibly as the man turned away for a moment to contemplate the thin, dusty onlookers within the fence. "Diplomacy's not doing it, so we'll have to find our own way out. But it looks like he doesn't like you--or me--so let's not make that any worse."

"Like this could get worse," she muttered, feeling her heart hammer inside her chest. The "inspection" was making every nerve in her body scream for action--escape. She tried to will that down, though, tried to think... "At least they don't seem interested in our commbadges. If we get to keep them, we'll set them to let our a dis--"

"Silence!" bellowed a guard nearby them, hiking up his weapon and pointing it at her.

B'Elanna closed her mouth--and clenched her teeth behind it.

A little dizzy from the heat and sun and sweating profusely, Tom felt his already alert pulse jump another notch when her growl found his ear. Despite of because of that, he kept his feet planted. He knew that like her, he wanted to do some damage and get out of that worsening situation, get off that hellish world entirely. At the same time, he silently prayed she wouldn't move. To some small relief, she didn't.

Some moments later, Commander Hychar turned back to them, seemingly unbothered, and raised a casual finger towards Nicoletti and Bendera. "Purchase." Then towards Paris and Torres: "Labor."

He then turned to leave.

The guards took Nicoletti and Bendera by the necks and Paris immediately rushed up on them. "No way! You can put us in here, but we go together! I'm responsible for them--you can't--"

"Your responsibility is dissolved, drask," Hychar said, barely looking back. "You now are Unar property and therefore have no responsibility but to commit to your sentence."

Tom tried to keep his wits together as desperately as they were fleeing him. Suddenly things were happening again: Bendera and Nicoletti were already returned to the barricade path, the commander was done with them all and he was running out of ideas. "We're willing to cooperate with you! We come from the same ship and we can't be split up."

"Then I will destroy them and send the remainder--you and that creature--to work," Hychar told him. "I need laborers more than household staff to sell."

Nicoletti turned white, looked from a struggling Bendera back to Paris. "Lieutenant--l--uagh!" She coughed hard as the guard's huge hand squeezed her neck.

"Then why not have us all work together?" Paris swiftly offered. "We know how to work as a team--been doing that for a long time."

Standing by the gate, Hychar looked back to reconsider the squirming woman in Sentry Tbonek's hand, tilting his head. "I think the bazaar at Horaet would find placement of them yet."

"The hell you will!" Torres snarled on the heels of her complete disbelief at what had been decided for her two people, who were essentially immobile under the large guards' grips. "They're my people! You have no right!"

Hychar wrinkled his face in distaste. "Mask your female, drask, before we silence her by our own means."

"Who the hell do you think you are?!" Torres demanded. Finally breaking her footing, she moved across to back Tom up, only to be cut off by another guard. She didn't balk, though, at the man glaring down at her. His glassy grey eyes, tufted black hair and pasty skin weren't creepy enough to shake her. Rather, the way his stare darted over her in disgust did little but fuel her. "We didn't mean to fall into your territory," she continued, jerking a stare at the leader there, "and we didn't do anything but try to turn back around. We are *not* for sale!"

"You are in Unar territory *now*," Hychar replied and motioned at the delicate ones again. It would be a shame to waste the two for those others' ignorant disrespect. "Take them to the Akjohl."

Torres blew her breath, forcing herself to calm down and think quickly. "If you'll just listen, all of this can be worked out. Just let us conta--"

With a sweep of the guard's gloved fist, she hit the hot ground with a thud, a lance of pain shooting through her skull from the blow. The next thing she saw was a boot land in front of her face--and she heard him above, hefting something upwards--

"Stop!" cried out Nicoletti. "We'll go with you!"

"You were going regardless," Hychar replied.

--But before B'Elanna could even think to avoid it, she felt a body rush up behind her and two strong arms yanking her back. At first, she struggled, but then she realized it was Tom again. He turned her in his arms and immediately stared down at her forehead then winced at the sight.

Their eyes met for a moment, but without warning, he grunted and slammed into her--and she glimpsed the heel of the guard's rifle completing its swing as they hit the hard, hot dirt together.

To the side, as Paris hacked for breath above her, she heard Nicoletti again, calling out--and Bendera yelling, "Keep it together, Torres! We'll do the same!"

Her eyes blinked quickly, fighting the dizziness that threatened to overcome her for the second time that day. She felt blood trickling over the slight ridge of her temple...

"Just keep it together!"

Tom heaved himself up to shoot a look towards where their crewmates' voices were coming from, but across the disturbed dirt, he only saw a puff of dust--and coughed hard when he sucked it up in a gasp.

When he looked up again, he couldn't hear them, either.

They were gone.

Commander Hychar also exited the barricade, holding a hand out to another who would walk with him as he disappeared. The last thing Tom saw was the man's thin smile.

B'Elanna felt her heart pounding in tune to the fire in her temple as she glared blankly at the place where Nicoletti and Bendera had vanished. Gone to god-knows-where under the control of those beasts--her team, her friends...

"Up, drask!" ordered a guard, who grabbed her before she could think to obey on her own terms. The alien lifted her almost above her own feet, hanging her precariously by her sweat-soaked collar as he flung her around to face the camp. She reached for the ground with her toes as the guard all but carried her and Paris towards another barricade, a charged, crisscrossed forcefield.

Behind it, a throng of onlookers backed away, not necessarily in fear, but in deference. They did not interfere, but gradually went back to their various assignments, seemingly indifferent.

Tom grunted again beside her, but when she looked to see him being led in about the same manner, she also caught only his warning stare--and she knew what it meant: "Say nothing, do nothing, let them finish their jobs and go away."

She had no other choice: Even if she could flail her arms--or for that matter, if she thought she could wrestle one of their rifles from them--her feet found no purchase and the guard's thick hand was all but choking her.

Within the force field was a wide plain of scarlet dirt, dotted with various structures on the ends, the center serving as a court for general passage. To the left sat a sort of refinery and a large structure with what looked like mine entrances. To the right stood a long, concrete wall with what looked like vending slots built into it. Ahead of them sat what was best described as a collection of short, permanent shanties, to which they were quickly heading.

The cloaked people on either side of them still did not look, only paused.

The guards holding them walked straight into the crooked rows of structures, swerving around and through them, their prisoners hanging in their grips like clumsy puppets. Upon a sudden stop, they opened a shack and tossed their burdens inside.

"Sleep. Food appears at dusk; drasks will show you where. Work begins tomorrow."

"Thanks," Tom muttered beneath his breath as he turned a look back up at them.

He'd opened his mouth to say something else, but it died in his throat when he saw one of the Unar regarding him and Torres with what almost looked like compassion. Or maybe it was just curiosity. The man's smooth, white face was set in a emotionless mask, while his sunken grey eyes drifted over them without glaring. He even met Tom's eyes, blinked once before glancing to Torres again.

Whatever it was, neither guard bothered to close the flap when they left them there.

Their quarters. In but one glance as he coughed for breath, Tom had memorized it as nothing more than shelter.

He turned his attention to B'Elanna, who was thrown harder into the cubicle and now lay deadly still on her stomach. She waited as if she didn't dare move else kill something. Every muscle in her body was rigid.

Tom waited until he could no longer hear the guards' heavy footsteps, just in case and taking another useless look at the filthy metal walls until he saw her shoulders twitch. "You okay, B'Elanna?" he finally asked.

"No, Paris, I'm burning in hell," she growled between clenched teeth, "in case you've forgotten."

"Sorry," he returned blankly and opened his tunic. True to B'Elanna's sarcasm, it was even hotter and as painfully dry in that shack. *Maybe that's why the guards left the door open*, he thought, his mind still reflecting on the look that one guard had given him. "I'll ask around, see if I can't get something for your head."

"Forget about it," she replied. "We've got to get out of here--find Kurt and Nicoletti and find some way to get back in touch with Voyager. Or just find Voyager and then them."

"I have a feeling that the plasma field is blocking the signal," Tom told her. "I remember losing contact with Voyager right after we fell into that first wave. And that's not counting the forcefield outside."

"We'll have to find a way through it then," she said.

Tom watched her pull herself up then scoot her legs around to turn over. There was barely enough room to roll. Already covered with red dirt, some of the dust had caked into the wound on her forehead--and that above her solidly infuriated stare. He couldn't blame her that. They'd bruised a couple of his ribs, but he knew it couldn't feel as bad as she looked. *She's probably feeling it a lot more than she'll ever admit, too*, he knew.

"It'll have to wait until you've got that cleaned up a little," he said. "We don't have Doc here."

"I'm fine," she insisted, getting to her knees to crawl out of that tiny deathtrap, but Paris grabbed her shoulder before she could leave. Instantly, she balked and jerked her shoulder away. "Hands off, Paris! You might want to kick back, but I don't plan on staying here any longer than I have to!"

His eyes narrowed. "Who the hell said I wanted to be here?" he snapped. "And you're the one who's already bleeding, so sit down and let's plot this out. I don't feel like dragging you back to Voyager dead."

He had a point there. She knew that any action on her part would probably get them in even more trouble. It was clear that those Unar didn't like her already. She could feel it, knew from experience how

to spot prejudice. They'd taken one look at her and decided she was trash, and Tom was too for defending her. She and Tom both knew it.

At least she wasn't alone in their hatred.

So, she sat--fell to her hip and crossed her arms. "Fine," she muttered, challenging him with her glare instead. "So, what do we do, hotshot?"

"First," Tom said, ignoring her tone and tying the arms of his tunic around his waist, "we check out the other people here, see if they have anything for that knot on your head. Or at least get some water to wash it." He turned a quick look up at her. Thankfully, she was only chagrined at his insistence. But he had a reason for his concern: That guard had really torn into her skin with his glove, and her eyelids were fluttering, maybe for a slight concussion.

He continued, "Then we see if there's any way *to* get out of here, maybe hunt around that facility we passed on the way in. If there's no weaknesses they know about, we'll have to come up with something ourselves. But for *right* now, we'll see who else is here, get that wound taken care of then see if there's any cracks in the wall. The way this place is barricaded, it probably won't be easy."

"You're a regular tactician," she said dourly.

"I know what it's like to be inside a forcefield," Tom replied.

She said nothing to that likely truth, his being out of prison not that long ago, and he didn't think to confirm it when she felt her head start to sting again. She breathed against it with some success. "At least we still have our commbadges," she said, detaching her own to squint down at it.

"Whatever you do, it'd be better if you kept it in your pocket," Tom warned her, tapping his own hip. "You never know."

She nodded. "Good idea." She looked around the small space, searching for a loose wire or part, and then exhaled when she found nothing--not that she expected much. It was just a rag-tag of scraps put together for cover, nothing more. *Hell's a mild word for it*, she thought first, and then she wondered what she had left to curse that day.

She'd cursed Paris for flying them in--even though she'd been the one to tell him where to go. She'd cursed her team--and herself--for not being able to reverse their course once they were in. She'd definitely cursed their attackers, who'd sailed up and plucked them off the asteroid they'd crash-landed on, transported them into a holding cell while they were still disoriented and unable to fight anything.

Now, her team had been dragged away and she was stuck in an alien prison with Tom Paris without any real means of escape. More, her head felt like it'd been imploded. *What was in that glove? Gravel?*

She took another long, deep breath, fighting her twitching eyes. The pain was getting worse, too.

"You think the people here might help us?" she asked him. "Or maybe we can find something, somewhere--I'll need at least something close to a compositor to boost the signals. When Voyager comes after us, they'll need something to go on."

"That's assuming the Unar haven't set up those force fields to disrupt subspace transmissions like the ones ours generate," Tom returned.

"It'd explain why they weren't interested in taking them," she acknowledged, none too gladly.

"Maybe we can find something closer to the barricade--if we can get close to it sometime. As for getting any answers from the natives, from what I saw, those people seem to be in the same boat we are. I even saw a few teenagers. If anything, they'll most likely want to avoid trouble for themselves."

"In other words, we're on our own," B'Elanna concluded.

Tom grinned to disagree. "I never knew any prison that didn't have *some* people who were willing to help someone screw the system. It's only that they won't want anyone else to know about it. Or maybe we can persuade them somehow."

B'Elanna eyed him, not necessarily trusting his optimism. Still, though he was already pretty messed up, she could tell that all his instincts were at the ready. His stare was intent. Their capture had made him focused, made his mind work quickly and his voice strong and serious. He'd barely even tried to crack one of his usual jokes since they spotted the ships on what little was left of their sensors...and in between thoughts, she wondered where the shuttle was.

Of course, he wasn't joking around when they were fit to be made into organ donors not too long ago, either, she remembered well. He'd been just as serious and responsible, from start to finish...

"Okay," she said, taking a reassuring breath and wiping the back of her hand lightly on her temple to at least dab off the worst of it, "we'll go and get acquainted, see what we can't do something with what's here--and we'll stay out of trouble. But what if we don't find anything? I don't think we have anything to 'persuade' these people with, either."

He offered her another grin, this time with concern as he regarded her head. "Then we'll find another way," he said. "Better, Voyager might get here before we have to." Thinking a moment more, he pulled his tunic loose again and turned the arm inside out. Pressing the sleeve gently to the wound, he caught her dark stare, holding it as steady as the cloth. "One way or another, B'Elanna, we'll get out of here."

Again, Tom was completely serious. Maybe unsure of *how* they would escape, but he meant what he was saying. His eyes, bluer in the useless shadows of the shack they'd been callously assigned, were pinned on hers, pressing his belief silently.

She wanted to believe it; seeing his equal need, she finally nodded. "Think the natives can get us some water?"

He smiled--his first real smile since they left Voyager. "Thought you'd never ask, Chief," he said, warm with relief.

It was enough for her.

"Yet as it was decided to move amongst the others, bring themselves cautiously from their shack, there were possessed in them equal portions of right and wrong. Far more to acquaint themselves with than they could know awaited them..."

"Bear trust in us, fair newcomers," breathed the hooded man they had neared.

Almost immediately after the words were spoken, they felt two sets of protective, robed arms around them, leading them away from the court and back into the rubble of shacks. But instead of being taken towards the middle, where they were assigned, their guides led them around and behind, through the maze of trenched dirt paths between the shanties, near to the water dispensers and well away from the barricade.

"You arrive among friends," said the other, a wiry woman a little taller than B'Elanna. Her trilled but mellow assurance was quick from deep within her sand-colored hood: "For within the gates of Uillar we are one, as in all things."

"I'm Tom Paris, this is B'Elanna Torres," Tom whispered gratefully, having not expected such a sudden, hospitable response from the two people they hadn't even greeted yet, though the man took care of that as swiftly as their diversion.

"I am called Dalra. Beside you walks my bondmate, Miztri."

Tom gave them both a quick nod.

"Your companion bears injury," Dalra noted as he looked at Torres, "yet little medicine is available to us, only balms to soothe and waters to cleanse. I should not suggest you find yourselves near the guards. They bear no tolerance for the unusual."

B'Elanna shot a glare at him, even if she knew he was stating the obvious.

"My intention is but truth, good lady," Dalra explained. "Unar bear little tolerance for your difference, and it is a reason to pity them, not to blame my words for what is plainly known."

"Just pity?" B'Elanna muttered.

Miztri, who held her, squeezed her lightly. "Our spirits are not the ones poisoned, good lady," she smiled. "That they allow their corruption to curdle them is cause enough for many prayers. Let us rather procure healing for your wounds and leave Unar aside."

"It's not that bad."

"I am not deceived by you, little kini'isi," Miztri scolded lightly. "Upon my arrival here I was trained to the sensation of Unar gloves--and I feel you now tilting in my arms like a jow-tree, as I had in your place."

Torres didn't know whether to give it up or be annoyed by the woman. She kept reminding herself how much they needed their information--and a little water and food wouldn't hurt, either. And she had to admit that the woman's strong hands still held her just tightly enough to guide her.

"I meant that you don't have to 'procure' anything for me. I'll be all right."

"My thanks," Miztri replied. "Yet I shall tend you regardless."

Tom saw the engineer's jaw tense and quickly picked it up. "So where are we? What is this place? They didn't even tell us when we came here."

"They bear no cause to speak to you at all," Dalra confirmed. "That they addressed you once was surprising. A moment yet and we shall speak in full. The guards care not what we speak of, yet there is ease out of the full sun."

"I'll bet there is," Tom agreed.

"Its moons bring equal cold," Miztri added. "We shall procure what we might to assist your acclimation and with personal articles you may require. Items remaining from former prisoners have been retained and mended. Cloaks should be accepted immediately lest this sun burn you too severely; the other components require only solar charging--which you may note is little burden here."

B'Elanna sighed. "You don't have go through that much. What we--"

"Is it the way to refuse generosity among your people?" Dalra asked.

Tom grinned briefly. "In a way, yes."

"Ka'eb." Peering over at B'Elanna, he said, "Your manners may be put aside for this place, good lady. You shall require assistance. Ullar's elements have shown many the path to their blessed ancestors. It would please should you accept what we give, and it *would* be necessary."

B'Elanna exhaled again, but held herself back. They were trying to help, after all. None of it was their doing. "Thanks. But we lost two of our people when we came here--"

"They shall enjoy more fortune than you and your companion," Miztri told her, easing their pace as they came to a large covered area with folded blankets and cargo cases set neatly around the outer perimeters. There were several other people there, burrowed in small groups and sipping what looked like water from large canteens. Though they talked steadily amongst one another, they looked parched and unhealthy.

Gently, the woman called Miztri helped her patient into a small, separated area within the long overhang, which looked like a makeshift dock within the overhang area suitable for both storing supplies and resting. A small shack like the others in the camp sat at the end of it. While breathing relief at the shade and slight breeze there, B'Elanna also noticed the blankets she was sitting on didn't look replicated, but had been woven from strips of old cloth. They were tattered even then.

"To be sold into the services is safer," the woman explained as she drew off her cloak and straightened the cloth that was braided into her thick, red-blond hair, "and offers more ease in living. Your friends shall be cared for should they bear any wisdom."

"At least we know they're probably all right," Tom said, only partly relieved. "But it's still service. We're a pretty independent people."

"Yet sense, I have noticed, is also present in you," Dalra said, looping his long robes over his arms and lowering himself to sit on his heels. Pulling his hood off, he revealed a set of gold-brown eyes, above which sat a hint of greyed, brown hair, short and mostly hidden by his boxy, wrapped headdress. He motioned Tom to take a seat between himself and B'Elanna, on another pile of homespun blankets.

"Should they remain healthy," Dalra continued, "freer service shall be offered to them in little time. The Antral often take such burdens of training their own--their means of retaining what small freedom they bear. Your people would be treated well by them when it is seen that they are not of this place."

"If that's the case," B'Elanna pointed out.

"It is as likely as any outcome, should they bear some presence of mind."

Miztri meanwhile had opened a case nearby and brought out a high cushion, which she propped behind B'Elanna's back. "Rest, Child, as it shall soon please you to," she told her, wrapping her long scarves and hair around her neck so they would not become tangled in her work. "Water shall soon be brought."

B'Elanna grudgingly reclined, rather more disposed to asking about the factory she'd seen. Tom was playing it so subtly, she was sure it'd take all day to get any answers. But of course, he was also getting their needs taken care of, too, so she reminded herself to be patient. Even so, when Miztri began pulling at her boots, she yanked her feet away.

"Look, this is all very nice, but--"

"Show no stubbornness, Child," Miztri cut in firmly, her smile dissipating. "Should an infection claim you, you shall not enjoy a speck of strength to defend your low pride. You would rather take yourself unto the ancestors and allow Unar to spread your remains over their drask gardens to eat you with the harvest?"

That mental image was effective. As soon as B'Elanna leaned back again, Miztri started on the boot again, scowling at the lack of hooks or ties. "You are warm and contain much water; you shall perspire away any applied balm as you sit at present. It may be your wish to remove your...coat."

B'Elanna didn't mind agreeing there. She felt her heat escape her skin when she parted her tunic. "Okay. But I can handle my own boots."

Miztri's grin returned as she yanked the second shoe off. "There is a fault in exceeding self-reliance. In that, the boots are done--with more ease than you would allow. So, Child, your stockings may now follow by my hand or as a further proof of your independent spirit."

"What about this place?" Tom picked up, for his own curiosity as well as to distract B'Elanna from her annoyance with the busy woman. "Uillar, you called it? Is there any way out?"

B'Elanna's attention was immediately back on them. *About time he asked.* "Are there any weaknesses in the force field they're using?"

"For escape? That we are aware of, there is none," Dalra said.

"Do you know what generates it?"

"Geothermal laridium," Miztri said, "a source fed and stabilized by a unit's sub-particle field stabilizer." She smiled at the younger woman's responsive stare, though she didn't address that. "The power well lies far to the south. It is directed from an assembly on the opposite continent. There is no disruption of it--and the guards would not be bribed so far unto their own imprisonment and disgrace to be corrupted any further than now."

B'Elanna growled a sigh. "Then you're convinced there's no way out?"

"On occasion," Dalra said, "when they bear less need for our present number of workers, we have been known to be transferred to refugee cities--cities of Desal, in truth--and some arrangements have been made in trading one for another. In my ten revolutions here, I have traded myself for others twice to

remain with Miztri. We may hope the resistance rebuilds itself enough to distract a while, bring them to trade again."

B'Elanna perked up. "Resistance?"

Miztri folded B'Elanna's socks into her boots and set them aside with her tunic. "To think my spirit's partner and I came to be here through such crimes might surprise you," she said and nodded to both sets of eyes. But her smile weakened as she continued, "Ka, this is truth. We found ourselves with a Koba group when circumstances dug our path there. For this, we were parted of our two surviving children. Their location is unknown to us, nor is it known had they with their siblings passed onto our blessed ancestors."

"And yet we persist here," Dalra quickly added, "with faith."

"I hope it'll be okay," Tom told him understandingly. "Just that you've stayed alive this long says something."

"Trying it has been," Dalra admitted. "Yet with time, with patience, with acquaintance, despair eases and purpose surfaces. So it shall be for you, I would believe."

"But what about your resistance?" B'Elanna asked. "Is there any chance they'll know we're here? We'd be willing to help them out for a favor--like helping us get out of here--if there's something we can do."

Dalra furrowed his brow. "An underground faction would not offer any assistance at Uillar, good lady. Too much danger resides in such an effort with no promise of success and less need to bring themselves into a conflict for but a collection of drasks during a time of peace among Unar. In time, perhaps they or another Unar sect shall distract matters here into another shift, yet that should not be expected soon. The previous sect scourge ended but three years past."

"Unar sects are historically combative," Miztri explained. "Once these were but philosophical debates; past their militarism, the debates evolved into skirmishes. There have been reorganizations and weakened territories because of this, always one shall lose when another gains. Many Desalians and Koba have found their spirits in these struggles. We should rather retain our patience. With patience, as my bondmate has said, I should believe your days shall speed."

B'Elanna said nothing, noticing Tom's equal unease. In that glance, she could tell he was about as pleased as she was with the idea of getting used to that place they'd been stuck in--or waiting for a resistance that wouldn't be showing up any time soon. Of course, she also knew that the resistance wasn't the only thing they could hope to wait for. Voyager would come after them soon enough--if they could get past the Unar. She and Tom both knew from experience that Janeway would not leave without corpses.

Yet before B'Elanna could bring that thought to the fore, small, deeply hooded female slipped into the shade of the overhang and bowed to the host and hostess, drawing a circle on her temple with her fingers as she rose.

Miztri, seeing her, stood with her cloak and whispered a few words to the lady as she passed. "I shall procure water and balm," she said behind her, disappearing a moment later.

The other woman knelt before Dalra and reached inside her hood with her bony fingers to touch her face. "S-zo...hoi ye-szaah-ek?" she said in a voice that in comparison to Dalra and Miztri's thick accents

was heavily slurred--and unlike the others' odd speech, hers was totally untranslatable.

Dalra understood her well enough, however. "Their spirits bear them well, good lady, and, ka, they shall require care for time."

"Vh-heil aac-ei sab yh-ap?"

"Gye," he replied. "Let it be seen whether it shall be required. Do not take yourself."

A single nod and the woman immediately turned to crawl nearer to the new people. Pulling off her cloak, there appeared a woman somewhere in her twenties, with long brown hair braided with thick scarves and skin tanned where her cloak could not fully cover her. Below it, a faded purple gown and leggings powdered with red dirt decorated her small-boned body. Like Dalra and Miztri, she had a fan of fine, dark blue markings on her temples and patterns on her left hand.

With that tan, calloused hand, she touched her temple again as she bowed her head, looking at both the aliens when she came up again. Her eyes, hazel like Dalra's and bright with curiosity, held them each for several seconds. More noticeable than any feature, however, was the scar on the corner of her small mouth, which extended deeply into her cheek and was apparently the cause of her badly affected speech. "S-zha wastn-a," she said to them, smiling on one side of her mouth. She patted her own shoulder. "Sa-sah-nai-ee Cesata i'e."

They looked at Dalra. "This is Sashana'i of Cezia," he told them.

Sashana'i returned her gaze to B'Elanna, darting it to her forehead. Her smile flickered, but didn't fade, as she reached out to it.

B'Elanna jerked back at the prospective touch. She couldn't deny anymore that the wound really was starting to nag at her--probably swelling more than she could guess. The thought of someone putting pressure of any kind on it tightened every fiber in her body.

"Nice to meet you," she said, trying to be nice and yet warning the lady, too.

Sashana'i immediately saw the woman's hesitation and stopped her move. Instead, she let her thin hand fall to B'Elanna's cheek, which she touched gently. "Ma'ay-sse swa tsa fah-wam ank i'a," she said softly, as if to comfort her. Turning her attention to Tom, she bowed. "Ah-ka-whohh yhui-ahd zsha."

"Uh, I'm sorry..." Tom said and turned his eyes to Dalra, who had already chuckled at her words. "She's still not translating. What's she saying, Dalra?"

The man pointed with a chin to Torres, who was also curious. "She says your lady's eyes show a good spirit beneath her pain and that you shall be tended well." Not paying attention to B'Elanna's peculiar grin to that, he looked at the other woman again. "Miztri shall say so as well, that you require rest, good lady."

"Vh-heil aac-ei so'a yh-apag?"

Dalra tensed at her repeated question, though he remained kind. "You are not yet required to procure more," he told her. "It has been but one sun; you must think of yourself and your bondmate. Let us cleanse it. Miztri shall use D'viti's balm."

Sashana'i shook her head, motioned to B'Elanna. "Gye. Aht gu-aafahr hsu'i-gye kall asp-om."

Dalra caught her gaze, held it seriously. "Let us yet bear patience, Sashana'i. Let the better wisdom of your bloodlines guide you."

The young woman sighed, shrugged then relaxed a little more into her place. Suddenly curious again, she pointed at B'Elanna. "Aga'i o'a?" she asked and looked at Dalra.

"What is your calling, lady," he hinted.

B'Elanna grinned at the woman above her. For Dalra's tense protectiveness of the younger woman, she was glad to change the subject for a while. "My name's B'Elanna."

Sashana'i seemed both intrigued and amused with it. "Bay-gah-ha?"

B'Elanna smiled more, even as she felt sorry for the woman's handicap. "Umm, not exactly. It's-- B'E-lanna."

"Bay-na-hna?"

"B'E-lan-na," she repeated. "It's okay if you can't get it."

Sashana'i tried again anyway--and again--but finally grunted with a moment's sourness and put up her palms in compromise. "Be'i?" she asked, obviously wanting to decide on something easy.

"Close enough," B'Elanna decided generously. They wouldn't be there long enough for it to matter. "At least I'll recognize it."

With some trepidation, Sashana'i then turned her gaze to the tall, fair man beside the lady. "Wi-i'oa?" she asked, pointing with but a lift of her finger that time, her brows raised.

He grinned. "Tom."

The young woman released her breath in relief, making all within the shelter laugh. Sashana'i nodded gratefully. "Toma."

Furrowing his brow at her choice, he shook his head. "Uh, no, it's--"

"Good man," Dalra said quietly, stopping him with a hand on Tom's arm. "Indulge our good lady Sashana'i. It is a well-meaning name."

"But it--"

"Your future introductions shall proceed with more ease," he added. "Names among Desal are traditionally gender specific to ending sounds."

"Yeah, well... I guess it's fine," Tom relented, giving the young woman another nod and a shrug, and then finally a chuckle. "Toma it is."

Sashana'i looked pleased and gave him a firm nod. "Ka-zsha ko'i, Be'i, Toma," she said before darting her eyes back to B'Elanna, who wasn't paying attention to them any longer. Rather, she winced and swallowed her breaths as she tried to make herself more comfortable. The younger woman looked at Dalra again, more pressingly. "Dah-wha."

"You shall wait, good lady," he insisted.

Rather than respond, Sashana'i seemed to lose herself in thought for a moment. "Se-a'aw-ab duk ye'i ehmbw-a," she whispered then quickly turned when she heard a stirring behind her. It was Miztri. Taking a deep breath, she bowed her head to Tom and B'Elanna then patted B'Elanna's bare foot. "Zshaw-ye," she said. "Kah-webha."

Dalra almost interjected, but the young woman had already pulled her cloak back on and scurried out.

Miztri replaced her by B'Elanna's side. "Where does she take herself?" she asked.

"She takes herself to procure medicine," Dalra quietly told her then leaned over to help his woman part the bundle she had carried in. He handed Tom a flask of water and a wet cloth.

Tom used both without hesitation, and he didn't know which to feel more relieved at--the water in his throat or on his skin. "Thanks," he breathed.

"Adjustment shall come in time," Dalra told him. "I bore my first breaths within the moist thrush of Maha'aje, thus I bear knowledge of the change for you. The dry here shall reeducate your thirst. You must recall time to drink."

Tom grinned. "I don't think that'll be a problem."

Meanwhile, Miztri soaked a cloth for B'Elanna and pulled a tube from the folds of her robe. Glancing up to her, she offered an apologetic smile. "This shall not proceed with easiness. Dirt has imbedded itself in the wound. You shall take water after. You may find illness should it be fed before."

"I can take a little pain," B'Elanna assured her.

Miztri gave her a look as she tapped some of the contents of the tube onto the wetted cloth. "The ground of this land is not beneficial to the bloodstream," she instead informed B'Elanna, "not like other worlds. Deadly infection can be brought by simple injuries. With proper care, it shall heal, however. I--and Dalra with me--have recovered from similar."

"That's a plus," replied the engineer dryly.

Peering over to Tom, Miztri motioned him to come closer. "You shall observe and care for her wound as I do. The balm must be applied each third moon in upward half-circles move the cloth."

"Each third moon," he repeated, brow raised.

Dalra touched Tom's arm and pointed outside. "Three moons pass overhead each quarter at regular intervals, four turns daily. They are quite visible. Your tending must be diligent, good man."

Tom caught B'Elanna's eyes and saw them darken at the contact. She obviously wasn't enjoying being tended to more with every minute. When B'Elanna's eyes blamed him even in silence, he decided to have her accusation over with and moved closer to Miztri. "Okay."

B'Elanna took a breath and blew it out, indeed impatient for them to just go ahead and clean it, since they'd insisted. Certainly, she'd had worse injuries before and got by with a lot less attention. Those people--Paris included--were probably just being careful to save her feelings, which she knew was kind. Then again, they couldn't know that she had a rather high tolerance for--

"Shit!" she screamed as Miztri pressed the balm to her skull.

"Embrace her legs," Miztri ordered.

Tom immediately scooted around and pressed B'Elanna's knees down. Holding her eyes that time, he saw her glare in his direction. "It's just going to make it better, B'Elanna."

"What?! Acid?!" she cringed, clutching at the blankets she sat upon.

"It washes out slowly," the woman above her said. "It has sunken deeply; the combined water and balm shall persuade it otherwise." Gently as before, she swabbed the younger woman's forehead, meanwhile distracting herself by examining the pattern of--*Bone?* she wondered--within the young lady's forehead. "When you have found recovery, we shall take food."

"Wonderful!" B'Elanna gasped, balling a lump of blanket in her fist.

Miztri sighed and pulled away the bloody cloth to clean it and start over again. "Zhall ye'i," she said quietly.

Feeling the sharpness of the pain recede as the woman pulled away, B'Elanna gradually caught her breath. "What did you say?"

The woman smiled sadly, her eyes turned down as she squeezed scarlet water from the cloth into a shallow metal basin. "I have asked your forgiveness."

B'Elanna's stare darted away. "It's not your fault," she said tersely, though sincere.

The older woman nodded and prepared a second swabbing.

Though her face and tone had briefly softened, Tom watched B'Elanna's eyes widen with caution when Miztri approached again, saw her really prepare herself that time.

"Easy, Torres," he breathed and felt her nearly kick his whole weight off when the cloth made contact.

B'Elanna could have screamed at him directly for that one. Who was he to tell her to take it easy? He wasn't the one who felt like chlorazine was pouring through every vein in his skull, down into his neck and shoulders, scraping every nerve and muscle...

She'd almost gotten a good enough breath to get a yell in, too. But then her breath caught, her eyes rolled back...

The sun seemed lower, the air more stagnant, when B'Elanna's eyes opened hazily upon the robed woman... Miztri, she recalled. Spotting another form, she noticed the Sashana'i sitting nearby, tying scraps into a blanket and staring eerily at her.

Miztri regained B'Elanna's attention as she stroked her hair. "You shall find wellness, good lady," she said softly.

"What happened?" B'Elanna whispered, noticing the pain in her head again.

"Mercifully, unconsciousness claimed you," Miztri told her.

"Ugh," was all the reply B'Elanna could muster. *Yeah, I handled that wonderfully*, she thought. Rolling onto her undamaged side, she shut her eyes again. "I don't think I've had a worse day," she muttered. "And I've had some bad ones."

Miztri couldn't help but laugh at that. She yet was careful not to be loud, to prevent furthering the headache she knew the girl would have. "Yet, you remain among the living and bear all your teeth."

B'Elanna snorted, shook her head. "That helps."

"You have been well tended in your life," the woman noted when B'Elanna turned over again, eyes still closed. "You bathed regularly, likely, took healthful food, clothed yourselves in that which was not of the passed, bore technology at your hands and your wits to use at your wish: You both deservedly have enjoyed proper indulgence. That your fates have brought you here, I feel sorrow, good lady."

"Well," B'Elanna replied, trying not to feel the enormity of Miztri's honesty, "so do I. But maybe tomorrow we can start to see if we can't find some other way out of here."

Opening her eyes, she looked at her hostess. She was not old, probably in her mid-forties, but the effect of that world on her was obvious, even without having known her before. Hard, dry lines had set into the crevices of her thin, heart-shaped face; her light hazel eyes seemed to be set into a permanent squint. The hair that was visible around her neatly tied scarves was like a parched strawberry. Her gown and leggings were stained with red dirt; they probably were blue at one time. Everything about her seemed prematurely aged.

And she was doing all she could for them.

"Thank you--for helping," B'Elanna said, more gently, then. "I know you don't have much. It was generous of you and I guess I've been...difficult."

"This is understood," Miztri responded, stroking her hair again, sad and motherly. "You have undergone a terrible trauma, with the loss of your ship, your friends. Knowing they fare better than you may bring you some comfort. Only yourself and your companion remain for you to consider."

"Well, if Voyager manages to get past the Unar, we'll have less to worry about."

Miztri drew down her brow. "Your ship would venture through Irl'lae? I should hope it bears superior protection?"

"It's a powerful ship and we've gotten through a lot of scrapes so far. Tom hasn't said anything about it?"

"He has voiced no details. Rather, his preoccupation has been with the immediate--your care, food and water and tending items. He has taken himself with Dalra to warm your space with blankets. --Ah, there is no need to refuse this. We have kept them for this use, and you shall be tended well by him, I should believe."

B'Elanna sank back, pursing her lips at the grin that curled one side of Sashana'i's mouth. "Just so you know, Tom and I are just friends--crewmates," she said to both women. "We don't usually...sleep

together."

Miztri laughed aloud, quickly covering the noise with her bony hand. "Of course we bear knowledge, dear lady!" she snickered. "Sashana'i implied your union and our good man was certain you should harm *him* should he allow any to believe other than what you have just said."

B'Elanna rolled her eyes. "Paris--always the gentleman."

"Bear no fear," Miztri told her, still giggling. "Were there any sense that your friend was poor or degraded, my own bed would be yours." She patted her shoulder. "However, I would believe nothing less than good lies his intentions--and the companionship when the evening arrives shall be required, I assure you. Bitter cold resides in Uillaran dark and your injury requires care."

"I can tend to myself."

"Gye, you can not," Miztri countered. "Cleansing your wound until it heals shall require another hand and a watchful eye. Why distrust you so to bear a man by you that you would sleep cold, alone and ill? --And in that, I should say there is not a Desalian population that does not suffer crowding, so I would not expect you might bear that wish as it were. Yet, I do not feel you should despise Toma, so, that you should wish it."

B'Elanna smirked. "Toma?"

She shrugged. "It is a proper name. Sashana'i chose well for him. Yet you do not answer me, good lady."

I should've known I couldn't get away on this one, B'Elanna sighed. "It's not him."

"Ka. It is not."

Sitting up, she faced the other woman. But then, opening her mouth to speak, she saw the woman's wise stare and decided against her first response. "Okay," she admitted, "you're right. I mean, we're trained to handle situations like this. I guess I hadn't thought about sleeping with Paris. --Never mind. Don't ask."

Despite that, B'Elanna grinned again to think of the look on Tom's face when the topic was brought up. She almost wished she'd been awake for it. She could hear him explaining it away all too clearly.

Again, Miztri laughed, a quiet, maternal laugh that time. "Closeness to such a tall, warm man appears to be odd for your independent people. I have seen youths take to their own bonding with less trepidation than you and Toma have accepted sharing blankets and five walls."

Or maybe it was better I was out.

"Tsa-ashy wa-e't Soti Gabwa wi?" Sashana'i suddenly said, putting down her scraps at last to look at Miztri.

"Trine-twice past sunset," the older woman told her.

Sashana'i motioned to B'Elanna. "Be'i-Toma na'oi k-hetaf aa."

B'Elanna looked at Miztri. "What? What's going on?"

"A bonding ceremony takes place on the sixth sunset from this sun. Sashana'i wonders whether you shall bear enough wellness to attend."

"Well, I hadn't planned on being here that long," B'Elanna said. "But I wouldn't say no if we are."

Neither woman replied to her optimism, only nodded.

B'Elanna continued, "I think Voyager will try to contact us by then--or break through their shield grid--as soon as they've repaired the ship enough to come after us. Our captain's a very determined woman. She won't let us go."

Sashana'i looked curiously at her. "Vo-hya-gah...ad hiwaget ihs-hwaew wasaw aw-od? --Misti?"

Miztri shrugged. "Toma has told us their ship undergoes repairs in a nebula past the Zi'ihar Ralle, as far as can be ascertained."

Sashana'i looked thoughtful at that, glancing to B'Elanna as if she wanted to say something more. But she turned her eyes back down.

"It didn't take us long to get here, so it can't be too far," B'Elanna told the older woman. "Even so, I think as much as we couldn't see through the plasma field, neither could the Unar. How far does the Unar's territory stretch?"

Miztri bit her lip. "Your forgiveness, good lady. We bear little astrometric knowledge of Desalian territory aside from the homeworld and colonies, far less still of our neighbors'. Worlds and features are known to us, yet little more. It is a shame that must be accepted, as Unar have held us in ignorance."

"Do you know anyone here who would know?"

"There are matters of which you are unaware," Miztri said with a sigh and continued in a whisper, "At the onset of Unar occupation, our great scholarship was all but utterly annihilated; they and our word painters are long suppressed and hidden; our combined knowledge was scattered and suppressed. In secret we train now. Only the most essential skills to make us scholars--our spiritual training--is taught now, and that in secret. This necessity is coupled with with deep sadness. Our scholarship once bore greatness and beauty; it was a balance of both that mental training and an extensive education in a chosen trade, and was our greatest governing body, a peaceful and just guide for our people." Miztri shook her head to herself, knowing she had diverted from the topic. "To answer you, good lady, there may be few answers available in all of Desal and no more here if unanswered already, for we those who would no cannot answer you."

"But you were in the resistance and traveled in this region," B'Elanna said. "You wouldn't have known about a sustained sub-particle plasma field near to an asteroid belt?"

"I bear knowledge of many asteroid fields. Irlae bears many. Three nebulae reside in the local space about Ulllar, however, beyond which lies the plasma field of which you speak. It is a force to be avoided for its destructiveness to ship and life. Not one of our ships could enter it were it desired. More, it is heavily patrolled by Unar, who protect that energy source from wandering traderships and other sects."

"Would anyone else know?"

Miztri bent her head slightly. "Dalra and I are the most traveled of the population here. There are Antral, laskeb and Koba traders--yet not upon Uillar, as they cannot survive the elements. The whole of

Irlae is not permitted any advanced technology, even in service. We bear little before us, good lady. I would have more for you, were there wishes which might bear truth."

B'Elanna sighed, but nodded, too. "Sounds like something I knew about where I came from."

"Dov? How is this?"

"The Bajorans," she answered, grinning slightly to explain it. "They're an ancient, peaceful culture whose world was overrun by a race called the Cardassians. They were also made into laborers, had almost everything but their religion taken from them. But they formed a resistance and fought the Cardassians--and eventually, they began to weaken the hold on their people. With a little help, the Bajoran resistance succeeded."

Miztri smiled, too. "And so they now live in prosperity? Free of their strife and growing among themselves in spirit? The dream of our people has been that someday, when our contrition for Desal's past is served, that our people may live as such again."

B'Elanna stilled a bit, deciding not to ask what the Desalians might have done to deserve their subservience--much less the rest of the people who'd been affected. Instead, she admitted, "Well, they've had trouble since. But for the most part they're free and their territory is theirs again."

And they're having internal wars with their provisional government, struggling to get their trade going; they're under the hand of the Federation and the Maquis are fighting the Cardassians instead, she silently added.

Taking a deep breath, B'Elanna turned her eyes down thoughtfully. "In any case, I guess we're on our own for now, at least until Voyager can make some repairs. Captain Janeway's not the kind of person who gives up without a fight."

"I should hope your people would not find with Unar too much to ail them and rather would find cleverness their guide," Miztri told her. "Yet to see you in your home again, among your friends, would be a blessing."

"With any luck," B'Elanna said trying to sound hopeful for her hostess alone that time, "we will be--and so will you."

"Be'i ka," Sashana'i finally joined with a grin of her own. A moment later, however, she returned to her blanket extending--as the lady's companion was a rather tall man--her fingers trembling slightly as she willed her smile from becoming any broader.

Tom tucked the last of the blankets into the corners of the shack, practicing his apologies well ahead of time. He knew well that Torres wouldn't take kindly to the fact that they had little choice but to stay there together.

Of course, it's only temporary, he knew. She'll like to hear that for more reasons than one. Well, for that matter, so would I.

Dalra bent and crawled into the cubicle to attach a pouch to the wall. "For the keeping of your

medicines and tending items," he explained.

Tom nodded his thanks, wiping his forehead with the back of his arm. "Well, at least we can cure infections, comb our hair and have a shave with...whatever that thing is--"

"You shall be shown the process of our items upon the early sun."

"But we can't get a bath," Tom finished. "Hell, I could use one right now."

"Each tenth sun, Unar allow us enough to cleanse ourselves cursorily," Dalra corrected him.

"Sorry," Tom said with a sigh, shook his head. "Guess I'm just not...I don't know. We're setting up shop here and everything you're doing is more than I expected. But I don't want to have to stay here long enough to use any of it. You know?"

"Ka. It is also my hope that you shall find little use in it while yet among the living."

"I'll have to thank Sashana'i again for the medicine--and Miztri for the balm. They really did the trick on B'Elanna."

Dalra nodded shortly. "You yet are required to attend to her wound."

"I know. But the swelling went down right away with that medicine. Where'd she get it, anyway?"

"Bribes," Dalra said, turning his head back down to his work. "It is not a proper way, yet it is a necessary function here. Sashana'i is one the Unar guards shall deal with, mainly for her own culpability by association--and their self-given curse as well."

Tom looked at him. "How so?"

"They among them lacerated her tongue, under Hychar's orders when she spoke out to him. She was but a teenager."

Dalra sat back on his heels, staring outside with reflection. "She is a fifth heir of the Allanois Regency and carries within herself what remainder of it there could be: The memories of her blessed ancestry, Desal as it had once been through the eyes and minds of those who tended it. She was born upon Cezia as another refugee, yet was educated by her grandfather, Dulla. Indeed, her education was greater than most among Desal at present, and she was traditionally intended to what spirit's partner she chose upon maturity--our good Aratra, also a student of Dulla. When the city of Sacezia underwent a cleansing, she was captured. Aratra made himself a captive as well and accompanied her here. Upon this dirt they were bonded by Miztri and me, who claimed them as our spirit-children.

"Yet she bore youth, was outspoken and unwise. Hychar despised her alone for her family name, much less the spirit she bore before him." Dalra looked at Tom again, continued with relative dispassion, "In a moon of much illness, she relinquished her lineage publicly in supplication for supplies. She submitted in the name of the Allanois. In the night, however, Hychar ordered his guards to take her and cut her tongue--mutilate the remaining voice of our last regent's family. That was his answer. Her spirit and Aratra's might have met our ancestors' for it.

"Life proceeds with far less difficulty than beneath past suns, yet the guards recall the stain of her blood upon them. While she must bribe them, in their manner of cleansing they shall deal with her. We yet would rather she did not, for the danger to her."

Tom barely knew what to say to that--the brutality of it, though not surprising, was bad enough without knowing how solicitous of B'Elanna and himself, Sashana'i had been. Sashana'i--the Desalian equivalent, it seemed, of an outcast princess.

"To see her solemnize her bond and take her name of scholarship someday is a blessed hope," Dalra added wistfully. "It would be a blessing to our honored spirits, those regents who had been good and ones among us. Her spirit, like the still, clear pond, reflects them." He grinned. "So perhaps I assure her safety."

Tom chuckled. "Uncle Dalra sounds about right," he said.

Dalra laughed, pushing himself to stand as he did. "Ab, Toma, food shall be doled out for a period and for you to meet others here would be to your benefit. Tsid ka'e, to gain knowledge of our own before you begin at the detail shall be a blessing."

Tom stood, his cheer disappearing at the reminder. He'd easily almost forgotten about what they'd be expected to do there with everything else that had happened that day, the crash and capture, the Unar, B'Elanna's injury and treatment, meeting Dalra and the others and preparing that shack. "What kind of work is it?"

"For one bearing your education, it should be mindless. I would believe you would be assigned to processing. --Do not assume that you might procure any useful parts there. Nothing but what might build structures remains in the waste."

Tom frowned. "Why would they do something that convenient?" he said dryly. "I'd like to keep my eyes out for anything helpful, though. I know you worked on a ship, Dalra, but Voyager's sophisticated--and B'Elanna's pretty innovative when she sets her mind to something."

"There is a blessing to be borne in optimism, Toma. Yet I would not build a full dream upon it. Disappointment finds those who hope for the impossible." As they crossed through the shanties, the older man gestured around to the other rickety metal structures and the people that moved around them with a well-tanned hand.

"This region is one of small hopes among people now small," he told his new friend, "It did not bear the same quality sixty-two revolutions past. Yet these are not those suns and Desal bears a changed people. We do not wish the luxuries that ruined us, but seek to live humbly, to balance our destructive past--and take lesson in it as well. Even our current criminal status was built upon a need for food and supplies, and no more. To defeat Unar was never our thought."

"Why not?" Tom blurted, taken off guard by Dalra's admission--not that the rest agreed with him personally. "Why bother joining a resistance when you're not planning to resist?"

"Food and equipment were so desperately required and possible to be borne. Thus, we few agreed to assist our Koba neighbors."

"With enough people working together, you could probably get rid of them," Tom told him.

"You speak as one independent man," Dalra said, reaching out to touch another in passing, bowing politely as he did. "What must be done is done to pass forward what we can and wait. The Unar shall ruin themselves with time and continuance on their path of rightful domination of our people."

"*Rightful* domination?" That time, the pilot was almost insulted for Dalra's sake. "You believe they have the right to do this to you?"

"Ka," Dalra answered truthfully. "Our people earned the disgrace it bears this sun. Yet we recover our true spirits in healing and humility as Unar degrade. Their pinnacle was reached with the taking of Desalia. They only weaken henceforth."

"But their fall could take the rest of your life, if not more," Tom pointed out.

Dalra smiled. "My pure and bonded spirit shall find it pleasing, then, when another generation embraces the future. My wait shall be in peace, lest I become that which I see as corrupted. Thievery was a bend of our ways in enough degree. Yet it was the choice between two torments. As fate saw fit, we were meant to choose the lesser consequence, to sacrifice our peace of mind for others and gain in giving, there and here upon Uillar."

"And die with your conscience in tact," Tom acknowledged, though there was little comfort in his understanding. His lips turned inward as he took in the wrecked landscape, the slum housing and the dirty, lightly robed people traipsing over it with weakened gaits. That horror alone made him wonder what the Desalians could have done to deserve to live like that.

Even *he* didn't feel so guilty about his own past that he would ever humbly accept living like that.

"Guess that's the best one can hope for, huh?" he said unconvincingly.

Dalra felt the meaning well. "And shall you continue to hope, Toma of Voyager? For this fate you seek to mold with your own hands?"

Tom raised an eyebrow to the man's observation, keenly put and yet as friendly as before. "Maybe."

"Listen to the lessons of the wise and find respite in the good of your spirit," Dalra said simply. "The past, let into the wind to scatter in memory. The future's matters, leave unto fate's balance, as they are not of our control, but only the result of all that came before. We may only pray to the spirits, who have lived the path of past's nature, who have seen the way, for our hope. From their way, we lessen our want for guidance. It was my learning."

"Sounds easy enough," Tom replied, looking over the camp again, seeing the people milling at one end.

"I should think you behave well now, yet do not release that which you are powerless against," the older man observed. "Your youth proves such. It would be a burden relieved should you learn someday."

Tom grinned through the twinge he felt at that truth. "No fair, Dalra. You're too good at this wisdom stuff."

He laughed again and patted Tom's back. "Let us find our meals then, good man. I would think you have enough to contemplate with our lady Be'i in your bed this moon and forward."

"You're too good at that, too," Tom smirked and steered easily away from that. "And come to think of it, I am pretty hungry. What's for dinner, anyway?"

Dalra wisely remembered his own words of letting free remainders, and so only retained his smile for response.

Tom didn't tempt him further.

"Dalra of Maha'aje!" called a man as he hurried through a row of shacks and up to them. "Have you been present with Sashana'i?"

"Aratra, ka. She lies well with this man's companion."

He blew his relief and nodded across to Tom as they continued again toward the edge of the shanties. "You are the most recent to bring yourselves here," he said, quirking a funny grin as he looked Tom over. In a fluid moment, he touched his temple and then Tom's, bowing briefly. "Zha lastnya. I should welcome you to our Desalian blessing; however, this is sparse welcome to languish in."

"It's not so bad," Tom rejoined, responding immediately to the other man's humor. "A little grass here, a lake over there, maybe a restaurant or two, it'll be just like home."

Aratra laughed. "I am certain now you are not of this place, good man!"

"You could say that."

Dalra gestured to Tom in introduction. "Toma--as called by your bondmate."

"It is a good meaning name," Aratra said, his grin refreshed when he saw the man in question purse his lips for want to comment. He bowed again to the elder man. "My gratitude for your seeing to Sashana'i, good Dalra. She is like the kyep in the leaves with all her brews."

"Ah," Dalra sighed, "yet her wings are too quick to hold. Toma's companion found injury."

Aratra quieted, raising his brow to consider that. But a moment later, he drew another breath, returned his attention to Tom. "Your companion--the lady who resisted Officer Maghet."

"Yeah," Tom said, studying Aratra's tan and lightly freckled face, and seeing within his hood short, bronze-colored curls popping out of a headdress that was much like Dalra's. He seemed at first younger than Sashana'i, but then much older once Dalra had mentioned B'Elanna's injury... *Sashana'i's bribing the guards, the danger*, he reminded himself. "But she'll be okay now, thanks to that medicine."

"Then her effort pleases," Aratra said with a quick look ahead as they neared the far wall. "Bring yourself. Your lady, I should think, may be seen now, Toma."

Before Tom could even glance that way, Aratra was gone, jogging lightly ahead. A moment later, he vanished into the throng of robed figures who awaited their portions, whispering amongst themselves. Their noise was a steady buzz, gathering strength as more collected, and Tom remarked at the size of the crowd. There had to be over a thousand inmates in that mall alone just then.

When the food dispensers activated, they moved slowly to it--even if every one of them could qualify as underweight. Their robes hid their frames to some degree, but every face that turned in the longer shadows of the sunset revealed sunken cheeks and slim necks. Only a couple of the men were as tall as Tom that he could see, none taller, and the women were largely petite. By contrast, the Unar were at least a head taller than Tom was; they towered over the Desalians. Even Sashana'i, who met with Aratra and moved back to the overhang with him, was a slight woman on the edge of gaunt. Only her curious eyes and swift movements asserted her vitality.

They're probably used to their routine, or maybe this is just how they are, Tom thought, having

half-expected some excitement at the prospect of food. He was growing hungry, himself. But the crowd showed no hurry at all. They may as well have been Vulcans at a bistro.

He felt Dalra's hand on his arm, leading him into another group. Once there, Tom finally saw what Aratra had--one obviously healthy, dark-haired female with thin netting over her head wound, staring around at the people with a blank, cautious stare.

As they neared, Tom couldn't help but grin at the look on her face when she peered into someone's bowl in passing...but then he saw its contents, too.

"Well, at least it's not leola root soufflé," he quipped when he came close enough.

Torres turned. "Something tells me I'm going to miss it, the way that stuff smells."

"Let's just not get sentimental and take a sample back with us," Tom added. "Neelix might just like it and use it in a stir fry."

B'Elanna just shook her head. "I don't know how you can joke sometimes, Paris."

He shrugged. "I didn't think you'd mind. It's been a hell of a day and we have a few more ahead of us at least."

"I guess so."

He eyed her. "They've told you about our sleeping arrangements--that it'd be better if we stuck together, right?" Her gaze was pointed away as her head dipped once in acknowledgment. "Hope you don't mind."

"I haven't said anything about it yet, have I?" she replied curtly, letting that half-lie stand. She looked up to see him nodding. "We're professionals, Lieutenant. I think we can handle it."

He smiled, letting her have that one since it made her feel better. "Yeah, you're right. And besides, it's just temporary."

"Exactly," B'Elanna said as she turned. If he wanted to be in a good mood about it--which certainly didn't surprise her--that was fine. Just as he said, it was temporary.

They were at last near the front of the line, and Tom moved up to the slot next to hers. When they pulled out their allotted meals, they looked at each other then back to the lumps in their bowls. Their mouths twisted downwards to avoid saying the obvious.

Behind them, Dalra and Miztri also shared a look then pressed down their grins as soon as the new people turned towards them again.

A couple hours later, the pilot and engineer looked at each other again, their stomachs surprisingly full, yet their bodies feeling the cold of the night, finally descended.

They'd put their tunics back on as soon as the sun had set, but B'Elanna still shivered much of the way

back to the shack, not as bothered as before with the idea of sharing the "shelter" with Paris. Rather, she was too tired to care. All she wanted at that point was a warm bed and sleep.

Dinner was more palatable than it smelled or looked, they both discovered. The overripe aroma dissolved for the most part once the food was eaten, making the finished product tasteless. It and the full canteen of water they drank filled their stomachs, but that was about it. Better by far was the company of the Desalians, all of whom had welcomed them into the crowded overhang without complaint or a hint of suspicion, but rather offered their help and sympathies for their "fate."

Tom was notably relieved by their generosity, and even B'Elanna couldn't find it in herself to distrust them. The Desalians seemed like an intelligent and gentle people whose only crime, if any, was not fighting back more against their oppressors. Instead, they were thankful to the Unar for the few freedoms they were allowed at Uillar, which hosted one of many of the forced labor camps in their region.

"They bear far more care about our daily occupation upon our arrival nearly seven ralkle past," Aratra told them when Tom became curious about where the guards were. "Greater lenience has been shown to us of late."

"Maybe because they know you won't try anything," B'Elanna thought aloud.

"Kaes-awk, ub wa'iap," Sashana'i said, staring at the fire. She had tired greatly since that afternoon. Idly, she fingered the scar on her cheek, moved her cloth-shoed foot in the dirt like a fumbling child. She seemed to have something else to say. Instead of trying for more words aloud, however, she whispered to Aratra, who nodded and spoke for her.

"They are falling out of their chosen way," he told them, "and their interior struggles worsen. Their collapse shall come someday."

"And so you just wait for that?" B'Elanna asked. "You said before that you've waited--how long?--sixty years? What if they become strong again?" She shook her head. "Sorry if this sounds judgmental, but where I come from, right now is the perfect time to fight back."

Sashana'i's eyes came up at that, but her lips remained shut.

At the same time, Dalra laughed quietly. "Your birth is of a determined people, Be'i. Your companion spoke of the same just today. Yet such means of freedom cannot be our way, not when all we may claim is rudimentary technology--certainly no ships--and, with far grater importance, not without accepting their poison into our spirits. To win our resurrection in such a manner, their lives would need to be taken by us. I shall not charge such a sin against my spirit for any reward. As Toma has learned this sun, little choice is ours but to wait and pray our spirits would not be corrupted again by their degradation."

He was kind, but he meant it. And he said nothing more, letting his point sit and his people agree with him.

Miztri then began to speak, easily distracting the others from her bondmate's correction. Soon, she gravitated into a story about a man who tended a mountainside--or something like that. Half the words were lost in the translators and Desalian syntax was too much to bother with.

So B'Elanna said nothing more, thinking that Chakotay or Tuvok, being more spiritually and culturally centered, would probably have been a lot more suited to their situation than she and Tom were. How interested and intelligent they would probably be there: She could picture them in front of the fire

asking questions and having some valuable experience. B'Elanna felt another small stab of humiliation that she just couldn't be like that.

She had also noticed that Tom was eating steadily when Dalra had spoken. He showed no reaction afterwards, but simply leaned back and watched as Miztri told the tale. His eyes were filled with thought, though, as he looked at the people with an observant concern. A couple times, he raised his brow, but then turned his eyes away, still silent. It was strange to B'Elanna, who had thought he'd always talked too much and liked to argue--or at least goad them into getting them to agree with him.

Seeing the abject conditions for the Desalians outside of that circle, knowing they'd been there for years without even trying to escape, B'Elanna had a feeling she and Tom were thinking about the same thing. Thankfully, they weren't her people, even if she felt for their decidedly hopeless situation. She couldn't be there long enough to change any minds there, as if she even had the right to.

The thought of where Voyager might be in her repairs played in her mind yet again. Their conducting repairs without her or Nicoletti or Bendera, too, might take even longer.

She decided again that she and Tom *had* to get out of there--sooner rather than later.

After dinner, Miztri had cleaned her wound once again and injected another dose of the medicine Sashana'i had procured. Then she pressed Tom to retire them both. They would begin the detail tomorrow and would need the rest.

Though the swabbing was thankfully not nearly as painful as before, the medicine, by Miztri's admission, would make her sleepy. Indeed, B'Elanna didn't fight Tom's hand when it gently helped her to stand. Even so, she insisted on walking alone as they followed Aratra back to the shack they'd been assigned and waited for the man to leave before turning to Paris again.

"After you?" Tom asked, holding open the door.

B'Elanna nodded, bent to get into the flap then immediately to her knees and onto the blankets. When Tom hung the small glowglobe he carried on the slab wall, she looked around. Not only was it "furnished" a little, but it also had been cleaned. It smelled faintly of mint and the walls were no longer stained with... She shook her head to herself. She didn't want to know about that.

"You and Dalra did some work in here," she said without much emotion.

"Dalra did most of it," Tom admitted. "I guess they know the place well enough. Dalra was pretty insistent about it being warm enough--and he was right about the cold."

"No kidding. It's like the dark side of a moon out there."

Tom watched B'Elanna crawl into the corner with her head and shoulders slumped, a posture unlike what he knew of her. "You think you'll be all right?"

"Of course I will," B'Elanna responded, not looking at him as she tugged a few blankets into place. "I'm not an invalid, Paris. I'll survive. You can tell all our other 'friends' here that, too."

Tom opened his mouth then closed it. He was too tired to feed into her frustration. It would do nothing but remind him of his own, which he'd not forgotten, but had willingly prioritized. They could look around the refinery tomorrow, figure out again how long Voyager might take--if they couldn't find a way to contact them or find a way out. Nicoletti and Bendera... Tom didn't want to think about what

they might be going through at that point, only hope they were holding their own, too, and that Dalra and Miztri were being honest about their assignments.

He knew she was probably thinking about the same, but with their capture, her injury and all the fussing over her had left her understandably terse and tired on top of that. She still wasn't admitting to any pain, either.

So he said, "Okay, Torres," and left it at that.

B'Elanna sighed through her nose, trying to block out the plans spinning in her mind, trying to relax. Her head had begun to sting and throb again, even while her eyes gladly closed. "Good night," she said quietly and pulled a blanket over herself.

She'd gotten herself nicely into that corner, he noticed, so that there would be more room for him--a lot, really, since she really didn't take up any room at all. Turning down the globe, he took that space and covered himself. He knew he wasn't going to sleep as easily, though his body gladly accepted his new position.

He fell to sleep not long after settling his eyes on the pitch-black ceiling.

Tom awoke with a start, hearing a clicking noise near to him. Shaking the webs from his mind, he remembered where he was. He hadn't fallen very hard to sleep and thus didn't have much trouble getting back. What he didn't recall was the clicking sound.

Groping around the wall for the glowglobe, he found and activated it.

It was B'Elanna--her teeth were chattering, her body trembling in tune.

Moving to his knees, he peeked out of the shelter, bracing against the shot of cold that greeted him in the shack, which needed no help cooling off. *What was it? Every third moon? And how the hell am I suppose to know which one's the third when I haven't seen them before?* Wishing uselessly that he had at least a tricorder, he closed the flap again.

Thinking it'd been about long enough, he turned again to B'Elanna, who was huddled in that same corner, her short hair bunched up against her head. He couldn't see her face, but he could already imagine her hard-pressed frown.

Tom sighed, rubbed his hands briskly together then took out the balm and cloths Miztri had given him.

The light sleep indeed hadn't done much for him, and so he didn't hesitate as much as might have when he took B'Elanna's shoulder and rolled her onto her back. The half-Klingon didn't even stir, only continued to tremble and take short breaths.

She must be more sedated than Miztri said she'd be, Tom surmised. Miztri was a perceptive woman who figured B'Elanna wouldn't take kindly to sedation, either. The Desalian lady's care was a good thing, too. As he pulled back the netting and cursorily examined the exposed epidermal layers, he could see it was definitely starting to heal. With a few swabs on his part, it was shiny again with the thick, orange oil.

Cleaning it didn't take long, and after applying a fresh layer of bandage and wiping off his hands, he drew himself down behind B'Elanna and pulled all the remaining blankets over them, covering their heads as well.

He breathed his relief into her tangled hair when he felt her shivering decrease and body relax when he draped his arm around her.

Despite the return of those thoughts that'd kept him staring at the ceiling earlier, he joined her repose in only a few minutes.

"Zsha-ab wah!"

Tom rolled over. "Not yet," he muttered and threw his arm over the pillow he was leaning on. "Go aw-- Oof!" He suddenly doubled for a Klingon-strength elbow in his gut.

"What the hell?!" B'Elanna sat up and yanked the blanket off her head--scraping her forehead and making her suck a sharp breath. "Ah!"

"Damn, B'Elanna!" Tom gasped. "You could give a guy a little warning!"

She spun to see the pilot indeed beside her. "What the hell were *you* doing, anyway?!"

"Keeping you warm!" he retorted. "You were freezing last night, so I combined the blankets. Maybe I *should* have just let you freeze, let you come to me."

"Not a chance, Paris."

"So much for being professional."

"I don't see your cozying up to me without my permission as anything official."

"Damn it, Torres, it's not like I tried to get in your pants! Take it easy!"

"Screw off!"

Suddenly a growl sounded from above them and two small feet landed on the blankets. The glowglobe activated, revealing Sashana'i, who turned a scolding stare to both of them. "Oah-gask as-i'im!" she told them, but shook her head, knowing well they wouldn't understand her. She leaned down and grabbed Paris' arm. "Awah-twa, Toma tih-mon-e'ih!"

"Good morning to you, too," he said as she dragged him up and shoved him out of the shack. Stumbling to a stop outside, he flushed below his still sleepy eyes to see both Dalra and Aratra grinning at him in the warm, early dawn.

A moment later, his 'razor' and comb followed him, clanking to the dirt and stopping near his feet.

"It is our way to tend our needs then feed our good women, Toma," Aratra chuckled, "--even while yours might send it back to you in spittle."

"You think?" Tom replied, bending to pick up his items. "I thought I was starting to get the hint."

"Be'i proves not to be the warmth of sunshine upon waking?"

Tom chuckled against his will, grunting from his bruises of the day before and the ones B'Elanna had just added. "More like the heat of a plasma injector."

Dalra was also laughing. "Food shall settle her flares--and your own, I should hope. Ab."

Tom rubbed the stubble on his chin and staggered after them. "Guess there's no chance at getting some coffee, is there?"

Both men looked back quizzically, but laughed again as they escorted him onward.

Meanwhile, Sashana'i took the balm out of the satchel and began to prepare it. B'Elanna shook her head tersely. Her first morning on that godforsaken planet had been bad enough in the first minute without people poking at her again.

"Look, I really appreciate this, but--"

"Be'i--gye'ak," Sashana'i said and turned with the prepared cloth in her hand. Pressing the engineer by the shoulder against the wall with a firmness that B'Elanna hadn't expected, Sashana'i cleaned the wound, swabbed it swiftly and covered it again, ignoring the growls and flinches from her patient.

In but a minute, she finished and turned an "I told you so" look to her chosen charity.

B'Elanna crossed her arms, her lips turning up. "Okay. You win--this time."

The other woman grinned and cleaned off her hands before digging in the wall pouch again. Taking out a thick comb, she then pulled some thick ribbons from her pocket and reached for her hair.

B'Elanna held up a hand. "Sashana'i, I know you're trying to be nice, but this isn't how I usually start my--"

"Be'i bwuh-ke," the lady answered immediately and scooted up enough to easily take a portion of B'Elanna's dark locks, which were still bunched with sleep. Before B'Elanna could think to argue with her about it, Sashana'i had combed and deftly braided a side back with a ribbon, dropping the other one into B'Elanna's hand. She wordlessly moved to the other side to finish the job, plucking up the second ribbon as she started then tying the ends together in the back.

Again, her stare dared the other woman to disprove its usefulness.

To her own surprise, B'Elanna cracked a laugh. "You really are a snotty little brat."

Sashana'i smirked. "Be'i ka'i-wahn eko-wvuw," she said, running her finger over her temple then into the loop of B'Elanna's braid, flicking it upwards.

An hour later, she understood the reason for the Desalian's insistence.

Her day's "work" was leaning over a sheet of wrecked metal, helping another woman, a dark skinned, gold-eyed lady called Kepri, push it into a refinery slot for recycling. Across the row, Tom and Naja--Kepri's bondmate--lifted another sheet on from a pile left there for them.

Worse, she and Paris had no chance to shore up their plans aside from their mentioning it at an otherwise quiet breakfast between them. Rather, at the call for detail, they went directly from the meal across the red, cracked court to the lines of their assigned details, silent only for Dalra's insistent instruction at their meal to wait until the heat of day to inspect the place if they so insisted.

They would have the opportunity to when their pile was done, they figured. Aratra had mentioned that the Unar would take their time to bring another. It sounded like a good time to them.

"I again advise you wait," Dalra had whispered to them as they paced across the court. "Unar may be distant--yet remain a danger. You are noticed."

"We'll be careful," Tom told him, a daring little grin pervading his poker face. "We've been through this kind of thing before."

"You bear little awareness of Unar. Brutality is not beyond their method."

"So we've noticed," B'Elanna smirked. "We're just having a look, and like Tom said, we've got some experience in sneaking around. Besides, anything's better than just sitting here waiting." Her tone bit that point, not caring what anyone thought about it. "Right Paris?"

"Yes, ma'am," he intoned with a bow her way as they turned into the refinery.

From there, they went to their duties feigning a slightly insulted compliance. They'd agreed on that much, even if it was harder than the work itself proved to be.

Forcing herself to keep going without looking around too much yet, B'Elanna helped Kepri turn the sheet, push it in, wait for another. She ignored the pain of her wound, worse with the heat and the perspiration trickling down her back.

She ignored as well the occasional passings of the Unar guards, though she felt their eyes burning through her, sneering. Her eyes caught Tom's a couple times then; his begged what she already knew--to just let them go, not mess around, make any trouble, attract any attention. They'd get their chance later.

She was starting to get sick of his reminders.

Thankfully, the officers went away soon enough.

Once there were no other distractions, she managed to get into the mind numbing routine of the work. It kept them busy enough to think about what they were doing--they had to cut the scrap pieces down just enough to fit through the slab opening at the end of the small conveyor. But it was unimportant and repetitive enough that it didn't allow *too* much thought.

It only served to make her itchier. She was a chief engineer of a starship and a damn good one. She knew that without too much conceit. The work she had beneath her, cutting and pushing metal, was suited to...

Prisoners.

Determinedly, she started calculating exactly where Voyager probably was in their repairs. She considered the lack of staff and supplies, and then recalled the energy signals of the Unar's shields, which she had foggily glimpsed on the flickering panel before they beamed her and the others to their brig.

Their ships were nothing special, small and clumsy even while sleekly designed, she remembered. Their shields were decent--though less powerful than the shuttle's had been; their weapons were ancient compared to Voyager's. She wondered if the Kazon knew about the Unar. She did know that Voyager could get past them. *Finding* their away team would probably be more of a challenge.

Hoping the Unar's communications were as nominal, she'd adjusted her commbadge to set off a distress beacon and left it hidden in the shack. Tom still carried his in his trouser pocket. When Voyager came and if--when--they narrowed their signal down, they would know.

"That's the last of it," Tom grunted as he and Naja lifted the last of the hulking metal onto the conveyor. With that done, the men leaned against the wall. Naja took a slug of water from a pouch, handed it to Tom, who gratefully drowned his thirst, swished the thickness from his mouth.

Watching him, B'Elanna noted how pink his skin was--overheated, probably. Even with her Klingon blood and in the shade of the flimsy roof, she found it relentlessly arid. But Paris looked miserable. Anxious, too. The latter wasn't too bad to see. She was anxious to slip away, as well.

The metal slab pulled in front of her and she jerked her eyes back to Kepli's. With her nod, they cut down the piece enough that they could get the piece through the refinery slot.

Naja handed B'Elanna the water pouch. "I should think a respite might assist our good lady. --B'ei? Does the warmth affect you? Officer Tozswak should not be replenishing our supply until some time passes."

She smiled when she finished gulping down the warm but relieving water. "Thanks, Naja."

"We shall wait here and call you should more arrive. Toma, her balm shall require assistance."

"Almost forgot about that," Tom said, nodding his thanks to them both as Torres moved around the small assembly they'd been working on all morning. His grin increased to see hers: She had been intense and silent in their "mindless" toil and perspired only a little less than he had. But then, with the chance to do something more to her specialty, her eyes had brightened considerably, her pleasant determination back in check.

He responded in kind.

"Take yourselves with care," Kepli said, her wide eyes shining out from her fawn hood as they turned for the inner corridor. "You live dangerously in this."

Tom smiled back at her. "Just part of the job, Kepli," he quipped and moved to catch up with B'Elanna, already on her way into the grey grated corridor behind their stations.

Within only a minute, B'Elanna found an access junction and squinted carefully at it. "This looks like only a minor relay--a power node," she said thoughtfully as she ran a fingertip over the isolinear bundling.

Tom, keeping the watch at her side, glanced over and nodded quickly. "Think we can use it?"

"I'd like to see if there's anything farther in," she said slowly, still wrapped up in her mental schematic deductions. "In itself, this isn't going to help us."

"You've got the lead, Lieutenant," he said lightly.

"Thanks a lot," she replied, also grinning as she closed the hatch. Drawing her eyes farther into the hall, she spotted a cross corridor. "Let's try this next section, try to get behind these nodes. There'll be a shunt unit somewhere in here."

"I'm right behind you."

"You'd better be," she said. "The way my head's hurting right now, I'll need my nurse."

Tom stared down at her, surprised to hear her say it. "Maybe I should look at that now, get it over with since it's bothering you."

"Later," she said, quietly brisk. "I can deal with it, and I really want to find that junction." Without waiting for his agreement, she started moving again, to the next corridor. There was no one in sight, so she turned a nod back to the pilot.

The half-lit corridors grew smaller with each turn they took, and B'Elanna took to whispering, sympathetic with the space.

She was sure she was making progress in finding the main junction, though. From there, she told Tom, they could probably access the Unar's systems, if not get into their command pathways. Each power grid was successively more complex and thankfully unguarded, thus easy to study at relative leisure.

"Convenient as this is," Tom breathed to her as they found yet another empty cross-corridor, "I don't think I trust this."

"Like how it's this unguarded this far in?" she asked, peering back to him, but nodded before he could answer. "I know. But they said the Unar weren't too cautious. The Desalians aren't aggressors, so they probably don't give the Unar anything to worry about."

"They're pretty insistent about their ways," Tom agreed.

"Dying with their spirits in tact is still dying under lock and key, Paris."

"You're selling to the vendor, Torres," Tom grinned, squinting around another corner before allowing them to pass it. "Though, I have to admit, dying with my soul in working order doesn't sound that bad."

"That's assuming you have one," she smirked.

"Spoken like a true zealot," he returned, trying not to laugh as he let her have that one. It felt good even to get insulted by the half-Klingon at that point. She liked to throw jabs, he knew, when she was feeling clever or just proficient--which he understood pretty well. Being on the hunt for parts had definitely put B'Elanna Torres in that sort of good mood. It was good to hear.

B'Elanna found and pulled open yet another hatch, her lips parting slightly as her eyes flickered over what she found there. "I think we're getting somewhere," she whispered, almost to herself.

"I hope so."

"This is a secondary relay. I'm willing to bet the primary junction should be inside the next corridor."

Tom nodded. "Yeah, but I'm really starting to get a bad feeling about this. Call it instinct."

"I've got the creeps, too, but we have to go on. We have to see if we can get in touch with Voyager somehow."

He took a deep breath, averted his eyes. "Agreed."

Her full mouth twisted upwards. "Scared, Paris?"

Tom snorted quietly. "Damn right I am."

"Well, if you want to go back--"

"And let you grab all the glory? No way." He'd smiled at that, carelessly, egging on her wit purposefully, as he followed her around the next passageway.

In truth, they both knew that despite their "chills," they knew they wouldn't sleep without seeing everything they could.

For that matter, they might not have as good a chance another time.

And in all honesty, that kind of excitement in itself wasn't that bad. He knew he was as much an addict to it as she could be, too.

Commander Hychar knew that.

Or he had at least glimpsed that brightness when they came around the final corner. Then, when they happened to look up and see two guards and the commander who had granted their internment, their expressions were...interesting.

They were stunned, frozen for a moment in their recognition; then they seemed insulted, and then they waited for his response. They straightened, knowing their guilt, knowing there would be consequences. Even a moment of their shame shone through. Or was it humiliation?

He hadn't expected so much from them.

With that passed, the two filthy, ungainly aliens were ready for the lesson to his test. They stood unmoving, and even held their heads high to him.

He was even more impressed that they did not run. It spoke of pride.

Pride was not their place, though.

Hychar said nothing to them, but simply moved back, revealing his two officers in full. "Discipline," was all he said; then he turned to walk away, his heels soft on the metal floor.

Tom instinctively moved in front of B'Elanna, but he felt his throat in a clutch before he could complete his move. His responsive hand was swatted away hard enough that it bounced off the wall behind him.

"Bastards," B'Elanna spat behind him and let out a grunt when the glove grabbed her tunic and yanked her forward. Her body slammed into the grate a moment later.

The pilot almost turned to see, but he too hit something before that move was even begun.

Hychar crossed into the main complex, and a strangled yell and several hard thumps echoed behind him. A shuffle, then sharply exhaled groans, and then another thump...

He closed the door and returned to the pleasing silence of his post.

Some amount of time later--pain made that impossible to gauge, though the sun was starting its descent--the smaller of the new prisoners was thrown onto the blankets of the shack, heaving in vain for breath, coughing, choking.

I think I still have my teeth, thought B'Elanna as she braced herself and tried hard to breathe normally.

Aside from that, she couldn't even think for everything she felt, bitterly, swelling quickly--and could almost have been numb in the shock of that much sensation. Tasting a free flow of blood in her mouth, feeling too many parts of her body to count pounding in rhythm to her banging heart, she dragged for air, swallowing the bile behind it, gasping to catch up. That wind was knocked out of her again when a long, lifeless body was thrown atop her, knocking her re-injured skull against the back wall.

That time, the flaps were slammed behind them.

Neither was conscious enough to notice.

Some distance across the court of the camp, Sashana'i looked at her bondmate with knowing eyes. They had all seen the purpled, limp figures being dragged by their grey collars out of the processing center and to the shanty rows--displayed for all to see.

They had all stared in silence and sadness.

Looking to Aratra, Sashana'i touched her temple markings, then his, allowing his spirit, his love for her, to fill her. She would need it all for what she knew she would arrange, would need his strength, even if part of that strength was borne of fear.

Glancing only for a moment to Dalra, the young woman pulled her hood well over her brow and slowly set off across the parched red ground. The hot breeze did no favors for her but to liberate her loose robe and hide her path as she quickly disappeared into the barricade rows.

Aratra could only watch her. Then he turned to ask Dalra and Miztri to follow him.

If she passed to their ancestors, his only comfort was that he would go with her.

"Not so much anything as much as their pride, their hope, their power to act, found injury that day. It is remembered how they barely saw what the young regent had desired, in recovering them, them to see..."

"They bear themselves with such quietness," Miztri noted, spreading out the ginhra cloth around the short center pillar, peeking back to the couple then up to her bondmate. "This is unnatural in them."

"Their injuries," Dalra said, piecing through the kraja box, "their failure and their wait. They bear determination which cannot be."

"Bear you no belief that they shall be returned to their own?"

Dalra drew a thoughtful breath. "I would not answer for lack of knowledge. It is wished."

He was a little *too* certain in his last statement, Miztri thought. "It pleases that Sashana'i and Aratra were able to bring them tonight."

"It should be brighter than their healing has been," he agreed.

It had only been five days since Unar disciplined them, Miztri knew, but dark ones indeed in many ways. They had gone too far within the walls despite their warnings, their advice of waiting. But the two were an active sort, terribly curious, well educated and intelligent--perhaps too much so. Anticipating this nature to assert itself, Hychar ordered his officers to beat them well enough to give them great pain, but carefully enough to keep them alive.

Through this, Unar had yet again proven their corruption of spirit, which troubled Miztri more than the newcomers ever could. She had long dreamed to see in Irlae a restoration of what once had been. Her spiritual scholarship had given her a keen awareness of what had been taken from her people, and it strengthened her desire to see their fate rectified. It seemed too bleak and impossible sometimes to believe, however. The alien woman spoke her fears during their first dinner together: Desal's want for Unar's eventual dissolution might not become truth. Their evil could well be resurgent, recover after each sect, allowing them to continue their way. The last Unar sect scourge had changed little, Miztri knew.

Though troublesome to consider, what choice did Desal have but to watch and wait? It was not in their power to choose their fate. They could but aspire to follow and accept the destiny laid out by the events of their lives--to follow their nature and ways with an open mind and good spirit. For that matter, the Unar indeed had taken every physical means of resistance and advancement by stripping Irlae of its technology upon conquering each world within it, and they had efficiently limited it for over sixty years following the final desecration of Desal.

So she prayed the spirits might show that nature would have them shift towards a kinder fate for Irlae. There was no sin, after all, in hoping for goodness.

Dalra sighed, feeling his bondmate's dilemma tricking at her mind. "Perhaps what they desire shall yet be theirs, my spirit."

Miztri's lips turned up briefly. "Perhaps for but wishing. Yet I see their hopes threatened."

"Is it difficult to master humility," Dalra replied with a sigh then touched her arm. "For the present, they might be benefited by the laridium chips I have stored."

Miztri smiled at him. "You bear true goodness in your way, my spirit. It may well buoy them for a time. Yet what shall happen should that not assist them?"

"Then healing shall follow their difficult understanding," he replied. Caressing her arm, he sighed at her stare. "They are troubled spirits, Miztri, whose thoughtlessness troubles me. They bear goodness, however, and shall receive what help we can offer. This is our way."

All those who came to the circle that night might well have felt the same. They had encouraged Miztri when she slipped out of her work detail as soon as the guards had removed themselves from the shanties, followed closely by Dalra. The others covered their work inside the refinery, making their absence all but unrecognizable.

With what they possessed of wiry strength, the two extracted those lifeless forms from the shack then called for a few others who had followed to help carry them to the overhang. The newcomers were, after all, well-fed and solid in body, thus quite heavy.

Had there been proper instruments and medicines, they might have healed the two more efficiently, but for their broken ribs and fingers, his broken nose, her broken nose bridge--as Miztri had decided to call it--there were only wraps and splints for those injuries. Only water and the cool of night would help the swelling and bruising.

The lady had awoken first, screaming and resisting those who pressed her down. Miztri had held her head in both hands and stared hard into the young woman's roughly swollen eyes, telling her where she was, what had happened, that her companion was also recovering. The patient remained angry and short-tempered despite the comfort. She still balked at too much attention and cursed glaringly.

Miztri likewise tried to understand her and the young man's seething sarcasm when he too awoke. Their pride, seemingly as inherent to their people as their freedom, had been battered equally well. Or perhaps it was the pain.

No, their sort was not accustomed to losing in their intent.

Sashana'i, after recovering as well from her own dealings with Unar, had come to stay by them. She seemed particularly endeared by the two, and complied with them enough that they did rest. Nursing them while allowing them their dignity, she let them bear their broken pride and their anger without interfering. They seemed to require the vent. During those five days, Sashana'i had also managed to buoy them enough to come to the bonding ceremony of Suoti and Jabra. She had even found proper cloaks--and convinced the stubborn pair to wear them.

Though good spirits, they did bear qualities few Desalians would attempt without great fear of reprisal, Miztri knew.

Again, she thought how shameful it was that Unar had targeted them. Miztri, knowing Unar, knew they likely thought the outsiders were hideously distasteful creatures. Commander Hychar would indeed think it an interesting challenge in his unholy life to train them. He likely waited at present to see how his new prisoners would behave at the work detail after a disciplining, when they finally returned to it.

The indignation in their hurting visages was palpable when Dalra informed them of that possibility.

But perhaps, she thought, they would gain a finer strength and resist Hychar's manipulation as they recovered and acclimated to Uillar. That night, not in so much pain, finally released of her care and perhaps seeing the beauty of the ceremony would offer them some ease in their sleep. Sashana'i had expressed such hopes.

Miztri, having come to know their moods, doubted it as much as she wished it.

"They're watching us again," B'Elanna muttered. Her mouth was still bruised.

"I know," Tom replied, similarly slurred. "They're still worried."

"At least they didn't get into trouble because of us."

"Yeah, the Unar have some discrimination of taste. But for how long are they going to be nice?"

She blew a breath, continuing to watch the older Desalians prepare the center, where the ceremony would take place. They didn't have much, but some had managed to carry very pretty cloths and ritualistic items with them to Uillar. In their own simple way, they were getting by, continuing their lives, almost as if they weren't in that horrible place.

She noticed Tom had quieted again. He'd lost a back molar during their punishment. But she didn't think that was the entire reason. He'd been in turns as rigidly silent as she had been, and colder than she'd even known him to be when he did speak. Probably pissed off and embarrassed, just like she was, and she wouldn't blame him if any portion of that was pointed at her. As for herself, she couldn't describe the humiliation she felt every time she remembered that she'd led them both right into Hychar's trap.

She gritted her teeth, and then decided not to do that again when her temples and nose screamed in reaction.

The Desalians began to gather and sit; surprisingly, they greeted the new people there with genuine and gentle smiles. B'Elanna suspected they'd all seen what'd happened to her and Tom. Aratra told them how they'd been taken across the court during the work pause.

As fires began to replace the heat of the sun, the circle formed, row upon row, leaving only two adjacent paths into the center.

Dalra and Miztri came close, also pleasant as they knelt by their bundles and covered their everyday clothes with finer robes and sheer scarves. Dalra pulled on an old, knee-length red coat, adjusted his stained, white headdress then knelt to get his waist sash tied properly. Miztri pulled on a dusty green coat with ornate silver embroidery at the hems. She hooked it at the waist and brushed down the sides, where deep slits in the skirt revealed the gown and leggings beneath. Then she pulled the bulk of her hair loose of its braid, letting it fall long in the back before draping a set of soft, light-colored scarves around her head and behind her to her knees. Around the top, she wrapped two rows of braids around like a crown, tucked the ends under and pinned it all in place.

With another greeting smile to their sullen guests, they returned to the center, ready for the ritual to begin. When they found their places, they waited together, watching the sun set.

Meanwhile, Sashana'i and Aratra returned to their seats next to Tom and B'Elanna. Crawling over to B'Elanna's side, Sashana'i gently pulled back her new friend's hood, revealing the crown of her dark hair.

B'Elanna looked up at her. The woman smiled down at her with a regard that almost made her nervous. To her credit, she didn't flinch, even when Sashana'i touched her temple.

"My bondmate admires your beauty," Aratra told her and nodded when B'Elanna looked at him for confirmation. "You bear subtle differences to our own, and in that she finds appreciation."

"Thanks, but I don't exactly feel fetching right now," B'Elanna replied.

"Ka," Aratra agreed, "you bear more the appearance of sipreg fruit than an appealing lady, yet Sashana'i sees beyond Unar, as do I. There shall be healing, Be'i."

Looking up to Sashana'i again, B'Elanna shook her head. "What I don't understand is why you do so much for us. I know it's difficult for you--"

The lady placed a finger on B'Elanna's swollen lips. "Gye'awi-Be'i," she said softly, bringing her fingers up to her own temple markings, and then her sternum. Then she motioned between them all, catching Tom's curious eyes as well. "Shi-h aw kwet ye'o."

"We are all one in life," Aratra translated.

"Awah-twa," she nodded back to him.

He continued, "One in life, that which surrounds us, that which precedes us, and that which shall be--all in the living are what we are, equal and undying, bound in time for only time. We are brought from the spirits, and are completed in eternity, one among all, having tasted the soil and water. --It is a Desalian prayer."

"It's beautiful," B'Elanna said quietly and turned her attention out to the center. Small fires had been lit within rocks, lighting the area with a warm, bluish glow, and a rhythmic melody began from somewhere within the audience, catching on like the fire, fed by the cooling air.

They were trying so hard to make that night special, she could tell. Dalra and Miztri were going to connect a young couple's "spirits" together, exchange their life's memories using what selective telepathy their race possessed. It was a most holy ceremony to the Desalians, one Aratra had described as sublime and joyous.

But beyond the ginhra cloth, the unforgiving red dirt remained ready to poison them all.

She shivered; beside her, she felt Tom moving closer. With a soft grunt, he pulled his cloak up enough so that he could sit behind her and double up her coverings with his own.

"We can handle it, Lieutenant," he whispered humorlessly as the singing, combined with a percussion somewhere across, grew in volume. "We're professionals, right?"

She didn't look back. "Right," she replied with an equal etching of sourness.

"Good," was his only reply. He really didn't feel like being there in the first place, would have tried harder to evade it if it hadn't promised to be warm. He was rather in the mood to stew in the way he knew so well--and knew he had the right to. At the same time, he was sick of feeling cold.

He felt like hell, stupid and careless for letting Torres challenge him into going so far within the Unar corridors. He felt stupider still every time he recalled Hychar's smug grin. Just waiting for them. Tom cursed himself for not knowing better--or at least for not listening to himself--and cursed B'Elanna for getting him so excited about the possibility, even if he knew he wanted to do it as much as she had.

Knowing himself as he did, he knew he would've probably gone on his own if she'd been unable. Right into their trap.

Stupid, stupid, stupid...

...Dalra and Miztri opened the small kraja box, wherein was laid the same-named marking tools. With their fingertips alone, they lifted the instruments, placed them on the stump between them. The singing continued, the melody traveling gracefully through the rhythm, a chant with a lilting beat.

The kraja tools properly arranged, Miztri offered her hand palm-up on the small table. Dalra placed his fingertips within it. Their eyes became heavy, watching towards the path, towards the remnants of the sunset...

Though it'd been by B'Elanna's persuasion, Tom had indeed followed her. He'd always been an impulsive person. That and selfish arrogance had gotten him into every other ounce of trouble he'd been in before. Tom suddenly wondered what the Desalians would think about *that*, in their search for spiritual goodness, his own friends' deaths in his record, his breaking with his father and getting wrapped up in the Maquis, blind drunk and drifting off to nothingness by his own will, until someone just happened to be fast enough to lock him away.

Oh, yeah, they'd really like to know about that, too.

Because of his continued disregard, B'Elanna looked like hell, her face and neck purple with ripe bruises and a series of hard knots down her side where the guards had kicked her. He knew they both could've been less selfish, a hell of a lot less gung-ho and a lot more patient to give the Unar a little time to get used to them. They could have used more of the brains they knew they had.

Sashana'i, sitting in her dingy gown and well-braided veils beside them, seemed a proper bondmate to the casually dignified Aratra. Seemingly more willful than any Desalian there, she had risked herself again to save two strangers--stupid strangers. The princess, Tom mused.

And Voyager probably wouldn't come for another week, according to their original calculation.

...The young couple, Suoti and Jabra, both dressed in long coats and draped with embroidered scarves, walked at an equal pace down the paths left for them, each guided by an attendant, who led them by the fingers to the center, where Dalra and Miztri moved to accept the two.

The elder two knelt before the couple then straightened to take their hands. To the beat of the song echoing around the hard court, Miztri led Suoti, dressed with an elegance that seemed inappropriate there, around the young man and her bondmate, bowing and turning the bride in a sort of brief dance before repeating the course. The Dalra took Jabra around the women in the same fashion...

B'Elanna felt the warmth of Tom's arms around her, but he wasn't holding her. Aratra was holding Sashana'i, intermittently kissing her behind her ear as they smiled upon the ceremony, probably remembering their own. On occasion, Sashana'i met her eyes, smiling with unaffected sweetness; B'Elanna felt an unwanted stab of jealousy, not for the man so much as deserving such attentions. Her Desalian acquaintances seemed so untroubled--in that place.

Conversely, B'Elanna knew she looked like a monster and sat with a man--well known for his flirtatiousness and friendliness--who wouldn't so much as touch her. Tom only rested his arms around her enough so that his cloak could cover her. His bandaged hands remained unmoving on her knees, impotent there.

"We really didn't know," she'd told him a couple days before, "we didn't hear or see any--"

"I don't feel like rationalizing it," he interrupted, his voice muffled and thick. "We both know what happened there, Torres. I'm not going to bother trying to explain this away."

"Well, thanks a lot, then, Paris," she snapped. "Just go ahead and sit in your shit for all I care. I was trying to say--"

"There's nothing to say, B'Elanna! Just leave me the hell alone!"

"Fine!"

She stopped feeling sorry for him then and there. At the same time, she couldn't blame him for being angry with her--mainly because she was angrier at herself. Nearly a week had gone by way too badly, mainly because of her.

...The four celebrants were soon surrounding the table, and then kneeling gracefully on the ornate ginhra cloth. They spread their handsome robes and scarves outward, like a four-sided fan.

The hosts of the bonding spoke, but their words would not translate. Even so, it was clear enough what was generally occurring as Suoti responded first by offering her palm to Jabra. Another phrase, and the young man placed his hand in hers. His face shone with dignified joy. Her simpler smile spoke a world full of feeling...

Tom's sore eyes closed. At least the Desalians knew how to be patient, to use what they did have. What had he and Torres done but waste their chance? Humiliate themselves?

"You must not be seen as prey again," Dalra had warned when he helped the man to the latrine that morning. "Your conscience shall be tempted now that your vulnerability is known."

"I know that," Tom said shortly.

"It should be good for you to know patience, Toma."

"What if I don't want to, Dalra?" Tom countered. "What about that?"

Dalra sighed. "Then pain and hatred shall guide you, and you would be pitied as are Unar."

Nothing new in that, he thought. It'd just be another thing to look back on and cringe silently about years later. But the idea of being anything like the Unar--the idea that Dalra would compare him to them--hurt more than he expected, turned like a knife in his mind.

...The singing quieted. Dalra and Miztri spoke a few phrases in unison, then Suoti wrapped her fingers around Jabra's. She spoke softly, yet passionately, her eyes nowhere but in her chosen's. The man then spoke the same, and in the same way...

At that distance, B'Elanna could see tears in both the young couple's eyes above the smiles. They were happy--there, under those conditions, their wedding clothes probably borrowed from those who had died in that horrible place, their life together probably doomed to Uillar until they also died, and yet they were still happy. B'Elanna just couldn't get over that, couldn't believe it.

They were attractive and rather young, probably not yet twenty.

Suoti allowed Miztri to take her hand and press her finger into her palm. Their eyes met and locked;

they seemed to lose focus for several seconds. The young woman's head lolled slightly, but she managed to remain straight.

Dalra did the same with the Jabra.

The chant's rhythm became the dominant sound, mesmerizing, pulsing softly through the air. B'Elanna felt it in her heart, lulling her, almost. Her eyes blinked heavily.

Dalra and Miztri's hands met again, but then they slid their center fingers into each other's palms. With a small jolt between them, they stared at each other, suddenly lost in each other's eyes. Not long after that, they reclaimed the Suoti and Jabra's hands, repeating what they had done before.

Yet that time, the young couple was lost in each other's eyes, fighting to keep their heads up, breathing hard yet silently as the ritual continued. Dalra and Miztri seemed to be taking their time, smiling kindly while still concentrating on their task.

When they finished, they joined the new bondmates' hands again, whispered something to them. The young couple's eyes closed.

The music ceased; everybody waited...

Between his arms, Tom felt B'Elanna shift. He looked over at Aratra and Sashana'i. That time, they did not return his attention. They were fixed upon the couple, for minutes, it seemed, utterly still as the air that surrounded them...

"She truly believes in giving and the wind of fate, Toma," Aratra had said as they watched Sashana'i skip from out of the overhang and across the main walk to the water dispensers, bottles in hands. "Should there be a one who would skirt the wave of ethic, it would be my bondmate. Yet it is birth given."

"You seem to go along with her," Tom commented quietly. "Or do you just follow, like the others?"

Aratra chuckled. "I should like some chisak to soften your sour tongue, my friend. You see Desalians as drinking in the punishment they have not earned?"

Tom said nothing.

"Bear you certainty that we have *not* earned it, then? The deprivation of spirit in our recent predecessors should be cause for retribution. We must cleanse the way for our future."

"How very Klingon," B'Elanna said dryly from her pallet. Tom's bad mood had been enough to deal with, but Aratra--whom she'd liked before--was starting to annoy her. "How many generations are going to have to go through this crap before you regain your stupid sense of honor, Aratra?"

"What 'crap' do you mention, Be'i?" Aratra grinned back at her. "No Desalian here stepped into Unar aggression as you have."

"No one but your wife," B'Elanna replied.

"She is of regent's blood."

"What does that matter?"

"It matters in that she was bred with and inherited spirits of righteous empowerment," he replied. "My trust and knowledge of my bondmate guides my conscience, as does for the legacy we share as a result of our bonding. As our spirits are one, some of her will is mine, yet our place in Desal's contrition is accepted fully. As heirs of the regency alone, this is known to us."

Tom didn't try to understand what he meant. "But don't *you* ever feel like resisting what goes on here?" he asked.

"Each moon that passes over our heads sees my prayers for freedom," Aratra said, for a moment reflective. But then he laughed a little. "Yet should I attempt a thing, it would bring me and Sashana'i to our ancestors far more quickly than her fair visage. Unar despise my face, too. --Should fate bless a path to our freedom, however, I shall follow it. You may trust this."

They weren't like the other Desalians--but they *were* Desalian without a doubt.

...They spoke again: The new couple finally drew an audible breath and spoke, first the lady then the man. They offered their hands to their hosts a third time, smiling and still staring at each other, almost in relief.

The singing began again, that time in a happier melody, punctuated by claps throughout the gathering...

Only the day before, they'd had a funeral for another who hadn't been as lucky at staving off the infection, who didn't respond to the medicines that Sashana'i had procured for having gained a tolerance to them.

Both he and B'Elanna had finally agreed to give each other the silent treatment when they happened to see the Desalian, pasty orange and fatally swollen with infection, clouded eyes and pale mouth open, being carried past the overhang.

Tom and B'Elanna had stilled at the sight.

Aratra hurried to cover the person's head with a scarf.

They burned the body and celebrated the life.

It could have been them, they both knew.

...Looking over, Tom saw Aratra and Sashana'i had joined in the rhythm of the singing as well. Unconsciously, he too moved his hands to the beat, settling on tapping Torres' upraised knees. When he realized what he was doing, though, he stopped.

B'Elanna noticed that.

...The kraja tools were chosen and, sharing a smile, Dalra and Miztri, began their work.

B'Elanna watched them begin to mark a series of patterns into Suoti and Jabra's left hands...

She tapped her fingers within her crossed arms to the beat around them.

...The newly married couple stood, spoke to their audience graciously. They spoke with joy and welcoming, as far as B'Elanna and Tom could see and hear. They were joined, their memories and senses

bonded, and they would meet their "spirits" together someday...

One among the living, they were also a part of each other for eternity.

Despite their circumstance and their likely future, they were happy to be alive...

B'Elanna watched it, saw its beauty and how devoutly it was being celebrated, but could barely think about it without feeling a sharp pain in her chest.

Without wanting it to, it disgusted her.

"I don't understand how they can live like this," she said suddenly, breaking the silence between them. Outside the fire lit circle, the temperature dropped drastically. As she fought her shivers, she'd walked with her arms crossed high on her ribs--mainly so not to push on her tender lower ones. "At least in the Maquis, we knew a crap situation when we saw it--and we did something about it."

"This is their life," Tom replied. "They won't do much about it."

B'Elanna turned her eyes down to the path, dimly lit by the glowglobe Tom held. "Obviously. I don't know if I could've gotten by as they have. They're sitting here with no technology, their people dying from simple infections, in forced labor--at the same time, they're praising their ancestors and getting married. Are they actually thinking about a *life*?"

Tom blew a breath of heavy fog into the night air. "Look, Torres, you can stop angling--I *know* you want off this planet. So do I."

She shot a look at him. "I wasn't 'angling'! I was just saying--"

"What? You can't live like this?" Tom faced her. "If you'd lived like this, you'd be right along with them. You're just looking in, talking like someone who's trapped here just like me. But I can't *do* anything about it--less now than before!"

"I never expected you to!" B'Elanna seethed and turned around, shaking her head.

"Sure doesn't sound like it!"

"I know this is my fault, Tom, but you don't have to rub it in my face."

"I'm not," he responded. "The truth is, you and I are just a couple of idiots who believed we could just walk right up to the Unar central pathways, open up a terminal and beam ourselves out of here. --You and I together..." He caught her eyes. "Now look at us."

She said nothing as she gazed up at his pulpy, distorted face, suffused further with his anger. Before they'd set foot on that hellhole, she knew Tom Paris was a handsome guy. There, he was hard to look at without flinching. She was sure she was much the same.

"Some stupid idea, B'Elanna," he growled as he continued walking. "These people are right not to hope for anything. --No damn wonder they're able to be happy. They don't expect so much that they get the

crap beat out of them!"

Staring after him for a moment, B'Elanna finally decided to catch up to him. "That doesn't make it right," she said. "They're still here because they never fought back. Now they expect we'll be staying here, waiting for nothing to happen."

Tom sighed impatiently. "It's not that they don't want to go back to their homeworlds, but they'd have to do some serious damage to do it, and they're afraid for their...hereafter--whatever."

"It's a pretty good excuse to play it safe," she added.

"I'm not arguing with you on that. But I'm not about to tell them to give up their own sense of peace just so we can have some."

"I never said they should!" she returned. "You're putting words into my mouth."

"Then what the *are* you talking about, Torres?" Tom demanded. "We've been through this before: You're criticizing a people for not acting. At the same time, you're saying you couldn't be so much like them--and not angling your way out of here. What's your point?"

What am I saying? she suddenly wondered, but couldn't answer it. Her shoulders drooped slightly; she looked away. "I was just saying I couldn't survive like this and accept it."

"Looks like both of us are going to have to for now, though, doesn't it?" he concluded. "We sure as hell aren't in any condition to pull any maneuvers for a while."

She twisted her tightly closed mouth, tightening her crossed arms.

"Come on," she heard Tom say as he started moving again. "We should at least get back before we freeze to death."

For that she was indeed cold--and no other reason at that point--she followed him with the same tight expression until they finally returned to the shack they'd been given, crawling in when he pulled open the flap. That time, he made no mannerly quips.

Carefully settling herself upon the blankets, she scooted back into the corner. He came in behind her, careful not to bump his head on the low ceiling and shutting out the black sky beyond that hellish world with a decided yank on the makeshift door. Lowering himself against a wall, he closed his eyes, sighed out his breath. He didn't hang the glowglobe up just then, but tried hard to relax in the eerie yellow glow.

"It's as much my fault as yours," he told her. "You didn't see me arguing with you about going in there--and it was my idea to get a peek around in the first place."

B'Elanna fought back her first reaction by leaning against the wall as well--but then she cringed and sat up. Her ribs still didn't like that position. She noticed him breathing hard again, could hear a slight clogging sound in his lungs, and saw him flinching with that simple respiration. He was hurting. He was tired.

"We were both wrong," she finally said.

He opened his eyes, leaned forward and hung the glowglobe up. Then he reclined again.

"I think we should just keep our eyes open from here on," he thought aloud, "wait for Voyager--or maybe even Nicoletti or Benders will find a way out. Who knows?"

"What?" she snapped up. Whatever calm she'd attained disappeared as her eyes narrowed. "You expect me to just *wait* here--for *how* long? What the hell's wrong with you? Desalians passivity gotten to you already just because we got a few bruises?"

Tom glared at her. "Haven't you listened to a word I've said? They led us into an easy trap, beat the shit out of us and left us to bleed, Torres! And now the Unars have their eyes on us. They're waiting for us to do something again. We can't give them another chance like that."

He was right.

"That doesn't mean we have to lie here like sheep," she returned stubbornly.

"Then you can get *yourself* killed!"

"And you can also let me freeze to death tonight and get it over with!" she shot back, her fists unconsciously clenching. "Just stay the hell away from me from now on if you want to sit here and rot!"

He said nothing; as his face jumped with tension, the silence filled the shack again. Blowing a slow breath, he leaned back.

For lack of anywhere else to look, she watched him, watched his darkened eyes, worse still in the putrid light, drift shut again; then his chest rose again with a shudder. His hands, still splinted, rested listlessly at his sides despite his outburst. Unwillingly, she remembered how those hands looked as they danced over a conn panel, the last time she noticed it. She could see it so clearly, how his face looked when his eyes fixed upon the astral horizon...in his element...

She realized how much then she missed her work, her bed, the ship, her friends...how much he did, too.

She sighed, shaking her head of it.

"I don't want to fight with you, B'Elanna, not here," he said quietly, breaking the still within the close walls. "I usually don't mind your temper--envied it sometimes, really. And I'll admit it's fun raising your hackles. But on Voyager, we can get away with all that. Not here. Like it or not, we need to keep each other alive until Voyager comes, not kill each other. I'd rather survive this place. And I'd rather not survive alone."

She blinked slowly. "I don't want to die here, either."

Tom's head bobbed once in acknowledgement. "Truce, then?"

"Fine," she said, not as hostile and concluding their conversation. Frankly, she was too *tired* to argue with him anymore, though she managed a smirk with her next thought... "I'll think about it."

A short, mirthless laugh escaped him. "Thanks, Torres. I really needed to know you cared."

"Who said I did, Paris?" she jibed flatly, watching his lips flicker upwards again for a moment.

There was nothing left to say. So finally, she drew a breath, resisting the threatening chills, and

crawled down into the blankets. She took the appropriate moment to adjust to the blood rushing back into her face. It hurt like hell. She shivered and tightened, clutching the covering to herself.

In a pause, she heard his unsteady breathing. He still hadn't moved, even when she turned herself onto her side, close to the wall. For what seemed like minutes, she stared at the rivets in the metal that hooked the whole contraption together--though not very well. She could still feel the little drafts coming through them, hear the slightest whistle when the breeze picked up.

B'Elanna knew she'd only get colder--they both would. Very cold.

"How's this for thinking about it, Lieutenant?" she sighed. "We'll go to sleep and I'll even let you keep me warm without gutting you in the morning."

Tom looked at her. She didn't look back, said nothing more. But he didn't need the explanation. He didn't even know if he wanted one at that point.

"Gladly," he replied and moved to join her.

"The hot sun and cold moons dark passed as such, many times. Time, however, brings adjustment. With adjustment is brought a slow, yet assured loss of hope, to be replaced by hopes of another kind. Yet those ones were known well already as among the stubborn..."

"More speed, drask!"

B'Elanna coughed as she hit her hands and knees; a puff of dirt flew up into her face. "Asshole," she hissed.

Tom swooped down and got her onto her feet again. "Don't give them an excuse," he whispered in her ear, his brief gaze upon parting communicating the rest.

She read it well. Pulling herself free as she resumed her pace, she glared back at the guard. "I'm moving--happy now, *sir*?" Stepping back around to Tom's side, they doubled their pace to rejoin the detail lines.

Miztri shook her head with a snicker as they arrived beside her. "You shall earn more Unar gloves than any other, Be'i, with your delicate tongue."

She snorted. "They can go to hell."

"They were not always as such," another Desalian said from behind them. "They once bore pure spirits, committed to learning and community among Irliae."

"I don't give a damn what they were, Bolmra," B'Elanna returned. "We're here *now*."

Beside her, Tom grinned widely. "Did I mention she's been studying to be our ambassador?"

B'Elanna laughed aloud and smacked his arm. "Shut up, Paris."

Miztri continued to chuckle at them. Dalra rolled his eyes--though he did also grin at their strange humor.

Fifty-six suns had passed since their first day there, and the two, once strangers, had quickly gained a reputation for their "passionate spirits," as Sashana'i had decidedly labeled it. Though some still sought to correct them at times, most agreed with their young regent, that the two simply had been born with spirits Unar would not subdue and that they should be accepted as such.

They still bore damage from their injuries: Her thin nose bridge had bent in and a bit askew from a difficult mending; he bore a long, jagged scar along his cheekbone, among other breaks and scrapes. They continued to stand proudly before the guards, however, almost daring Unar to lower themselves again. They let them push--but not enough to let them fall.

Though the Desalians believed they could not follow such ways, the small resistance became interesting to them.

"Station," said the detail officer.

"Gee," Tom droned, "All our own? And I didn't get you anything."

B'Elanna swiftly stepped around the conveyor, the corner of her mouth tucked firmly in and upward. "We'll have to give them something real nice sometime, won't we?"

The guard's eyes narrowed, though, as usual, he said nothing.

They had also returned to the detail with increasing vigor. Gradually acclimating to the heat, they had accepted a set of lightweight day cloaks so they could work free of their heavy short coats and high-necked shirts. With that better ventilation, the two called Toma and Be'i worked as hard and long as their fellow inmates, going so far as to organize the scraps they recycled so that they, with Kepli and Naja, finished their scrap piles more efficiently than any other unit. They did not seem to mind that their piles increased in size as a result.

"Work," said another guard as he completed the transport of that morning's pile.

"You sure about that?" Tom grinned as he moved to his post. "I thought I was up for shore leave."

"Work," the Unar repeated then turned away, breathing hard between clenched teeth, obviously holding back the rest of what he wanted to say.

The pilot and engineer met each other's glances with that.

"Hychar must not like us," B'Elanna sniffed. "I'm hurt."

"I'll be your friend, B'Elanna," Tom returned, giving her a wink before leaning over to help Naja.

B'Elanna rolled her eyes and pulled some rags out of her cloak pockets. Unfolding one with a shake, she wiped her dirty face a bit then began wrapping her hand and wrist. Though the rags made her hands even hotter, they prevented cuts from the sharp metal, a far greater evil there.

Voyager had not come. It had been more than a month past their estimate, and though they'd stopped

expecting it, an unspoken hope lingered. Even so, she saw that as they recovered, Tom was increasingly determined to get through their discouragement with a smirk on his face.

B'Elanna willingly joined him in it. Sarcasm in duet was proving useful for releasing her internal pressure valve a little, preventing her blowing up on any of the other poor souls trapped in that hell. Oddly, it made her understand Paris' attitude when she first knew him on Voyager, with him just out of Auckland. It also made her see her own verbal edginess more clearly. Before, she'd never really thought about it.

They were a survival instinct, those little clips. They hid the fear neither wanted to admit to but knew they shared. At the same time, they knew they didn't have the luxury of accepting that weakness, anyway. Left with nothing else to do, even fight the way she wanted to fight back, B'Elanna quickly found the familiar sardonic strain a comfort. Taunting those hairy, white-faced guards just enough to get their ire up was indeed satisfying, sometimes even entertaining--and did a lot more than fuming at Tom, who'd never really deserved it. Naturally, Tom was glad for the change.

It would have to sustain them until they had some news of Voyager, since there was nothing they could do. Keeping their eyes open had only revealed that there was no escape. The watchfulness of the Unar over them was much easier to see once they knew what to look for.

Meanwhile, time was passing, day after day.

Tom and Naja were separating the metal chunks, which sat in a sloppy pile next to them as B'Elanna and Kepli wrapped their hands. The latter man furrowed his brow as he gave up on lifting one, waving at Tom. "Might you assist us, good ladies," Naja said. "Some pieces remain attached."

"Sure," B'Elanna said, moving around as she tucked the end of her hand rag through the middle and yanked it tight on her palm. She stopped opposite Tom to help him balance the thick, grey sheet. "Try it again," she told him. Naja pulled at the stuck piece again and grunted. Despite his wiry strength, the piece wouldn't budge.

"It shall not give itself to you, it seems," Kepli sighed, also peering under the chunks.

"It is as stubborn as my friends here," he smiled tightly.

"Maybe I should bring the laser over and cut it there?" B'Elanna suggested. "It looks like it's hooked on a corner below it."

"Good idea," Tom replied. "Think it'll reach?"

B'Elanna looked briefly over to the laser unit's permanent mounting and power link. "Maybe. Kepli, let's help them drag it over. I'd like to have some leeway."

They did, managing to pull the chunks a meter or so towards the conveyor. B'Elanna let go and pulled down the laser drill. "Pull it up as I go," she ordered, crouching down beside the sheet. Holding an edge, she deftly sawed through the juncture and nodded.

Tom reached down close to her face and pulled the freed sheets up. "A little help, Naja?"

Together, the two men finally managed to extricate the slab and heft it aside. Watching it settle on the rest of their day's work, Tom was ready to nod away that small victory when he heard the laser drill snap back into its bearings with a *whack*.

B'Elanna had let it go.

When he turned, she was staring blankly at the part that had been stuck.

"What..."

He silenced when he saw it. He felt his heart lurch to a stop.

Kepli and Naja shared a glance then looked at their friends with concern. "Toma? Be'i?" Kepli asked. "Is there trouble?"

B'Elanna shook her head in shock. Tom let out his breath, looked away.

The uncovered sheet was clearly marked in small, square letters: "74656 USS-Voyager."

They were recycling their shuttle.

B'Elanna stepped back. With a couple hard breaths, she flew to the nearest wall, throwing her clenched fists against it and letting out a yell--and then another as she kicked and punched her wall again. "Damnit!" she screamed, coughing up phlegm as she sucked another breath. She spat it hard onto the dirt, remaining bent for a moment, as if she needed to cough more. Instead, she just held the wall, shaking her head again, dragging in gasps for want to break down further. "They bought that here for us," she finally choked. "Waiting for just the right time..."

She stopped, just stopped.

Tom's eyes shifted outside to the court. There were no guards there, surprisingly enough, none even at the barricade. "Wonder why they're not watching the show?" he asked loudly, to acknowledge the Unar's sick sense of humor. "Took enough time to bring it here, why not enjoy it?"

The Unar did like their little games. Once, for a few days, the officers decided to return the same scraps they'd taken apart--each piece restored to its original condition--to see if they'd notice. Tom and B'Elanna had seen it immediately, but remained silent for Kepli's wise advice. Another time, they cut half the power to the laser drill B'Elanna used, making it twice as hard for her to saw the metal. That *did* manage to frustrate her at first--before she realized it wasn't a problem with the drill itself.

That latest one was the best yet.

"Maybe they've installed surveillance," Tom sneered. "They knew they'd get us good this time."

B'Elanna remained pale, continuing to interpret the meaning of the Unar's action. "If they were able to restore the computer," she pointed out, "they'd know who to look for, Tom, our capabilities..."

"Whatever survived the crash, they have it," he concluded grimly.

God knows what they know about us, B'Elanna realized. Or Voyager.

That lousy possibility stuck in her head, she straightened, struggling to get a firm breath. *So, if they knew what they're dealing with--why give them any more?* By the look of him, Tom was about to. He looked like he was preparing to either cry or kill something. Thankfully, he held it back with every bit of nerve he had left.

In a way, she was glad he still felt that frustration--*could* feel it. She was glad she did, too. But they couldn't take it any further than that. The Unar wanted to see what they would do...

Moving over to him, she put her hand on his arm. He tightened at the touch, but then relaxed slightly.

"Let's just do it," she said, almost forcing the words through her throat. Once she said it, however, she committed to it. "They want to hurt us? We'll show them how much they'll get to us. See what they think about that."

Tom stared at her that time. Her expression was fired with what she'd suggested--her eyes and mouth both were firm; even the way her hair stuck out from her hood seemed to denote her determination.

He shook his head. "Just scrap it? B'Elanna--"

"It already *is* scraps," she pressed, "like every other ship that comes through here."

"B'Elanna, it's all we've got left. We might be able to salvage--"

"They know you'll say that," she said, meeting his eyes solidly. She squeezed his arm. "You know that. It's scrap hull, Tom. They probably destroyed the shuttle weeks ago and just thought to send the shell to us. There won't be anything in there. For that matter, I wouldn't be shocked they've contaminated the tritanium just to see if we take a memento. I hate it, too, but we need to get rid of it."

Seeing her sense, Tom caught himself--cursed himself for almost falling for the trick despite his awareness of their tactics. "Should've known better than to hope for more," he relented, looking away.

Hearing his finality, she sighed shakily. Feeling more like hitting that wall again, she instead gave his arm a supportive tug. "There's nothing wrong with hoping a little."

Her words were empty, but she had said them. Catching her eyes again, he saw she understood.

Tom reached up and pressed B'Elanna's hand gently in return, holding her gaze a moment longer before moving back. "Naja," he said dully, "want to help me with this?"

The other man nodded sadly and bent down. "This is part of your craft?"

"Nope," Tom replied, not bothering to lighten the hard edge of his tone as he lifted one side of the hull sheet. "It's the Unar's now."

Trying desperately to ignore that, B'Elanna pulled down the laser as Kepli adjusted the scrap. Staring at the signage, the engineer activated the instrument and sawed through it.

Tom watched as the two women pushed the scrap down the belt and into the recycling unit. Then B'Elanna cut down the other, all business, her mouth pressed tightly shut.

Moving around her, Tom put his hand on the sheet, met her blank stare. Pausing but a moment, he drew a deep breath and shoved it in behind the other.

He closed his eyes when he felt her hand pat his arm again, but offered only a nod in return before going back to the remainder their day's work.

They had a hell of a pile that day. The extra that'd been given was probably a part of the damned

joke.

"Maybe..."

She'd whispered in the darkness, the pitch-black cold of night that she'd somehow, unwillingly gotten used to. She'd gotten used to the blankets, which smelled of both their bodies and an earthy mint. The Uillaran form of soap was a soft stone they rubbed on the cloth when they had their brief water rights and could bathe and rinse their clothes and blankets. She hadn't liked the mineral odor at first, but it was better than what preceded it.

She'd gotten used to sleeping in front of Paris, too, with his arm draped over her, his breath warming the back of her head. His particular odor was quite familiar to her by then, which was rather strange, once she realized it. She'd never been with a man nearly long enough to get to know his scent as well as she did Paris'. She didn't mind it as much as she ever thought she might, though. In a way, it was a comfort.

Thankfully, he was nowhere near as annoying as she'd expected, though he definitely had his moments. Rather, he was familiar, deceptively relaxed in a way that, once she got to know him better, made her relax, too. She'd needed that seeming confidence--not to mention his watchful protection, as the guards liked to target her more often than the other prisoners. But he never stood up for her in a way that suggested she could or would not defend herself, but as just a part of being there.

Frankly, he'd been a damn good friend to her--a better one than she could have wanted. She'd tried to be the same. Though he put on airs that suggested he didn't mind, she could tell he needed it too and deserved as much.

"What?" he asked softly, lying still behind her.

It was as comfortable as it could have been in that place. --At least it was okay when they weren't feeling cross or overtired, and better when they'd been able to bathe, which they recently had. Drying off after sunset didn't always take care of their odor, even if his nose was getting less sensitive to that, too.

Sharing quarters with B'Elanna hadn't been anything like he'd expected, or what she'd almost lived up to in the beginning. In fact, he found her pleasantly warm and a deathly still sleeper. The latter surprised him, considering her Klingon half. He'd expected her to thrash around, steal the covers, growl more or something. Of course, he'd expected to see her angry more often, too. But like him, she'd pulled back into a different shell, frustrated but smart enough to hold back and wait.

The only thing difficult about their sleeping arrangement was ignoring the occasional physical reaction he naturally had to pressing up to her small, well-formed body. Friends or no, he wasn't dead; it was no secret to him that he'd always thought Torres to be attractive--damn nice, actually. However, she was also damn near the most unattainable woman on Voyager and certainly uninterested in anyone, it seemed. Or maybe it was how she'd trained her distance from people, how she'd buried herself in their work.

Even on their work details, there on Uillar, she bore that undefeated efficiency and determination, though she was just cutting up scrap metal...

Like that day, too, before they saw their shuttle.

She felt him take a harder breath.

"Maybe that was their way of saying Voyager's gone," she finally said.

In that darkness, Tom closed his eyes. "It's been two months."

"Yes."

Silence followed, and nothing outside the shack broke it for them.

He let his arm pull in to hug her. "I don't want to think about it, either."

She inhaled, let it go, forcing herself not to cough the last of it out. The dust there had gotten in their lungs, Miztri had told them. It was common--and best to resist the hacking, lest it rupture anything and allow the red dirt any farther into their bloodstreams. Ironically, B'Elanna had been affected more than Tom had, and being unaccustomed to illness, she had to think hard not to cough.

"Do think Voyager's moved on?"

He did not move. "I like to imagine them just looking for us."

"But what do you *think*?" She asked more firmly. She didn't want to hear about his imagination. She had enough of her own to contend with.

"I think they will once Captain Janeway believes we're dead. But we don't know if they've even gotten that far."

"You're still not answering me," she whispered.

"I think you already know what it is, B'Elanna."

"Why don't you tell me, then--just in case I'm wrong?"

His mouth closed, though in his mind he could see it: Janeway with that hard sigh, unwillingly setting their course again. He could see the bridge, Harry, Chakotay, Tuvok, maybe even Kes, or Neelix...He could see them all looking strongly ahead, because they had to. He could hear the crack in Janeway's voice as she gave the command. He could see the starfield distort as warp speed engaged...

He felt B'Elanna's arm shift, could practically feel her expectant stare burning out the back of her head. She was cornering him into admitting it, not even with a challenge. Maybe she needed to hear him say it, if only so she could justify her own feelings.

Why is it so hard? I've been thinking it for weeks now.

But the words stuck in his throat. Even with their shuttle's diced hull melting in the refinery nearby, he didn't want to admit it. Not yet.

"Goodnight, B'Elanna," he whispered thickly.

She didn't move; she felt a muscle in his arm jump. He sighed out his breath behind her.

"Goodnight," she answered, closing her eyes.

"A'aght," Sashana'i said, holding up her utensil.

B'Elanna glanced up from her breakfast to the other woman. "A'aght. --Spoon."

Aratra grinned. "Spon? Among Desal, it is a fuel--ferranide, a commodity, in fact."

"Well, it's close," Tom quipped quietly, leaning on an arm as he picked at his own morsels. The lack of taste made it edible, but definitely not enjoyable. He almost wished it tasted bad.

Sashana'i was thinking quickly, waving her tattooed hand distractedly in the air. Then, she pointed between herself and B'Elanna--"Li"--and then between Aratra and Tom--"La."

B'Elanna repeated the gesture with her spoon--her a'aght--as a pointer. "Li...La...Woman and man--or female and male? The second is more technical."

"Ka," said the other woman with a small bow and a touch to her temple. "Woeh-mah-n, mayh-n." When she rose again, her crooked smile showed her small teeth.

B'Elanna felt her grin widen. She couldn't help it. Sashana'i was contagious when she was pleased. Strange as it was on Uillar to feel that particular emotion, it felt good all the same.

"Detail!" came a booming echo from the barricade far down the row, and the Desalians all slowly moved to their feet.

B'Elanna straightened at the sound, but only her eyes moved towards it.

Tom covered his bowl and set it aside with some others' leftovers. "There goes breakfast," he said and reached down for B'Elanna's hand. "Come on. Might as well see what else they've got for us today."

She snorted and grabbed his wrist. "I can't wait."

Once on their feet, they swung on their cloaks and pulled the hoods far over their heads before leaving the overhang. They'd already been badly exposed and were careful not to repeat the experience. Tom doubled back for their water pouch, making sure it was full before joining B'Elanna again. He'd forgotten that one day, too, and never did again.

As usual, the walk in the morning sun was orderly and quiet, save the chatting between some of the people as they finished their conversations from breakfast. Tom and B'Elanna, side by side, followed Aratra and Sashana'i and fell into a natural pace beside Dalra and Miztri.

They turned the corner around the end of the shanty rows to cross the center court for the refinery. Once there, Dalra and Miztri would descend into the plant. Sashana'i and Aratra would go straight into processing. Tom and B'Elanna split off last for the ground level preparation isles, where they would meet Kepli and Naja.

As they neared the refinery, they saw Commander Hychar in their path.

He stood, ostentatiously watching them, relaxed but observant and all but oblivious to the others. His black hair hanging down around his pale white face, his silver-grey stare did not deviate from the objects of his study.

Others moved around him as though he were a stone in the stream.

A low growl rumbled in B'Elanna's throat.

Feeling his pulse jump, Tom unconsciously put his hand on B'Elanna's back--letting her know he was there as much as he needed to feel her there.

Hychar's brow rose slightly at the move.

Tom's fingers, on B'Elanna's robe, unconsciously clenched.

They moved slightly to the left to go around him. Tom met the commander's stare with a narrow frown, holding back his tongue and his body, telling himself not to give them more than they had.

He hated every second of it, imagined a thousand other things he'd rather do, as they paced slowly past...

Suddenly, B'Elanna sucked up a thick breath, looked up and spit in Hychar's face.

"Shit," Tom hissed. A moment later, he caught her in both his arms when she cried out and flew forward. She grabbed his arms, bracing herself and scrambling for her footing, determined not to fall. When she looked up again, Tom saw that Hychar had efficiently re-broken her nose.

"It was worth it," she choked, reaching up to catch the gush of blood.

Tom glared up at Hychar, who was quickly wiping away the alien woman's phlegm from his pasty skin. "Hope you feel important now, you asshole," he shot. "I hope her spit sinks into your 'poisoned' soul and *rots* it!"

Around them, the Desalians still moved, albeit more slowly. A couple drew a quick breath at the curse.

The commander literally flushed: His jowls turned orange as his eyes twitched. Tom's lips pulled into a thin smile for that.

"Maghet," Hychar said unevenly, trying in vain to remain composed. The ugly woman's bile on him was indeed upsetting. And the man's omen...

Miztri slowed more and almost turned to go back to them, but Dalra begged her to move, invoking Toma and Be'i's strong spirits. Reluctantly, she touched her temple and went with him, looking back all the while.

Hychar began to shake visibly. The rituals he would have to undergo to unburden their disgrace from him would take weeks, and to have the disgrace put upon him in front of his own officers, who would no doubt report it, as they should...

He started quickly to the gates, calling behind him, "Discipline them."

Maghet appeared almost instantly, pushing through the Desalians and moving up upon the two...

But before he could touch them, Sashana'i had stepped between the alien companions and the man.

"Gye," she stated. "Ye a'i sew-ehbek."

Aratra had returned, too, and stood a couple of meters away as his bondmate pressed the guard further. Glancing at him, Tom saw a look of pure despise on his friend's face, a look he'd never seen on a Desalian, though it was completely understandable. Nevertheless, Aratra did nothing.

Hychar had not yet gotten out of the court, but Sashana'i would not relent with the Unar. "I'a Unah bwut ak iwitv-he ya'a."

Her robed arms spread wide before her friends, her words had effectively stopped the large Unar man, her upright stare kept him there.

Finally, Maghet looked at Aratra. "Take them to detail, drask."

Sashana'i straightened, letting her breath out in relief, then drawing another. Turning, she gave a single nod to her bondmate, meeting his eyes with an intensity that made Aratra draw a deep breath of his own and finally nod back.

He moved forward and collected Tom and B'Elanna. "Say nothing," he whispered and led them back into the lines, urging them on--not looking back.

But B'Elanna did look back as she held her nose; she saw Sashana'i turn and move toward the shanties with Maghet. "Damn," she whispered and looked at the young man by her. "Aratra, I'm sorry," she coughed, pulling out her rags to stop the bleeding. "I didn't mean to get her--"

"By her spirit's guidance she is borne," Aratra cut in with a conclusive sigh, "and her spirit sees yours as bearing importance." Trying at a grin, he glanced at them. "Yet trouble does find you appealing. You may claim more blood on your cloak than stitches."

Tom also looked back. Sashana'i had almost disappeared in the wake of the other Desalians. "Where are they going?" he asked.

"Away to their arrangements." He pulled some cloths from his pocket and handed them to Tom, who still supported B'Elanna around the waist. "My spirit's partner bears strength like your own: It shall not be destroyed by base Unar. Bear no regret for your actions."

"This is my fault, though," B'Elanna said, accepting one of the cloths from Tom and wiping her face hastily. "If she--"

She was cut off by Aratra's long, dry fingers upon her mouth. His hazel eyes lit with his inward smile. "Bear no regret, Be'i. Sashana'i has wished the same act upon Unar for all her twenty-four ralkle--as have I." He shrugged. "It is not the way to wish such things, yet it is truth. Take yourselves with wellness."

With that, he moved quickly away.

"...and when my tola returned to me, he queried of my crying. From my piles, I wept. Tola, I have

soaked all these in the wrong bath,' I told him. 'The supervisor shall take them all from me now.' Yet Tola laughed--and there was some displeasure in me for it. Yet he said to me she should take my hair, too." Gresbri giggled, placing her marked hand on her head. "In the fury of my attempted self-correction, dye strips dropped themselves also upon my hair, striping it like a brroz cat!"

An echo of laughter poured from Dalra's overhang as Tom and B'Elanna entered with their evening meal. Hearing Gresbri's last lines, they both grinned, too. The woman loved to speak of her childhood mischief.

Sashana'i wasn't there, B'Elanna noticed as she and Tom found their usual places. Aratra was also gone.

"A full ralkle it took to grow away the evidence!" Gresbri laughed and continued with her meal.

"The supervisor--what did she say?" Gihetra asked as he moved to discard his bowl.

Gresbri laughed again. "I was found reassignment to the sorting room somewhat less troublesome."

In a flash, B'Elanna wondered if Sashana'i was hurt and her bondmate was helping her. She had not seen the woman since she left with Maghet.

The usual patrons of Dalra and Miztri's open space seemed unbothered by the troublesome aliens when they came in with their food bowls. They laughed with Gresbri, offered their usual bows of hello and found comfortable places on the folded blankets without a hint of negativity

B'Elanna could only glance at their greetings, puffy, purpled nose, eyes and all. She'd really wanted to fight back somehow--and she knew Tom probably would've at least said something if he'd been as close--but as satisfying as it had been to watch Hychar shrink back into the barricade as he had, she was regretting it more as the evening grew and she silently worried about their friend.

Though she barely understood a word Sashana'i said, they spent a good deal of time together and had formed a funny friendship, one based on perceived understanding, gestures, expressions and Atatra's amused translations. The young woman still came most mornings to help B'Elanna up and walk with her to their first meal while the men got their food. She remained close to them at those meals and on their walks to and from detail. Most recently, with Aratra and Miztri's help, she had been teaching B'Elanna and Tom the basics of Desalian language--and seemed curious about theirs, too, even if she couldn't pronounce anything which required moving the front half of her tongue.

Thinking about how that must have happened made B'Elanna angrier still at the Unar.

But again, none of the Desalians under Dalra's overhang seemed to look as concerned as she felt that night. As they ate and chatted, they turned no glances her way and whispered nothing on the sly.

She still felt self-conscious, felt like she deserved their stares--as if she wasn't enough of a sight.

When Dalra entered with his meal, she looked up at him, wanting to ask--asked with her eyes first. He indeed showed her the displeasure she had expected. Frowning, the man sighed and moved to his usual seat, with barely a nod of welcome. Miztri, catching her bondmate's poor manners and B'Elanna's unanswered question, however, offered a small smile and a nod.

B'Elanna blinked her thanks, glad despite her guilt that Miztri was kind enough to tell her what she needed to know.

"She's probably just off with Aratra," Tom said hopefully, having seen the relay of silent messages as he brought their food and took his seat by her. "They haven't hurt her yet that we know of."

"They're the same people who made her mute," B'Elanna said quietly. "I don't like it, Tom. Remind me next time just to swallow, okay?"

He grinned. "Personally, I think you bugged Hychar today more than anything else you could have done. You didn't see how he reacted. You *polluted* him."

B'Elanna's lips turned up, realizing the truth in that. "I was wondering why you said what you did. You shouldn't have. You almost got the same as I did--again."

Tom shrugged. "We're in this together, Lieutenant."

She looked up at him. "Thanks."

"Anytime."

"I just hope Sashana'i is back in the camp by now. It's late."

"Me too. But we'd have heard something by now if anything had happened, right?"

She nodded. "Yes, you're right."

He patted her arm. "I know. I've been wondering, too."

"We have borne a tale," Dalra suddenly started, "yet it should be thought another can be told."

Studiously avoiding Tom and B'Elanna's direction, he looked out among his people. He did not wish to address the two he had taken into his company of late--not yet. Or at least not until he and Miztri had settled the division of their own opinions in that matter.

"I would speak of what is known to me," he began in his rich tenor, "what was taught in our scholarship of the beginnings as taught in the ancient way. I am no word painter, yet I shall humbly attempt to practice the art a short time, as once I did for my children."

Attention turned to him at the promise of more talk that night and the older man's mouth curved pleasantly.

"To my blessed young, I spoke of this story," Dalra began quietly, "as it was to me by my nali, Prahchi..."

"There was in past Desal--as was said by stories old--a man in youth called Bihla, who stood without companionship of the plain of Ksorllad. Borne of the stars, whose power collided and made life called spirit, he knew none but consciousness until the stream of his life-force crossed that which blocked his unguided path.

"When awareness touched him, he found himself in form, in physical life, and he discovered also the living place where his life would need remain. For this, he reveled in his consciousness. Much was there to see and to experience.

"Yet his eyes, like the deep sun, fell over the empty place, and so he cried for the hunger of his given

home. He wished other energies collide and be brought forth as life. He wished so that he may share it and adore it as all things of spirit.

"And so he prayed to all stars that the land might also find life, as he had done. In suns that passed, his spirit was answered, growths appearing upon the land, spreading and diversifying with each passing light. He loved this life dearly and tended it well. In return, he was enriched. For this gift of the stars, Bihla felt joy and sought to know all of its blessings. He set himself across the land of his answered prayers, thankful for each new form he saw.

"In a sunrise, his paces brought him to a strange land, teal and cool and rolling in the wind, rushing forward and back upon the land of his blessing. Yet Bihla found himself uncertain of this place, doubting it was life of his wishing. His world was of stalks and sprigs rising from the land, warm carpets of greens and reds. This foreign land before ran vast and drew in what rested upon it.

"Yet now he saw on that land another life, more like his own than any other he had discovered, reclined along the waterside, on the threshold of the strange plain.

"To her, he spoke: 'Why lie you there without intent? Bear you life?'

"As wise answer, she said: 'Here I found myself born at Mivrle, and as Sa'alli, I life is borne through me.'

"What is this land?' Bihla then asked.

"It is water, the life you implant upon the land is fed by it; in turn, it is enriched. As it sustains and burrows your growth, you may partake of it.' And she offered to him the water as her gift.

"Bihla came forward and tasted the water Sa'alli held to him. His throat was pleased, and clarity came to his senses, so he offered to her the food of his land. She took it with gratitude and her body grew with nourishment.

"Let us share our lands in life,' said Sa'alli and marked herself upon him--a press of her fingertips beyond his eyes. Bihla made the same indent, drawing the stalks of the land through the plain of her temples. Then, on the threshold of both lands they were joined, his outward life to her vast and liquid depths.

"In their union, there was joy, and so they wove their life-forces together, their spirits as one, and then they marked each other with the assuredness of their union, which sprang from giving hands. From his wished seed and her borne water came children of both plains of life, and marked were they as blessed of both lands and of all things living.

"In celebration, wished they for greater things for their children, for the mountains at Faha'ar, for the streams passing over them, for the blessed rains which wet the land and brought it richness, for the flora and groves and the balance in the desert. All things of Desalia were meant for their wishing of these blessings.

"Desal became soon the wish of many stars, who shed upon the lands their light and spirit, bringing lives in abundance to that place. To the waters came fishes, eels and precious crustaceans; to the land were creatures of fur and feather, scale and skin. All forms of spirit found life to bear there and made Sa'alli and Bihla's wishes richer still.

"As this beginning time came to be of the past, the lives of their giving and bearing and gift grew and

prospered. Both lands were taken as theirs for caring and both were beloved, for they were yet one, from that which came from one.

"Yet in this growing time, Bihla and Sa'alli found by nature's fate their lives upon that land to be closing, their return to the stars eminent. So they prayed for continuance there on Desalia, so to bear always the joy and blessings of life which they had created. They did not wish to sacrifice the gift they had been given; they wished their bodily existence to be as their native eternity.

"Yet no gift but fire struck down to answer their selfish misunderstanding--and from the flames grew one called Prihar, who swore to taunt and tempt the children of Bihla and Sa'alli. In fear, their wishes were retracted, yet Prihar had slipped itself into the life-well there, ever lurking to scald the children with its selfishness and greed.

"Some children it did consume, and into the abyss of Prihar's domain they fell, burning with the darkness of regret and bitter memory. Yet others continued to follow Bihla and Sa'alli, of love and life, dedicated to the true spirits that bore them and the path of their true fate, though aware always of the fire which may spring around them in any instance, and that they themselves may inspire it.

"Bihla and Sa'alli bore sorrow for their fault and yet they moved unto their spirits with their last wish in selfishness--that they may collect there with them as many of their children again in their love of them and protect them as best they could, purer and unblemished in the realm of the stars. And upon their arrival at Tsa'aita, the children would be embraced in love and welcome.

"In time yet to be, the children would embrace their own as well, freed from the threat of Prihar, exalted in their having shared Bihla's and Sa'ailli's lands and building upon the memory of the blessing, which is eternal.

"For this, we yet hope to find our spirits there, someday. Zha hevrra."

B'Elanna blinked as Dalra's invocation died away and the others thanked him for the tale. She realized belatedly that during his children's story, she'd nibbled up her entire meal. His smooth, kindly voice had kept her attention the entire time.

"Done already?" Tom asked, taking the bowl for her. "I'll get you some...water--though I think that's your place, right?"

She grinned and almost flipped him a properly smart response, but then she noticed Sashana'i and Aratra at the edge of the overhang, about to make their way to their usual place. Sashana'i was wearing her warmer cloak; even in the firelight, B'Elanna could see her face was pale, her eyes tired, and that Aratra remained close to her. Still, she was pleasant, greeting Tom when he returned.

When the lady spotted her, B'Elanna gave her a quick grin and almost turned away. Sashana'i was already moving towards her, however, and knelt to take her hands.

"Zha-a hye-awa'i," she said, not even blinking at her friend's beaten facade. "Me-w-hasib e'ivas."

Aratra plunked himself down beside his bondmate. "She has said all is well with her and you must not be concerned."

"I still got us into it," B'Elanna told her.

Tom reclaimed his seat, nodding. "And I wasn't much help," he said. "I hope you didn't go through too

much trouble again. We'd feel worse about it if you did."

"Gye. Ye'i a-wah."

"No," Aratra translated, "Sashana'i insists it is her given duty, her responsibility."

"And responsible again because of me," B'Elanna pressed, narrowing her stare when Sashana'i continued to wave it away. "Look, can't you just let me be sorry and feel bad for making you feel the *need* to risk yourself? Dalra's pissed at me and Miztri's playing middleman and you, by the way, look awful, though I probably have no right to talk. I'm sorry that had to happen."

Sashana'i looked as though a thousand other words hid behind her quizzical grin, words she simply chose not to express rather than couldn't articulate. Instead, she leaned forward to kiss B'Elanna's temple. "E'iag o'en ah-t'ka Sa'alli v-hwew Bih-wa."

At that, Aratra laughed. "Miva ka'!"

"What?" B'Elanna asked, surprised by the kiss.

Aratra was still chuckling. "She bears great truth, I would believe: You and Toma are determined to assume the guilt of eternity for what is but natural--as Sa'alli and Bihla did. I should think this accepts their lesson too well."

B'Elanna shared a look with Tom then turned her face back towards the fire. "I don't think we're taking it *that* far," she said. "Regardless, I'm not going to get in their way--at least for a while if I can help it."

Sashana'i looked a little disappointed to hear it, but shrugged to dig into her robe pocket instead of argue. "Be'i i'a-k."

The other woman's hand curled into hers, and then pressed her fingers closed. Staring down, B'Elanna sighed to see the small, disposable hypospray in her palm. She almost spoke, but Sashana'i only held her hand to any response, her eyes shining with her lopsided smile.

B'Elanna said it anyway: "Thank you."

Miztri had injected the third of B'Elanna's treatments carefully into her shoulder and covered her again, but even the tiredness the medicines caused didn't stop B'Elanna from sitting right back up when she heard Tom mention he was going to pay Sashana'i and Aratra a visit. They had been absent from the work detail that day and had retired early the evening before, so B'Elanna was curious to see them, too. Calling out to Tom, she grabbed her cloak and boots, ignoring Miztri's wishes for the mean time.

"After everything she's done for me, I'd like to know if she's all right. Okay?"

Miztri finally sighed and began to clean up her work. "Cover your head, Child. The sun yet looms."

"Yes--mother," B'Elanna returned, closing the flap of her second boot. She then pulled her hood over her forehead and pushed herself to her feet.

"Only bear awareness..." Miztri started, but shook her head of the rest of it, offering her a small smile. "Know your proper feelings, Be'i, yet live with acceptance."

B'Elanna furrowed her brow at the odd statement, but decided to ask later.

Glad to see the older woman had relented, Tom gave Miztri a nod and took B'Elanna around the waist to help her.

She snorted at his familiar move. "Afraid I'll lose my balance again, Paris?" Then again, a hard fall wouldn't surprise her, considering her luck in that place.

"Nah, just taking advantage of a good thing while I've got it," he returned and escorted her around a row on the uneven dirt.

"Good answer," she smiled, moving with him around the shacks.

For a reason she could blame only on her engineer's mind, she still thought about how much better their scant housing would be with just a few supplies and a couple tools. Combining the spaces, sealing the joints and arranging the shacks in rings rather than sectioned rows--not to mention putting simple heating units in each of the shacks... It all could be easily built if they could smuggle more parts than scrap metal from the refinery...

Of course, she knew that the camp was made for work and sleep and not much else. The crooked little shacks would stay in their haphazard layout with well-trodden dirt trenches for pathways in between, and it would always be cold at night within those all but useless shelters.

And those shelters would always be too small, like Aratra and Sashana'i's, which B'Elanna immediately ducked to enter once they got to it. But she stopped as soon as she spotted the scene inside. Tom, still near her, froze too.

Sashana'i was huddled over Aratra's knees. Her small, tan fist was reaching around him, clutching his loose shirt. She was in a pause, shaking miserably--only suddenly to buckle and retch again. Aratra held her firmly, whispering soothing words, holding her long brown hair behind her. Crying out in either pain or with a curse, Sashana'i retched without end.

"This is the effect of your action," came Dalra's low voice behind him. B'Elanna turned to find the man's sad eyes aimed down at her. "You act and thus does Sashana'i--and this is what she is brought to, expelling the Unar filth she takes in herself to procure and abate."

B'Elanna felt her blood drain from her bruised face as she took in everything that meant.

Bargaining... B'Elanna suddenly wondered why it shocked her. Nobody there had anything to trade and even she'd known of many cases where women... But she hadn't thought--hadn't wanted to think that the young woman had gone that far for two strangers with even less to offer. A puff of breath escaped B'Elanna's lungs as her stare darted to the dirt. "Oh my God."

"There is nothing for you here," Dalra concluded regretfully then moved to pass her.

Her attention snapped back up, B'Elanna grabbed his arm. "No. Let me help."

"You bring only conflict. Your influence shall not confound her spirit further than it has since your arrival here."

"Wait a minute, Dalra," Tom said. "We didn't know what was going on here, and we haven't started most of the trouble we've gotten in."

"Your fate procures exceeding amounts, regardless of what consideration you have learned."

"Then let me make up for that!" she insisted. "I don't know how guilty I'm supposed to be for this, but she's my friend and I want to help her."

"You would assist by containing yourselves now," Dalra told her.

"B'Elanna's right," Tom said. "At least let us do what we can while she's suffering."

"Gye, To--"

B'Elanna didn't let go of him. "Look, Dalra--"

"Be'i, gye'i ak! No!" Dalra cried out in exasperation. "You and Toma have been brought to this place and dissent had infected us ever after! Others who would practice your rebelliousness! You spread seeds we know not how to tend! Such ways have caused too many to suffer without need--I have seen and felt these things! Desal lies in the condition you curse for the same ignorance. It cannot be permitted here, for all we must survive! Not again!"

"Dahwa--gye'av skov." Within the shack, they all turned to see Sashana'i staring back up at them. Lying on her side, bloated and pale, she pleaded with her stare, and then, "Hamu w-ehak Be'i-Toma i'o sa'am. Dahwa...gye'ogapah, ye'i-o ahw-ahkee."

Dalra drew a firm breath. "I cannot watch you suffer, Sashana'i. Choose it as you may, your place and blood would seal your greater importance. Lest Desal lose so much more, our remaining history, our people's legacy, you must survive. You bear awareness of ages precious to us, both great and cautionary. So few of your kind remain."

B'Elanna sighed and looked at the other man there. "Aratra, please let me help. I didn't mean for any of this to happen, but I'm sorry it did. I..." She turned up her dirt-stained hands then let them fall as she looked away.

She felt Tom's hand on her arm and she let her posture fall. When her head came up, their eyes locked. She nodded. That sad awareness of his was a look she'd come to know too well lately.

"Be'i ka'e."

B'Elanna turned back to see that Aratra had risen from the blanketed floor to dispose of a covered bowl. Turning the bowl over on the dirt, he faced the three, met their eyes in turn, held B'Elanna's a moment longer. An odd determination settled on his face as he gestured with his chin to the interior.

"Be'i, take yourself to my bondmate to comfort her. Ka, take yourself. It is wished."

Relieved, B'Elanna moved to the doors and opened her mouth to thank him.

"You would have what brought your bondmate's disgrace comfort her?" Dalra demanded before she could speak. "I would contest it!"

"You should find little peace in the rebuttal I would offer in the same forum," Aratra responded. "I bear

fairness in my way, my elder, yet you should not claim domain over *my* house, my place and my bondmate. --I would have you know *your* place more respectfully."

Tom shifted, looked back at B'Elanna's equal surprise. Suddenly, the debate had become a sort that certainly hadn't cropped up in any of their quiet evening meals.

"Be'i ke'aws i'ab," Sashana'i whispered from inside.

Interested as she was in Aratra's proud stance at his door, B'Elanna finally passed him and knelt into the blankets by her friend. Pulling her hood away, she had to swallow against the stench that greeted her. The small space's odor--though Aratra had removed the cause--reeked badly enough that it assailed her senses despite her swollen nasal passages.

Still, she did not hesitate to take Sashana'i into her arms and met her bleary stare. "You've had to do this?" she asked her. B'Elanna shook her head as she stroked her friend's hair. "How could you let those monsters even look at you, Sashana'i? It was incredibly brave, but you didn't have to do that for me."

Sashana'i gestured with a trembling hand to herself and shrugged. "Desal e'i ye'i asawit," she said and touched her temple markings with her knuckles. "I'a wawis-pe fassu ye'o kah-sa."

B'Elanna pieced together enough small words to guess her meaning, but didn't want to believe it. "You put yourself in that situation because you're the regent? To be responsible for your people?"

In response, Sashana'i only leaned down onto B'Elanna's knees, embracing her there, closing her eyes against her tears. "Ye'i pe-ha'at," she whispered.

"And us, too." B'Elanna swallowed the lump in her throat and stroked the other woman's back, willing down her anger about what the Unar had demanded from her friend. To make it worse, Aratra had likewise accepted the necessity of her self-inflicted duty. "Sashana'i, I am so sorry."

"Your curse on our friends has always been for their rebelliousness," Aratra told Dalra from the doors, seemingly oblivious to the others who had gathered at the unusual sounds of contest there. "For the loss of your own children, you have grown too cautious, and too stringent in what you see as Desal's true way. Yet you rebel as well, my friend--you rebel against me, my house and against the better wishes of Sashana'i, the last of the Allanois, who not even a scholar bears more wisdom of the true Desalian spirit than you.

"For our protection and for the hole you wished to fill, we were claimed by you--and yet, this is all. Sashana'i, filled with our pasts, bears a blessing of right action not all have survived. Yet it would be hers to risk at her discretion. And I--in spite of what you name disgrace--have understood, as her bondmate and co-regent, likewise bearer of the Allanois legacy, her need to follow our ancestors' wisdom with *true* humility. She has given *everything* of her body's life but life and spirit itself for Desal!"

Tom raised his brows, glanced in the shack at B'Elanna's response. The other Desalians watching seemed intent on the public pronouncements. None interfered--and Tom wasn't about to, either, seeing how Aratra had risen up proudly and how Dalra immediately backpedaled.

"Ka, you were welcomed within my walls," Dalra said. "As an elder here, I bore the right to claim her and you and share my knowledge. There was no ambition but that."

"True--yet not to claim her spirit, which burns with truth and progress, not with the preaching which

preserves your life in mere waiting--and not to claim *my* house, given by her to me when I was accepted by the spirits as her bondmate."

Aratra moved completely from his shack and into the afternoon sun. Not tall by any means, he seemed to tower over Dalra just then. "And let us again speak on your rights in claiming. As our friend, I love you and thank the blessed spirits for all your goodness, and that you have protected us. You have borne great responsibility for us all. Your right was but given in kindness by my bondmate, however, not through declaration. This we did to fill your loss and Miztri's."

"Yet my house was given for her," Dalra told him, "and you, child orphans but intended, without a living house. As one who bonded you, I have glimpsed your memory, felt your spirits."

"You have glimpsed," Aratra allowed. "Sashana'i names herself daughter to Lrrili and Sa'osha, granddaughter to Aneschi and Dulla and bearer of the Allanois, not only containing our golden past, but also the last voices of our sorrow-taught Regency, given in full to her upon Dulla's passing."

"This is truth, good man."

"Then think you there is no wisdom in what he gave her that you, descended from river vendors and scholars none before you--would know better of her decisions? What we carry was seen, yet not retained, by you and Miztri, as is the way in the bonding. Yet you behave as though you may direct her way. Sashana'i has shown patience with you, indeed.

"Now beneath this sun you counter *my* place, though as her bondmate, I share her spirit in full? While not countering the claims Unar have placed on *all* Desal, which they would dispose of as it pleases them? You bear the fight within you, Dalra of Maha'aje, yet your dispute lies with the wrong people."

Dalra did not speak at first, both properly humiliated at Aratra's claim of position and understanding that the young man was correct. He had indeed stepped beyond his place--and beyond humble generosity.

He still shook his head. "I have sought the safety of our people," he sighed, and then motioned to Tom. "These two...they have stirred unexpected feelings in me. They have *inspired* the dissent in me through their ways and have thrown Sashana'i into perpetual distress. I am greatly troubled for this, for their inability to follow. Their effort is known, yet more often seen is their failure. I wish their strife not to follow a path I have seen too well. The fate of my eldest children could not be changed; I now must choose prudently in my house for my spirit's peace."

"Your bondmate finds little agreement in your decisions," Aratra pointed out.

"This has been an ache I shall not easily mend," Dalra agreed.

"Then I shall mend it for you," Aratra told him, looking out at their witnesses as he traced his markings with his dirty fingers. "Zahi'ibrrle! Your claim is dissolved, Dalra of Maha'aje; Sashana'i and I are no longer your burden. Your bondmate may decide which guests she takes, as shall you from this sun."

Dalra bowed to him with a sigh. "It must be accepted," he said. "Yet the others? I may not maintain them." He looked at Tom, still watching wide-eyed from the side. "Toma, your spirit and Be'i's are good; our care for you is truth. Yet I may not claim you. You bring great unrest to my being, which is not reconciled with time. It is a greater sin than any I have committed, yet it is a truth I must accept."

"Then I shall claim them to my house," Aratra rejoined. "You need not trouble your nature further." Looking at Tom then back inside to B'Elanna, he gave them a grin. "From this sun forward, should you be asked, you shall be known as members of my house and family--the Allanois."

Tom stood speechless. Aratra had not only expertly pulled rank on Dalra while putting the elder man in his place--which Dalra accepted with a compliance that was just as surprising--but had, without even thinking it was anyone's decision but his, swiftly adopted him and B'Elanna.

Registering that, Tom grimaced and said, "Uh, thanks Aratra. But were we 'claimed' before?"

Aratra chuckled. "Informally. Dalra cannot bear such strong sprits in his gentle house, however. This is not dislike, yet a result of difference, Dalra ka?"

Dalra breathed through his shame, bowed to Tom. "It is suitable to you both. I shall continue my prayers for your peace, ever able to be attained, I would believe."

Still taken aback and a little confused, Tom looked between the two men, finally managed, "Thanks, Dalra."

Finally giving the other Desalian onlookers his full attention, Aratra pulled back his hood to show his face. "Zha hevrra," he intoned for them all. "This day I take those called Be'i and Toma into the Allanois and Shi'achku lines and rightfully call them Allanois by name. Let no life or spirit mistake my lawful claim."

"Zhra'o tsachill," came the small crowd's response.

Within the walls of Aratra's rickety house, the young matriarch, still lying in B'Elanna's lap, drew her arms around her friend and embraced her again. "Z-swa'i ka," she whispered.

It pleases, B'Elanna translated, feeling a pull in her chest. A common phrase among that population, it was even more meaningful coming from their friend. In turn, Sashana'i could not know how familiar--and how important--Aratra's act was to her, surprised as she was by it.

Bending forward despite the rush of blood to her wounded face, B'Elanna returned the embrace. "Ye zal," she whispered, hoping the grammar was correct.

She had a feeling Sashana'i would understand either way.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but did we have a choice in the first place?" Tom asked as he swabbed balm around B'Elanna nose.

"I don't remember being asked," B'Elanna grinned. Clearing her throat, her chest rumbled. She coughed, making him pull his fingers away momentarily. She nodded, and so he continued. "I guess Sashana'i already talked to Aratra about it. But you have to admit, Tom, it's a big honor they've paid us."

"I picked up that much. I just wonder why."

B'Elanna shrugged. "Well, they have been pretty good friends and protective of us. Maybe that's just

their way, since we're outsiders. They put a lot of importance on belonging to a family, and since we don't have that here, they must assume it's necessary. So Dalra tried us out, but he couldn't handle us."

"Sounds all too familiar," Tom grinned wistfully.

"Tell me about it."

"Both of us, I'd think," he replied, squinting as he moved the swab nearer to her eye, "trying things out and not handling it as well as we wanted to."

She blinked, both for his statement and for the proximity of the cloth. He'd nailed into her words probably better than he intended. "Dalra was nice about it though," she hedged. "I guess we can't blame him. We are pretty different."

He responded with a slow, single nod, continuing his work with a gentle touch. B'Elanna tried to be tough--*was* tough much of the time. But he also knew, even before they landed on Uillar, that she could be just as sensitive. She looked like she should have been that night. Her skin was blotched and sallow and her eyes had become so red that they had fogged over the dark brown of her iris.

She watched his face as he dabbed at the scabs on her nose. One of his hands was braced against the side of her head, both holding her still and securing his own balance. He was so careful she sometimes barely felt the treatment.

Finishing, he laid the usual netting over her nose to keep the dirt out. "Okay?"

She nodded.

He nodded back and turned to put the balm and the satchel away.

"What about you?" she asked him, scooting back into the corner and pulling the blanket over herself. She didn't want to sleep just yet, but still felt her mind turning with their unusually eventful day. "How are you doing?"

His lips turned up briefly. "Hell if I know," he said with a breath of a laugh, making himself busy in the wall pouch.

She watched him there, nervously trying to do something when they both knew there was nothing more to take care of. He did that sometimes, occupied himself uselessly while on an evasion course. With no jokes to make or place to go, his attempts were pitifully transparent. She knew she was guilty of the same. She threw herself into their daily and despised work most days just so she could be exhausted later, and thus make it seem as though she didn't have the energy to talk. Even in her work on Voyager, she'd often buried herself for about the same reasons. Her mind spun with desire and frustration, either way--more so there. So much more so there...

"Tom," she said softly.

"Yeah." He'd only acknowledged hearing her, but she didn't prod him again, just stared until he turned. Tom finally gave up the pouch and leaned against the wall. "I just don't know what to do anymore," he said. "We've survived this long, but how long are we going to keep living like this?"

"I don't know," she answered with a sigh.

Again, Tom half laughed and shook his head. "If we weren't so damned busy trying to stay alive, I'd have gotten really bored with this." She grinned at that, but he continued, "Day after day, just waiting for a sect war? The only break in the routine is hitting the dirt and Sashana'i selling herself for medicine. No wonder Dalra was pissed off at us. I hate myself for it, too."

"He might have told us what was going on, though," she pointed out, "instead of being so damned wise and paternal."

"Yeah." Tom sighed heavily, leaning his head back. The glowglobe's cutwork casing threw little patterns on the ceiling, patterns he'd stared at so many nights; he often fell to sleep still seeing them behind his eyes. "So, now we can't act or speak out *at all* without thinking about the consequences... You said it a while ago and you were right. We can't survive like this and stay sane. I frankly don't know how Dalra's done it this long--how *any* of them have."

She was very still. "I know."

Tom grinned humorlessly. "What I wouldn't do to get out of here and be on Voyager again."

"To be *anywhere* again," she joined with an equally mirthless laugh.

"I really hate this place, B'Elanna," he muttered in a thick throat. "Really...hate it. I hate Hychar, Maghet--appropriate name. I hate the Desalians' situation and their goddamned passivity that makes me want to scream sometimes. --Of course, I can't even do that without getting a lecture of how useless it'll be. Problem is, Dalra's right about that much. Hell, I even hate Janeway for leaving us here, for whatever reason they couldn't get us. I'm sure it wasn't her choice, but..." He cut off there, didn't bother to finish.

"Maybe they were convinced we were dead," B'Elanna suggested emptily, not having a word to disagree with in the rest of his frustrated lament. She didn't even know if it was a relief or painful to finally hear him admitting Voyager wasn't coming for them. "Maybe they did try to get us but Hychar or one of his people convinced them otherwise. God knows they had our shuttle scraps to prove it. And we still don't know anything about the capabilities of the barricade."

"Maybe they couldn't get through the field--or the Kazon found them and they had to leave."

"Maybe the Unar attacked when they did come through and..." She cut off, obviously not wanting to think the rest.

Nor did Tom fill it in. "At this point, I just hope Miztri was right in the beginning about Bendera and Nicoletti."

"I do too," B'Elanna said, turning her eyes down a moment in thought--and some measure of guilt for not having thought about them in a while. Their lives there had been so immediate, the routine indeed numbing enough, that she simply didn't think about anything but getting by.

"I miss it," he told her. "Every damn day, I miss...all of it. I even miss you sometimes."

"Me?"

He shrugged, peering at her askance. "Do you know what you look like?" he asked her. "You've had the hard end of those gloves, B'Elanna."

"I guess I'm pretty filthy, too," she admitted. "And pretty stupid looking with this thing on my nose."

He said nothing about that, but continued to regard her, almost in appreciation despite the work there. "I remember what you used to look like--in your uniform, nice and straight, shiny boots..." He grinned. "You always had your hair just right, a couple touches of makeup--that plum lipstick, or the rose one. You looked so crisp and pretty, every day."

B'Elanna's eyes widened to hear it. "I didn't know you noticed *that* much," she said.

"I noticed, and I wasn't the only one." His squint-lined eyes still held hers. "But despite what they've done, it'd take a hell of a lot more to make me not notice you."

With an effort, she didn't avert her gaze from Tom's foggy, bloodshot eyes, or dry, tan skin, nor from the shadows that seemed permanently etched into his thinned face, and the scars...

He noticed her returned examination. "Guess I look pretty bad, too, huh?"

She blinked, almost shrugged. "You look different."

"Maybe because I am now," he said, coughing slightly when he adjusted his position against the wall. "This place... God, was I stupid back then, to think I had problems. I wish I had them back."

"I know the feeling."

Again, he didn't comment--or perhaps the slow blink in the yellowy light was his acknowledgment. The wind outside picked up, rattling a loose section on the back of the shack; the rest of the shelter creaked as the breeze died away. But he didn't move aside from the blink until he spoke again.

"All my life," Tom whispered, looking up again at the glowing patterns above him, "I just wanted to do something well--really well...and, well, maybe I took that too seriously. A lot of it, I guess, was about my father. He was pretty demanding, had the family reputation to uphold. He didn't take well to weaknesses or excuses; unfortunately, I had a slew of them, and I didn't really want to be pegged into the Paris career track. It felt like a trap--like it wouldn't be mine, you know? Anyway, I wound up trying to prove I had more than I did...and everyone knows how that turned out."

That time, B'Elanna said nothing.

"So, I wind up here and you know what? All of that's gone. No father, no Starfleet, no lost chances to redeem. Now I wish I had it back." He grinned at that. "I used to wish that I could start over again, start from scratch, no baggage or preconceived opinions--my so-called reputation. I was just starting to do that on Voyager, too--not from scratch, but doing something that meant something to me and was finally *right*. Now this comes along. In a way, I got what I wanted, but I can't do anything with it but try like hell to stay alive. Sometimes I don't know why I bother, except that I don't want you to have to be alone here."

B'Elanna drew a deep breath, held it while her lungs tricked at the action, and then slowly let it out. "I know," she said, "I've called you some things, and we haven't always gotten along, but... You're a good person, Tom. I know that--I've really come to believe that."

He looked at her. She nodded, turned her gaze downward.

"I found out how much before we got here," she said softly, "when you protected me and tried to save

Durst in the Vidiian mines. Remember that?" He gave a nod, looked down to his hands. "I'll never forget it, how you stuck up for me. And what you said--about being dealing with fear--meant more to me than you know. You've done the same thing here, Tom, even if I'm not half of myself now, totally off guard. You've stuck by me, even when I was pissed at you for it."

Tom grinned. "You haven't been that bad."

"Thanks," she said, her lips flicking up briefly. She caught his stare again. "All *my* life, I blamed everything on my not being able to stay in control of things--no big surprise, right? Though, I was the only person who could say that about me. Every time I got myself into a good situation, I got impatient or angry or had some kind of problem and ran away from it--and cursed that while knowing my stupid temper--my Klingon side--got me into trouble again. It's why I left home, the Academy, how I got into the Maquis.

"The whole time, I thought I was controlling it. Now I don't know if I ever had...I was mad as hell when we got on Voyager because I *couldn't* leave it, I couldn't control it at all--and I really did hate it at first."

"God knows what you really think about getting stuck here."

She gave him a look. "I think you've got an idea."

He laughed quietly. "Yeah, I think so."

"Anyway," B'Elanna continued, "things started going right--I got my rank, became chief engineer. Even when I screwed up, I was given the chance to get past that--and it was my choice to take it. I couldn't escape it, and after a while, I didn't really want to--well, with being an officer, at least. Like everything else, I wanted to have some control over things. If I'd been able to handle our situation out there in the nebula, I wouldn't have been cramming for a fast way out--and we wouldn't be here."

"B'Elanna, it's not your fault."

"It wouldn't have happened without me being so damned...ambitious," she returned, biting her last word. "And I'm paying for it here." She waved her fingers slightly in the air. "I can't do anything about this. There's a fight, but we can't fight it. I can't be angry and resist, because then I'll *really* pay for it. So I guess we're both sorry for wanting more than we could deal with at one point or another."

Tom thought about that, all her words--which were more than she'd ever said to him before. Of course, he wasn't often confessionary, either. But on Uillar, he figured, maybe it was a good idea to let go of one's demons when one could.

"Maybe that's our biggest problem," he thought aloud. "We can't even fall back on our favorite vices. Like it or not, we have to take it--and it's worse now, especially in that it's...so relevant, all of this. It's life or death, every day. That's what we've got left here."

"And we might have to stay here for the rest of our lives."

The reminder put a chill in Tom's spine, even as he smirked at it. "So much for the positive," he said. "Worst of all, we can't think for ourselves anymore, either, not as long as Sashana'i keeps doing what she has to keep us from dying of infections in this damned place."

"I still can't believe she's been doing that," B'Elanna breathed. "I...I couldn't have gone that far. But again, we haven't been here long."

Tom nodded. "Dalra had every right to be worried about what we were doing--and not just because of Sashana'i. I had no idea he felt so...personally about us."

She sighed. "We really have stirred things up."

"Sometimes I think that's a problem, too," he said.

"How so?"

"The fact that we *couldn't* sit here and deal with it. Much as I really believe I still can't, it really proves how selfish we've been." Tom stared at her. "We actually thought we could fight Hychar and the guards off. What've we been doing?"

"We've played as many games," B'Elanna concluded for him.

"For something to do about it. And now Sashana'i's in her blankets sick as hell and Dalra's worried about Unar retribution on everyone he's worked to protect since he got here."

B'Elanna sighed on that. Leaning back against the wall, she let her tiredness start to take her. "So, what do you want to do?" she asked.

"About what?"

"About all of it." She shrugged, looking plainly up to him. "You wished for better but got stuck here and you can't do anything without risking someone else, Sashana'i in particular, who we both know will go out again if she has to. The guards target us and you're tired and sick. I have the same problems. So, what now?"

He shook his head slowly. "I don't know. Have any ideas?"

"If I get one, you know I'll say so," she told him, trying to be light about it and failing.

He also grinned, but it drifted away unfelt. With the silence, his eyes followed a similar path.

After nearly a minute, Tom moved to settle them to sleep. She tacitly agreed, scooting down into her usual place as Tom carefully arranged their coverings, pulled the layers over them one by one then lowered himself behind her.

Neither spoke again.

"And so it was upon Uillar, the suns to pass, suns and moons following one another, the waking and work, meals and talk, none more so than another day--a routine in turns made unique by the taunted guards. Yet Hychar was not to be touched by any of those suns. This absent form sowed suspicion among our people--and grisly hope in Toma and Be'i.

"Yet cast aside were such idle thoughts as the Uillaran winter grew to its yearly being, returning Hychar to his familiar lair. His preying eyes upon us once more, it became a time of hibernation--and winter creatures..."

"No. I meant it. Cut it off."

"Be'i gye oh-gaht kopa aw-hes."

B'Elanna sighed shortly and took the scissors from Sashana'i's fingers. "Whatever. I'll do it."

Sashana'i yet held her friend's hands, staring at her. "Owaah, ye-wahsi'e gwall tyo ife'i!"

"Sashana'i, you're being ridiculous. It's only hair."

Sashana'i swung around and pleaded silently to Miztri, who kneeled nearby as she combed out her long, red-blond locks, which still dripped from the brief wash. The elder woman only raised her hair and comb-filled palms and shrugged. Miztri was beyond trying to convince Be'i to change her will--and much longer ago had stopped with Sashana'i. She was rather disposed to letting the sisterly creatures fuss it out themselves...and because she did secretly smile upon it.

Seeing Miztri's neutrality, Sashana'i then chose to beg. "Be'i gye! l'aw-hes gepwu kopa ha'a."

"It's not like I'm cutting off my fingers, Sashana'i," B'Elanna told her. "It's getting too long--and especially in this heat, I want to keep it short. Now come on, we still have our clothes to wash after the guys are done."

"A'av yi--"

"Fine!"

With a decisive yank away from the woman's hands, B'Elanna whipped the scissors upwards and cut a chunk off her curls, doing as much damage as she could so that the rest would *have* to be done.

Grinning triumphantly, B'Elanna then handed the instrument back to her flabbergasted friend. "Do the back for me?"

Outside the overhang, Aratra chortled and shook his head. "My bondmate, I would think, loves our good lady Be'i more than she should. She would bear every piece of her retained undiluted."

Tom grinned, grabbing his satchel as they headed out for their weekly bath. "Undiluted B'Elanna? Sashana'i's never known it."

"I have not heard that you drink the pure waters of Be'i, Toma," Aratra replied wickedly.

"If I tried, my *red* waters might be named Lake Uillar and you'd be having some weird ceremony to bless *that*," Tom returned.

Aratra was shocked. "You share with a lady of such passions a pallet this third and feel no temptation?"

Tom snorted. "Are you kidding? The last thing I'd like to do is sleep some nights, but I won't do

anything she doesn't want to do. And *she* sure as hell hasn't mentioned it. Besides, it's good enough that we're getting along...most of the time."

"Ah, my friend, you and Be'i must be more Desalian!" Aratra proclaimed. "You must make yourself known to and claim the lady you wish, then worship at her temple with much pilgrimage. A lady with such spirit as Be'i's should not disfavor such a thing, I would think."

Tom put his arm around the other man's shoulder. "Well, when we're done down there and I stop smelling like a waste reclamation unit, maybe *you'd* like to talk her into taking a mate."

Aratra looked back. His bondmate was still gaping and stammering as their alien friend plucked the scissors away again and stubbornly continued to slice into her wavy locks--telling Sashana'i all the while it was bad enough they didn't have a "decent sonic shower" on a "dirtball a Ferengi wouldn't even try to sell" without also *looking* like a "wild targ."

Whatever that might have meant.

He turned another grin to Tom, who replied with a raised eyebrow.

"Well, I think these have just about had it," B'Elanna said and cleared her throat, managing to stave off the itch in her chest for the time. She'd been coughing more often, but had learned pretty well how to swallow it back. The temptation gone, she continued to shake out her freshly dried clothes. Her socks proved to be all but useless, though. "Might as well give them over to Gresbri tomorrow for her scraps."

Tom looked over, sighing. "Well, I'll give you credit, they lasted longer than mine did."

She grinned crookedly but didn't reply. She didn't have to. Tom knew where she'd have gone.

He spread their newly cleaned and dried blankets out, slipping them under her feet as she lifted them. Bath day was also a day without work. The Unar cleansing day meant no guards were available, so they were able to enjoy the early evening there in some relative comfort.

Of anything Unar, they were not cynical about that privilege.

The season had changed, somewhat for the better. The sun of full daytime was still searing, but it left at least a comfortable hour or so before the even colder nights set in. Just then, in that rotten little shack, it was nice. The sun was fading just enough that it merely warmed the roof but was still warm enough to negate the cooling breeze.

Of course, they'd also acclimated to the heat of the place. Constant perspiration from hard physical work and a low sodium diet had drained their excess water and consequently shed kilos from them both. It made the nights more difficult, though.

Looking over at B'Elanna, bent over the lump of laundry once he had finished carpeting their space again, Tom noticed, not for the first time, how wiry she'd become. Beneath the plain gown she wore when not wearing what was left of her uniform, he could clearly see the lines of her ribs and hipbones. Her half-exposed shoulders were leaner, showing the lines of her muscles. Her face was hollower and angled a little differently since her nose had been broken twice and she had no cosmetics there. Her skin

was tawny and dry, though she was much more cautious about keeping her cloak in place and her hood pulled up than he was. Her bloodshot eyes had circles beneath them that spoke of her respiratory problems.

She looked frail. Sometimes, when her coughing was bad, she was frail.

He wondered if she realized how much she'd changed.

He wouldn't know his own changes, except the view when he looked down. His skin had tanned considerably, even under his clothes. After a while, it'd decided to stop burning. His hands were rough with dirt-stained calluses and his body had grown quite lean. Otherwise, he hadn't seen his reflection since before he last reported for bridge duty about four months ago. Considering the abuse he'd taken and their severe conditions, he wasn't anxious to see it.

And Voyager... Tom fingered his commbadge before setting it aside on the wall shelf he and Naja had put together from smuggled scraps. He still carried the little badge, but no longer in hopes of hearing anything come through on it. They'd deactivated everything but the universal translator in them a couple of months ago and kept them charged with some rigging and Dalra's small supply of laridium for that purpose alone.

Besides, he just wanted to have it with him--just in case. He'd noticed that B'Elanna had done the same.

Looking at her again--she was trying to neatly fold what little she did have--Tom sighed.

"Of course I don't expect them to come," she said outright as she closed her eyes against the thick blanket. He'd asked her so tentatively, she didn't have the heart to get angry at him for it, even if she really hadn't wanted to talk about it again. "I thought we'd already said they weren't--and they aren't."

He could tell, though, by her tone. "I'm sorry."

B'Elanna nodded then let out her breath. She knew she'd been just as guilty of imagining Voyager breaking through the atmosphere--and tossing a torpedo into the Unar stronghold. "I just don't know what to do about it," she said. "There's nothing here, Tom. Some days..."

She stopped, cleared her throat. But that time, lying down, she couldn't hold it back, coughing until she felt Tom's palm whapping gently on the outside of her tunic, under the blankets. She finally expelled the phlegm with that help, spit it into a cloth she kept nearby then tossed it outside the blankets, towards the door.

"Okay now?" he asked.

"God, I hate that," she said, still catching her breath. "I'm fine." She said that for his benefit. Every time that happened, her lungs felt like they were on fire. Not for the first time, she sniffed at the fact that where once her Klingon lung capacity had been a very good thing, it only caused twice as much trouble there. Like everything else.

Turning onto her back, she didn't bother opening her eyes. "Some days, I wonder if it's worth it, staying

alive in this hellhole." When she got no reply, she breathed a small, ironic laugh, knowing what he must have thought. "It's not like I want to die, Tom, but..."

She stopped. It was a very old topic.

"I know," Tom breathed, repositioning himself by her. "Hell, just a cup of coffee would be nice right now."

B'Elanna laughed quietly. "God, I'd love a good cup of coffee. Thanks for reminding me." More reflectively, then, she said, "I feel so sorry for everyone here, too. They've been at it a lot longer than we have. I hate that we..." She shook her head.

"Hate that we can't whisk them away to some better place and get ourselves home?" Tom asked, nodding. "Dalra once told me Desalians were people who hoped for small things because they were able to be gotten. There's no use in wishing for the impossible."

"In itself, that makes sense." Her tone didn't exactly agree with the statement, however.

Tom paused, nestling himself by her, finally closing his eyes. "Well, call me selfish, but I want more--and their Prihar can just come and get me. I'll always want more."

B'Elanna's lips pulled inward for a moment and she turned onto her side again, scooting back so they were spooned up together as before. Instantly, his arm fell into place over her and his cheek rested on the top of her head.

"Glad we agree, Lieutenant."

"Well, look what slithered back in," B'Elanna mewed, peering aside her work as Hychar made his way across the barricade.

"Our old buddy," Tom acknowledged, "back from vacation." He yanked a sheet of metal up onto the flat, pressing the scanner button. "Looks like he didn't have a very good time."

"Well, let's not rectify that," replied B'Elanna, giving Latsari across from her a grin. "He's a big boy. I'm sure he'll manage it somehow."

"Oh, Be'i," Latsari snickered, touching the back of her callused hand to her lips before moving to their next flat. The comely young woman seemed to appreciate her new work partners' sarcasm, though she resisted joining in it.

About a month ago, B'Elanna and Tom had been reassigned without explanation--the Unar never had to give one, of course--to the front disassembly dock, where they separated metal types into piles to be transferred to their old processing station.

Latsari and her bondmate Bolmra assured them that it was not a promotion, a fact they quickly learned when they were reassigned to that detail several months ago. The couple, only twenty and sent to Uillar from the fourth Desalian colony Llatso'a shortly after their bonding two years ago, had replaced two who had died of infections due to injuries procured at that station. Likewise, Tom and B'Elanna had been sent

there to replace bondmates who had passed from the other common ailment commonly caused by exposure to ore and dissolution lasers--eye disease. Worse, the work was even harder and better guarded.

That was not surprising.

Hychar had turned to them, his eyes narrowing upon finding what he sought. Then he turned away.

"Oh shit," Tom muttered. "Wonder what he's up to this time."

B'Elanna pursed her lips then pulled another flat into place. "Time will only tell."

"It may be wise not to play into known practices," Bolmra said quietly. "I would advise compliance for this time."

Tom smirked at the same time B'Elanna did. "True," he said, his tone not as light as the grin implied. "We can really piss him off that way."

The officer grabbed the sleeve of her cloak and she merely stopped; her eyes pointed ahead as the others passed. She felt the guard remove Tom's hand from her waist and did nothing. The guard turned her and she forced herself to only look at the black leather strip at the mid-torso of the man's uniform, and then at the hard red dirt when he moved.

He removed her cloak, exposing her to the sun. He slid it off her arms, folded it and put it in her arms. He did not dismiss her.

B'Elanna did not move until he did--over twenty minutes later. When she turned, already feeling the slight burn on her face and arms, she saw Tom standing several paces away, staring at her from within his cloak.

Only when they got back to their shack did she allow herself to kick the wall, scream then shake her head at the blankets. Once she quieted, Tom gently took her shoulder again and gave her a wet cloth for her face.

Tom stumbled forward, but didn't dare fall. Damning himself if he did, he ran a few steps ahead to catch up with himself, ignoring the cry of pain in his back where the guard's glove hit him, willing himself not to cough. He knew if he started, he wouldn't stop.

Then he felt a small, strong hand grab his arm and pull him upright. He caught B'Elanna's eyes as he got his feet under him again, grinned his thanks briefly.

Her hand remained clutched to him the rest of the way to the work detail.

The evening sun was as it always was, the walk the same, their exhaustion felt in every bone and muscle, their bodies starving for water they'd already drained from their pouch.

Hychar was waiting inside the line, staring at them, waiting for them. Like a demonic apparition, he loomed, neared as they walked.

His black hair blew in the seasonal breeze against his face and shoulders; his grey eyes were pinned on the reasons for his waiting.

To B'Elanna, the familiar sight made her chest flutter with a combination of fear and readiness she'd become accustomed to since their first disciplining.

She could feel his eyes burning in her. She could feel the blunt studs in the glove ripping across her skin, the whiplash in her neck when her head was thrown in that inertia. She could feel the solid thud and loss of breath when they threw her against the wall, hear her own strangled cry...

Tom's hand found her back. It was trembling just slightly.

Sashana'i peered back for a moment from within her deep hood, feigning to scratch an itch on her cheek.

Straightening, B'Elanna turned her eyes downward as they shifted slowly to the left and passed Hychar by.

He did not follow.

Tom kept their pace, thinking to breathe again once the view was gone. B'Elanna blinked slowly to ward off the tears that treacherously cropped in her eyes. Neither of them looked back.

Her knees and hands hit the ground at the same time. Feeling the hot dirt on her shins, she suddenly knew she'd probably have to patch her trousers after that scuffing. They'd been mended too many times to count. At the same time, she wondered why she bothered. They were too hot, anyway.

"Proper," Hychar commented from behind her.

Swallowing every ounce of reply, she felt a small trickle of blood on the back of her exposed head. She remained, waiting to be kicked or prodded with the rifle butt. Moving her eyes alone, she saw the tips of Tom's worn, torn boots, likewise unmoved.

"Rise," came Maghet's voice.

She didn't bother, as his hand had already clenched her cloak collar and pulled her to her feet. She stood utterly still. She didn't even glance to Hychar, moving around her.

The others walked around them, heading back to the shanties. Many looked back, more slowed, but none interfered. For once, Tom was glad they didn't.

"You believe I am evil, do you not, drask?" said Hychar as he slowly circled, purposefully tempting her eyes to follow.

"Yes," B'Elanna answered honestly, resisting any sarcasm.

"Why?"

"Because of what you've done to the people here," she said, training down the bite in her tone.

"And what should you think if I told you the same? That I believed you were a truer evil, an example of filth and eternal corruption among that which is sacred to Unar?"

B'Elanna swallowed the itch in her lungs. "I'd wonder why you've bothered to keep us here this long," she told him, a little hoarse for her effort.

"Your work has been good enough to keep you alive," Hychar told her. "Do you think I am foolish enough to let my resources go to waste?"

She didn't answer.

Hychar smirked at her, and then turned to Tom, who was waiting some paces away but visibly at the ready. "And you, as disgusting as this creature: What think you of this? Of my belief in your filth?"

"Then I'd guess you're right," Tom said, his tone twisting with derision, "considering you don't let us get a bath but once every ten days. We stink like hell."

"Do not use base humor with me," Hychar warned.

"I wouldn't do that," Tom said condescendingly. "It's the truth. As for our *abstract* filth, I guess I'd say we've got a major difference of opinion."

The Desalians had all finally passed them--slowly. Tom let out an unnoticeable breath to see them gone.

Hychar's face went unchanged. "You, drask," he said, motioning at B'Elanna's head, "are an abomination. Your grossly sacrilegious markings I would have destroyed were it not for the use I have for your life. Your continued efforts to be repulsive seal your abhorrent behavior. You will die upon this land someday, and I will scatter your remains in the dung heap of Metrab should I have any control of the matter."

What, no flowers? popped into her head even as she felt her heart drop at the thought--and her temper rise sharply enough that she could feel herself blushing against the scalding sun.

Hychar looked at Tom. "As her willing companion, you will join her, drask."

Tom pressed his lips firmly shut, fixed his eyes blankly on nothing.

Without another word, Hychar moved away, as if caught on another breeze. "Maghet, your company."

The officer blinked, but continued to stare down at the aliens. Then he glanced to where the Desalians were disappearing. His pale mouth parted...

"Maghet!"

With another look, Maghet complied and left the two there.

Tom and B'Elanna were left in the afternoon sun, waiting only for the two Unar to disappear. When they finally did, B'Elanna fell back to her knees and threw her fists into the unforgiving dirt. Tom slumped, letting out his breath, shaking from pent up nerves.

B'Elanna coughed--hard, hacking until she was able to clear her lungs a little and spit the bile away from her. Then she gasped back her breath. "I hate him, Tom," she growled, knowing it was redundant but just having to spit the words again. "I want him dead. I want to kill him."

Nodding, he bent and put his hand on her shoulder. She grabbed it, gave it a squeeze. "Come on," Tom said quietly.

"You have shown exceeding patience with Unar in their diligence," Dalra said as he set aside his dinner dish and leaned back into the pile of blankets he occupied. "These past nine suns, they have offered much attention, more than beneath past suns."

"They're testing us again," Tom told him quietly.

"Your success is impressive."

B'Elanna put down her portion as well, but leaned up to the host. "You think we like this, Dalra? What I wouldn't do to beat the crap out of that son of a bitch, you probably couldn't guess."

Dalra sighed. "Unfortunately, this *is* understood. You bear passionate spirits and are not of Desal. This is why Aratra's house has claimed you." He looked up at her solid gaze, so willful, yet vulnerable at the same time. "Unar tests are not unique to you. Why would you think I remain here? Their test for me came with their attempting to tempt me away from Miztri."

"And though we're all happy with your choice, they won," Tom pointed out.

"To think of it as win or loss is a portion of the dissatisfaction and unrest you feel."

"And you don't," B'Elanna replied plainly, "which is why nothing's changed here."

Miztri raised her brow. "And yet you resist fighting now, too."

"Because they're *trying* to see what we'll do--and we know it." Casting a quick look to Sashana'i and Aratra, listening nearby, she added, "Among other things."

"Yet shall you relent always?" Miztri responded. "I should not think it natural to your way."

B'Elanna sighed and peered over at their friends. They were intent on the conversation, even if it wasn't a new one in Dalra's overhang. The older man had continued to press their compliance even after Aratra had claimed them, which was almost as troubling as the Unar sometimes.

"I don't think we could, Miztri," B'Elanna finally said.

"Then you would seek all our suffering," Dalra replied.

"I don't *seek* it," B'Elanna returned. "They're the ones pushing our buttons, and they don't involve *you* in our 'discipline.' --And for that matter, you're the one with the good soul guaranteed to go to your heaven, so what the hell does it matter to you?"

He did not take that as an insult. "It matters that I would wish to remain here for the others in need of me, and that your strain bears also upon me and the others, regardless of your family."

Tom shook his head. "We understand that, Dalra. And we don't want anything to happen to any of you, either. That's the last thing we'd want. But you can't accept who we are *and* expect us to lie down for the rest of our lives. We'd rather die now than live like that." Glancing to B'Elanna, he grinned. "A people where we come from believe that to die for your beliefs in a great struggle is a very honorable death. I've come to really appreciate that idea here."

B'Elanna smiled, knowing that Tom had cleverly left out about everything else Klingon, which would probably have turned Dalra white with shock and nausea.

"One of these days," Tom continued, "we'll get our chance. We won't do anything rash for the time being, but when the time comes, trust me, we'll be ready to fight. I need to believe that right now, Dalra. It's all I have left to believe in here."

"And yet those for whom you care shall be deprived of your presence," Miztri commented and looked again to B'Elanna. "I bear no fear of the exaltation of my spirit and Dalra's, yet my duty is clear: It lies with those still bound upon Uillar."

"I'm not disagreeing with that," B'Elanna said. "It's just that I'd rather go out like Tom said, struggling for my beliefs, than lying around like sheep just waiting to be put to the slaughter by a people who pick you off at will like some sick game--or worse, just let you rot away of infections because they can get more where you came from. That's no way to live."

She returned her attention to the host of the overhang. "I'm sorry, Dalra, but Tom's right. Right now, yes, we're being patient because we know they're playing with us and we don't want anyone else to be hurt. But we can't do that forever. You might believe we're all one in this existence, but you also believe in individual desire. Well, you know what ours are--and we'd might as well be dead if we don't live up to it, because that *would* be the death of *our* spirits."

Dalra had listened; his mouth closed at her conclusion. Finally, he bowed his head deeply. "You speak of your spirits, Be'i, Toma," he told her. "Your sincerity cannot be doubted. I should only pray for a swift end of their 'games,' and with great pause."

B'Elanna nodded. "So do I--and some."

Across from them, Sashana'i's hand slid from her lap and into Aratra's. Holding it warmly, she continued to watch her friends, slowly showing her satisfied smile.

"God, is that a cool morning breeze?" Tom asked as they swerved around a row of shacks and waved to Aratra, hurrying along with Sashana'i's hand on his forearm.

"Amazing," B'Elanna grinned, looking up to him as they breathed the air. "If only it'd stay like this."

"Better enjoy it now while we can."

She snorted. "Enjoy it! So to speak, Paris." She breathed again, swallowing the usual coughs that followed it; then she nodded her greeting to their other approaching friends. "You were right about the weather, Aratra. --Morning, Sashana'i."

But Sashana'i just sighed a breath and yanked back B'Elanna's hood when she got close enough. "Be'i, i'awk-sa gask efi'ir wash!"

B'Elanna rolled her eyes. "I woke up late. Now we don't have t-- Ow! Damn it!"

As they walked quickly to the rows, Sashana'i deftly braided back B'Elanna's short locks, grinning all the while.

Tom tried not to laugh too much at B'Elanna's resistance. In itself, it wasn't a bad thing, considering the past couple weeks. Any diversion at that point was welcome, and Sashana'i's pulling B'Elanna's hair out never failed as one. Sashana'i was ridiculously obstinate about certain "tending matters," and rarely allowed the object of her attention to get away with less.

They were much alike in different ways.

Of course, that was the fun part about watching them.

"Well," Tom grinned, "at least she's efficient."

"Shut up, Paris," B'Elanna smirked as she grudgingly leaned into Sashana'i's service. "Or I'll send her after you tomorrow morning."

Tom reached into his hood and mussed his fluffy hair. "Guess tonight's as good a night as any to trim it," he grinned.

The growl she returned did nothing but make him smile more.

By the time they came to the detail lines and began greeting their other friends, B'Elanna's hair bore nest plaits on both sides and Sashana'i looked pleased with her efforts, bowing low to her meal hosts before moving back to Aratra's side.

Miztri giggled at B'Elanna's chagrin and patted her back. "It was seen that Toma brought himself later this sunrise to the meal giving--and disappeared with both portions. Bear you wellness?"

B'Elanna shrugged. "Just that cough. It kept me up. Tom's got it too."

"It should pass once you acclimate to Uillar completely. My sorrow that this shall take more time, however."

"You don't have to be sorry," B'Elanna told her, trying for a good breath as her eyes diverted. "It's not your fault."

"I have meant for the time."

"I know. But it's been...a little easier, I guess."

Miztri nodded kindly. Glancing to her bondmate, who spoke with Traco'a, she gave B'Elanna a long look. "One moon, then, my friend, I should wish to hear the stories of your people--of your life. You and Toma bear nothing of them but mention--and it is known why this is. It would honor me to accompany your missing them."

B'Elanna did sigh that time, touched the woman's robed arm, feeling its thinness beneath the cloth. "Maybe sometime."

Looking over, she saw Tom had heard the exchange, but his reaction was unreadable. She'd come to know that look, but had never figured it out, even if--

"Submit!"

B'Elanna gasped out as her hood was yanked at the neck and she felt herself flying back and out of the line.

Tom had to blink before he realized what was going on--it'd been that quick. But a second later, he jumped out the line, following them step for step into the court. "Where are you taking her?!" he demanded.

"She is to be disciplined by the order of Commander Hychar," the Unar officer said blankly.

"For what?!" B'Elanna choked, and then hacked to finish it. "Da-- agh!"

"The hell she will!" Tom retorted. "She didn't do anything!"

The officer only stared back.

Sashana'i moved forward too, but Dalra instinctively grabbed the back of her cloak before she could leave the line.

"Gye!" she yelled, both at Dalra and the Unar. "Gya'o kah-wobak!"

"Dalra, you shall release my bondmate!" Aratra demanded.

"You're not taking her anywhere," Tom warned, taking another step toward the guard. Glancing down, he could see B'Elanna was actually scared--she was struggling for breath in coughs, her feet were barely on the cracked ground, her fingers were trying desperately to loosen the pressure around her throat. "Not without me."

The officer smirked. "You wish to share in her cleansing?"

B'Elanna shook her head at Tom, her eyes wide and begging him not to say it...

"She's not going anywhere without me," Tom repeated firmly, standing his ground. "Yes, I'll share it."

"Gye!" Sashana'i cried again and twisted herself out of her cloak. Scurrying around the others, she flew to the scene. But the officer only raised his palm to meet her chest with a shove--sending her down

and skidding across the ground.

Aratra gasped and paused, but then he scrambled to the ground to collect his woman, who still clutched the dirt. Growling loudly, B'Elanna reached up and found some purchase in the guard's hair, pulling it as if to rip it out. Her feet flailed, trying to strike him, knock him off his balance.

Before Tom could rush up on the two, the guard spun B'Elanna around to make her release his hair. As soon as she reflexively brought her knee up, the Unar grunted and swung his hand around, swatting her head with a loud crack.

As B'Elanna stumbled back, Tom grabbed the officer's collar and threw his fist directly into his jaw--and the guard swung back into Tom's twice fractured ribs. They cracked on contact. Tom's elbow answered it, striking him in the throat just as the officer threw another punch into his chest. Tom flew back, gagging to try to catch his breath.

Miztri darted a look back to Dalra, who was set to move along with the others, yet slower that day. He gave her a weary gaze in return. Silently begging her, he almost moved to take her hand.

"Your fear is known, my spirit," she whispered, but then turned and hurried to retrieve B'Elanna, still swaying on her feet in shock. Grabbing the young woman in her arms, B'Elanna gladly fell into them, holding on and coughing through her uneven breath.

The officer, a bit bloody from the blows he had been delivered and holding a part of his scalp which had indeed been ripped out, gestured to a younger guard, who came across the trench to give a short--albeit surprised--nod. The officer glared at the group still in the dirt.

"Contained discipline," he muttered, each syllable like acid, then turned to march back to the barricade, fighting to keep his breath steady.

The younger guard moved up on Tom, who stood slumped with his arm over his ribs in front of B'Elanna and Miztri...

"Gye!" Sashana'i cried as Aratra managed to yank Tom out of the guard's path. "Ye a'iw sew-eh bek'a! --E'saaf!"

Dalra had not yet moved. He stood with Sashana'i's cloak still in his fist, in shock at the scene, with his wife cradling the bleeding, dark-haired Be'i as if she were their child...who still clutched Miztri's sleeve, trying to remain conscious.

"Ye'i akw-his-w!" Sashana'i demanded.

The other men stood on either side of his once chosen spirit-daughter, yet again facing Unar--who likewise was facing her... "No, Sashana'i," he whispered, moving forward.

Tom knew, too, where it was going. "Sashana'i--"

"Toma gye ak!" she interrupted, unbroken in her stare at the guard.

Likewise, the Unar guard held hers, considering her, and then the others. His bright grey eyes then turned outward in his decision, briefly to the barricade, into which his superior had already disappeared.

"Maghet o'a gy'e-a mu'ewh," she told him.

Slowly, the officer raised his chin. "Gye'a," he said soberly.

She just stared at first, disbelieving. Then, Sashana'i's breath released in defeat; her shoulders and head fell.

Moving away, the guard stared at the others milling slowly by, and then to some others who had almost stopped. "Detail!" he ordered loudly.

"Z-shaw ye'e," Sashana'i breathed.

The guard moved his eyes over the unmoved group again, taking them each in, pausing on the injured woman, the gasping man, the young regent, bowed in defeat. Then, glancing back to the barricade once more, he drew a deep breath. "Quarters."

Sashana'i's head came up to stare at him again. "I'i?"

"Quarters," he repeated. With only that, he stepped back, blinked a nod to them then continued on with the work detail.

Tom, holding his ribs, looked upon the changed scene with a furrowed brow. He looked at Dalra and Aratra as if for confirmation of the guard's decision. Aratra was visibly surprised, as was Sashana'i, whose head turned numbly to watch the man pace evenly away. B'Elanna, semi-conscious in Miztri's arms, asked where the Unar had gone.

Even when the guard disappeared and none came to replace him, Tom still didn't know whether or not to believe what he'd just seen--not that he dared regret it.

He felt a hand on his shoulder and turned to see Dalra, straight-faced but holding no disapproval. "I should think your intent and protection were correct in this instance, my friend," he said.

Tom's head bowed in thanks. "Hychar's going to know you stayed, too, Dalra."

"This risk is known to my bondmate. It is acceptable, as Miztri and I shall find our eternity together...and for it is a just resistance."

His lips creasing slightly, Tom gave the man another nod then knelt with a wince by B'Elanna. Taking her hand, he said softly, "Let's get back to the overhang, get you washed up."

"I...I'm--"

"Shh," he breathed. "No arguments. You're hurt--and you can't tell me you're anxious to go sort scraps in the sun."

B'Elanna's red, puffy eyes found a kindly pair in Tom Paris, whose quirky grin was a bittersweet sight she might have expected. Then her focus weakened. She blinked in slow flutters, cleared her throat. "I wasn't...going to argue with you," she whispered.

Aratra moved down to them and positioned himself to take B'Elanna up with Miztri's assistance. "You require wrapping as well," he told Tom. "I shall carry her."

Tom mouthed his thanks, gently stroked B'Elanna's hair before managing to push himself upright with Dalra's assistance. He could barely breathe before, and he had to swallow his bile several times as he

straightened. Glancing at Dalra, whose eyes questioned him, he said, "I'll make it."

Sashana'i looked again to the young guard, well along his way to the refinery, then to Aratra as he picked their friend up. When he caught her eyes, her own widened slightly, became intent for a moment. "Wa'hal Gai-sak imak osw-na."

Aratra blinked and looked at Tom as they began their way back to the shanties. "There shall be trouble soon, she believes."

That news made him perk up. "What kind?"

"It is not known. Officer Gychak disobeyed orders without a bribe and by his own volition, however. There is dissent within the walls. Hychar's power is disrupted."

Miztri's eyes flew to him as even Dalra stared back at the guard. "There shall be trades, perhaps?" she asked, grabbing her bondmate's hand.

"We might provide a method to smuggle your house from this place," Dalra suggested.

B'Elanna, still conscious, smirked as her head lolled into Aratra's softly robed arm. "Wouldn't that be one hell of a rebellion, Dalra?" she whispered.

Dalra moved so that the young woman could see him, even if it was evident that she could see little by then. "You, Be'i, and Toma, among Sashana'i and Aratra--whom we have planned to smuggle away from Uillar for some time--your spirits must bear freedom. It is acceptable to procure for you your way, should the time arrive."

"I had a feeling," B'Elanna breathed hoarsely, "you'd come around."

At that, Dalra chuckled. "Let us heal the further trouble you have attracted, child. Then we may argue the nature of change."

"What about you and Miztri?" Tom asked.

Dalra's grin faded slightly, but did not disappear. "We shall await the blessing of the spirits, yet we shall not pray too much, Toma. That would be *our* way."

"Then I guess I'll have to learn how to pray that extra bit for you," Tom replied and turned with Aratra when they entered the shanty rows.

He turned onto his back, eyes opening to the all-too-familiar sound of the gargled breathing beside him. He felt like he'd slept perhaps a minute, it'd been how exhausted and sore he was when they finally felt safe to let B'Elanna rest, had settled her into the blankets and himself by her.

Sucking a sharp breath as he sat up, Tom reached out for the glowglobe, tapping it to brighten the light. They'd pretty much drained the cell that evening, he knew. But there was enough power to work by.

He didn't have to study the sky to know it'd been enough time between treatments. Through a crack in the wall, he saw the reddish light and knew which moon it was. Shivering at the cold outside the thick layers of blankets and B'Elanna's warm body, he found the balm tube they'd managed to borrow from another host's overhang and a few clean cloths then turned back to uncover her just enough to clean her wound again.

He did and gently turned B'Elanna over. "Shh," he said as he prepared the ointment, though he knew she wouldn't hear him. No matter what her condition, she still slept very deeply. "Just going to get this..."

He moved so that the light would shine on her, so he could see--and froze.

B'Elanna's eyes were wide open, clouded over and unresponsive as she gurgled short breaths of air. Otherwise, she was dead still. Her skin was... He didn't know what color that was. Even in the dim light, he could see the wound was infected. B'Elanna's entire face was beginning to swell...

Tom's heart lurched. For a moment, it might have stopped.

"Oh my god oh my god," he breathed and leaned over to pat her cheek. "B'Elanna? B'Elanna!" He patted harder. "Torres!"

Not seeing any reaction--none--he covered her again and grabbed his cloak. Moments later, he was sprinting through the shanty rows in the fading moonlight towards the center. He swerved around one row, into another, knowing exactly where to go in the rows between the shacks, his breath puffing out in clouds behind him.

He finally got to the rear quarter of the shanties and darted into a thin alley of shacks. Throwing himself upon the doors of one, he smacked the thin metal, gasping for breath lest he cry for it.

"Aratra!"

The occupants were not the only people who stirred at his yell, but within seconds, the door opened and a familiar set of eyes peered out.

"It's B'Elanna," Tom rasped without his asking. "The wounds are infected."

Aratra immediately straightened and told Sashana'i behind him. "She shall be taken to Dalra's space for fire and water."

"But it's freezing out here!" Tom protested. "B'Elanna's not good with the cold."

"Hear me and obey now," Aratra told him. "This is all that can be done."

Sashana'i collected her cloak and some blankets, and then handed her bondmate's cloak to him as she stood at the door. Giving Tom a firm stare and a nod, she slipped out of the space and hurried away into the row.

Aratra yet held Tom back a moment. "We shall do all in reach of this life, Toma. Now let us take her."

Tom tried to calm himself with a deep breath of the hard air, ignoring his lungs' protest to the cold. "Let's go."

Miztri stirred at the clanging in the overhang, the talking back and forth, and knew she should investigate. Rising from her warm space by Dalra and looking out to Tom's pale, anxious face and the young regents hurrying around a quickly growing pile of blankets, she immediately knew her patient. She sighed for the sting of it before spinning around to don her warmest clothes.

"Dalra," she said, seeing his eyes open when she activated the glowglobe, "Be'i ails with Uillar."

The man rose and confirmed her words--and her fear--in her face and mind. "Spare coals lie in the shallows," he reminded her.

Miztri nodded quickly and sat back to wrap on her boots. "The child shall not be lost," she told him, her mouth turned down with determination. "We need not the vials of the cause. We shall not be lost of her."

"I should hope this is her fate," he said as he pulled on his long tunic and laced it to his neck, "as nothing now is borne but the spirits' guidance. Yet we shall accept what power we may, Miztri."

"And more might I bear it," she replied.

By the time Miztri and Dalra appeared, Tom and Aratra had built a coal fire and set water to boil upon it. Sashana'i had piled three walls of folded blankets and covered it with a thin metal sheet and another couple throws to seal the front. Seeing Dalra move to their underground storage space, Miztri wrapped her loose robe over her arms, and with but a glance at the young matriarch, she got to her knees to crawl inside.

She could see nothing.

"Sashana'i," she called behind her, "take yourself to my bed and retrieve the glowglobes there, my knotted gown, leg wraps and my satchel."

"Misti ka."

As she heard the young woman scurry off, Miztri felt her way up B'Elanna's tiny frame and caressed her hair. "Fear not, Be'i. Your fate is not to find the spirits here." Hearing only a choked breath in response, Miztri smiled gently, though she knew B'Elanna would not see it even were the room lit. "Ah, you need not be independent now. You shall be cared for regardless. And I shall take your boots should I wish it, little kini'isi."

What remained of her grin disappeared when Sashana'i came with the glowglobe and her medicine bag. Taking the extent of B'Elanna's illness in, the older woman steeled her breath and set herself to work.

Tom paced as the Desalians outside the overhang set their bowls aside. Detail had been called, and so like every other day, they shuffled and started to the labor detail. Many passed before him, offering a bow and a sincere touch to their temple markings. Kepli and Naja stopped a moment to offer their hands, as did Gresbri, Gihetra, Plicta and others they had come to know. Latsari and Bolmra stopped, too, taking his hands and promising they would not be missed on the detail as long as it was necessary and offering their prayers for their friend's health.

Tom accepted it all but barely felt it. He was too worried to feel anything but for her, his only real companion there, and he cursed that selfish side that simply didn't want to be alone in that place. He just couldn't think of staying there without her.

He glanced over to see Aratra lifting B'Elanna gently from the blanket shelter as Miztri followed, holding her head. Beside a steaming basin, Sashana'i awaited them.

B'Elanna's eyes had finally closed--because of the swelling, which had affected all her limbs. At least her color had faded to a pale yellow, unlike that indescribable tone from the night before. Still, dressed in one of Miztri's warm gowns, her curly dark hair braided back in tight plaits, her forehead and temple covered with bandages, Tom wouldn't have recognized B'Elanna without a good look if he didn't know better.

Sashana'i accepted the burden into her lap as Miztri lowered B'Elanna's head into the small bath. After removing the bandages, Sashana'i dropped some cubes into a cup and filled it with the heated water. When the water fizzled, she poured the mixture over B'Elanna's wounds, letting it drizzle off into the basin.

"It shall digest the infection," Aratra told Tom as he joined him. "It has been known for its effectiveness."

"She's been pretty sick with the dust, too," Tom said.

Aratra nodded, but also offered a small smile. "My bondmate shall not permit Be'i's spirit to pass so soon from us, Toma, nor shall Miztri. Bear assurance of that."

"Isn't there anything the guards would be bribed with besides...?" Tom shrugged, not wanting to place that much of a reminder on Aratra.

Aratra understood. "Not often--and likely very little shall tempt them. That my bondmate at present cannot sway them is significant."

"I don't know what's worse," Tom muttered.

"During these times, should they be as Sashana'i says, there might be something to sell had we a thing and should salaries be held for sect incursions. Yet they would offer for labor in personal service."

Having heard Aratra, Dalra joined them. "I would take myself, Toma, were there a trade they would accept."

"I know you would. Thanks."

"Yet sadly, Unar quarters are staffed in full. They accepted Veda and Dyarsa this past moon."

Aratra raised his brow. "Why have I not received this news? Where have Likpa and Perrellga taken themselves in their round's completion?"

Dalra bowed respectfully. "They are taken to our ancestors, friend."

"Zha hevrria," Aratra intoned with a sober nod. "Tsa'all kochi'o."

Tom blew bitter laugh and walked away. "God, I hate this place!" Throwing up his hands, he shook his

head, turned around to the other scene in the overhang.

Sashana'i had looked up from her pouring; Miztri continued to caress the water down B'Elanna's soaked hair. Suddenly, he couldn't look at it, at them, at B'Elanna like that. Not then.

"I can't believe you people," he spat.

Walking out into the sun, he glared at the barricade. It was nothing to look at but the same crisscross of bluish energy he'd seen every day for five months. The breeze blowing puffs of red dust against it made it spark and sizzle briefly. It barely attracted his eye anymore.

Five months. Sashana'i and Aratra have been here almost seven years. We'll never survive that long...

A guard on the other side, just a dot in that distance, paced slowly, almost casually.

Tom breathed, feeling the rage fluttering in his chest, wanting to scream again, wanting to hit something, burn it off somehow--run laps around the compound until he was exhausted. Anything.

But it was useless. Anything he did would ultimately produce nothing. He *needed* to be of some good, more than ever, to do something. But he couldn't do anything for her anymore, either, when she needed it most. When he needed...her.

He needed her.

Just then--finally, perhaps--he realized the full meaning of that as he let the sun pour down onto his dry, tanned face and stared out to the barricade, despising that neat, pale, clean officer just going about his duty.

More than getting home, more than getting back to Voyager at that point, he needed her with him, even if only his friend. He would gladly take that rather than nothing, though he now understood that he wanted more.

The irony of that turnaround in his life, he knew, would make him a very bitter man if worse came to the very possible worse--and likely a dead one soon enough.

"Bring yourself within, Toma," said Aratra from the shade. "Dalra must prepare for tomorrow's ceremony, and the globes must be laid out for regeneration. They shall be required past sunset."

Tom looked back blankly to see Aratra's understanding gaze. He suddenly envied the younger man's solace, his steady confidence, and he heard himself asking, "How do you find peace in this, Aratra? In anything that's happened to you here? How the hell have you and Sashana'i survived this place?"

The other man grinned. "With hope--hope for the end of suffering and faith in a more blessed fate without placing our entire being in that prayer--a balance of sorts. It is similar to your own, in its way."

"I don't know about that sometimes."

Aratra nodded. "Much like us all. Faith does not simply exist; it must be exercised, particularly in times of great duress. This is how we recall that we have had any faith, when that absence of hope is so painful." He held his hand out. "Ab, Toma. Hope shall not be lost this sun. Be'i bears great strength. She shall continue."

Tom's eyes turned down to the cracked dirt at his feet. "She'd better."

He watched from the side of the overhang, leaning with arms crossed against the support pole as Dalra and Miztri helped oversee the ceremony blessing the passed spirits of Likpa and Perrellga. Tom had barely known them.

He did know that Perrellga, an orphaned and unbound teenager, had come seven years before from Azlre, the second of but two cities on the Deslian colony of Cezia. Sashana'i and Aratra had been aware of the young man's family on their birthworld, but they had never met until Uillar. The regent heirs were from Sacezia, the capital city of that same Desalian colony.

Lipka was from Mo'igeth, traded to Uillar by an Unar not pleased with his household work. Tom could understand why. What he remembered of the man was his geniality and activeness, much like Aratra. Even so, he was very compliant--well trained. But Hychar killed him, too, when he was done with him.

Tom knew Hychar would likely dispose of him and B'Elanna as well, when he became bored with his game. Neither of them had bought the commander's "good worker" statement.

Without wanting to, Tom found the "passing ceremony" beautiful, the circles drawn into the ground, which Dalra and Miztri moved upon in rhythmic steps, their clothing wafting in the air as they recited in tandem words Tom could barely translate to himself. Others around the circle sat upon their knees tapping the rhythm on their legs, humming an intricate melody that sounded nothing like a dirge.

They looked...happy. Dignified, but at peace.

He could never feel the same about such a thing.

Tom shook his head to himself. Every time he thought he was getting used to those people, every time he started feeling some sort of community with them, they'd turn around and make him feel like he really was from a planet sixty thousand light years away with no way of getting back.

He'd heard in passing, on his way to the food dispensers, some of the Desalians comment that Likpa and Perrellga were blessed in their fate to find the spirits well, that they would be honored in their courage and humility. Yet in the same breath, they said Unar had taken their rightful claim.

He had turned back around, his hunger suddenly gone.

He suddenly remembered that he hadn't eaten lunch, either, that day.

"Toma." It was Sashana'i.

He turned away from the funeral to another waiting to happen...

He shook his head again, cursing his pessimism. Being realistic, he knew it was a possibility, more likely than recovery. He just didn't want to deal with that, needed to give it every chance. Everyone else seemed to be but him. Or at least that's what it felt like sometimes.

"Ab," she said simply.

He did, moving back into the overhang. Upon arriving at Sashana'i's side, his gaze went immediately to B'Elanna. Her mouth was open, pale inside. She didn't move but to breathe, and barely so. She hung limply, her bony, yellowish chest bobbing slightly with tiny breaths.

If he ever thought she looked like hell before, it didn't compare to what she looked like then. Dead. Just another damned victim of that poisonous planet...

He blinked, feeling his eyes moisten and warding it away. "What do you need?" he asked.

With her gentle, tattooed hand, Sashana'i gestured to him to come down. When he did, she moved B'Elanna to him. Understanding what she was doing, he sat back and crossed his ankles to hold B'Elanna in the ring of his legs, as Sashana'i had done.

"Wah-ta," she said softly, handing him the cup. She dropped another two cubes into it for him then gave him the tray. "Eta fiw-awk'o, eta'a t-sm'aw."

"Two of these, how many times?" With her gestures to the fresh water, he nodded. "Every fourth pour, two of those things."

"Toma ka'a." Sashana'i touched her temple then his, holding him in her eyes for a moment. "Tsa'a yi s-zha."

"Zhra'a ka, Sashana'i," he said.

She smiled more at his gesture, and thought for a moment before responding, "Yeh weh-caahm."

He grinned back despite himself.

When she stood away, he reached out to pour some warm water into the cup. Carefully adjusting B'Elanna's head so that it tipped back enough, he brought the cup up, began to pour slowly, as Sashana'i had done before.

"You hear that, B'Elanna?" he whispered, numb to the lightness he tried into his tone. "We'll be having her recite warp parameters in no time."

Crossing back to Aratra, who waited with her headscarves in his hands, Sashana'i looked back to see their friend following her directions, slowly pouring the water over B'Elanna's head, talking quietly to her. His voice was tightly controlled, but he managed to continue uninterrupted.

"Toma Be'i pe'a-a ma'i," she said quietly.

"Ka," Aratra said, his lips upturned but his eyes dark with concern. "Va'itsa ma'a tollyad a'i."

"Vaa." With that, she wrapped her scarves quickly on, into her braids and draped around her head as was proper. Then, she reached out and straightened her bondmate's headdress with a little grin. He smiled back. Placing her fingers on his forearm, she let her bondmate escort her out to the celebration of those recently passed to the ancestors.

The coughing sounded more like a death rattle that wouldn't quit, and the women's busy voices seemed too shrill to him as he sat before the coals with Aratra, half awake. Dalra had finally turned in not long before.

Tom stared at the small flames, thinking...probably about nothing at that point. He'd gone beyond worry. He just waited, dreaded the end of that noise that kept him awake, even as he couldn't stand the sound anymore.

It'd been three days. Miztri gently reminded him that her coughing was dangerous and they would seek to loosen it more, lest they allow the infection to spread. The steaming pails they would take into the sickroom would help.

That wasn't very comforting. Then again, nothing was at that point.

For some strange reason, as he watched the coals radiate and throw their wafting flames, as he listened to the hacking continue behind him, he could hear Torres' voice ringing out to him, saying "Lieutenant" in that slightly derisive way she always had on Voyager. He couldn't get it out of his head, that challenging stare B'Elanna used to give him, arms crossed with her weight tilted askance...

It seemed like a million years ago. Another life ago. And yet, they were both a part of that memory.

...Or, the sight of her up to her arms in Cochrane pieces the very day they'd gotten the okay to start working on the transwarp experiment. It was only a couple weeks before they left Voyager. She snapped at him as she bent down into the nacelle core, saying that he wasn't being much help. The glare she shot back when he gamely replied, "Just enjoying the view, Lieutenant," was priceless.

A twitch of a grin found Tom's mouth, lasted a moment longer than he felt it.

They were hitting her back again, within the warm confines of the blanket hut. He'd seen them do that earlier. Miztri probably had B'Elanna over her knees while Sashana'i urged the phlegm out with firm and rhythmic fists chopping against her back. B'Elanna remained limp and gagging throughout the procedure, but it did help loosen up her chest after a while.

Tom huddled in the knotted blanket, pulling it forward on his head. Idly, he wondered how many days they had left until they had water rights and could bathe. He'd forgotten. Looking down to his trousers--stained with dirt, worn nearly through at the knees and ragged where they'd been sewn--he knew he'd need another pair soon and made a mental note to ask.

If he felt like going on like that.

"Miztri survived the infection, many years past," Aratra said quietly. His fair hazel eyes had opened again; he had been watching him. "Her illness was a similar degree to Be'i's and also similar was the cause--an Unar glove. Dalra would not admit too freely that Miztri did earn the strike she suffered for by protecting one of the youths here."

Tom blinked. The fire was very warm despite the night's distraction from it. Curls of blue rolled over the rocks, hypnotizing. "I don't think I'll stay here alone, Aratra."

"This is understood."

Sashana'i came from the blankets to grab another pail of boiling water from the coal grate, replacing it with the one that had cooled. She said nothing when she came, or when she returned and crawled back

into the shelter.

Tom took a breath. "She's tired," he said without emotion.

"She shall persist. As bribes are not possible, she shall labor in every other manner. It is the way."

"I'll have to thank her tomorrow."

"You would do so again," Aratra told him, grinning slightly. "Take sleep, Toma. When Miztri calls at daylight, your duties shall begin again."

"They didn't stop at sunset," Tom replied. "I just can't do anything else right now."

Despite it, he leaned himself back and covered himself completely. It was already very late; he would need to sleep, since Dalra and Miztri would be returning to the detail in the morning. At that point, there was nothing to do but wait and tend. Three people were plenty for doing only that.

So, Tom settled himself, trying to block out the beating and choking noises behind him...

But as soon as his eyes closed, they opened again.

Duty.

He shivered hard as the frigid wind cut its way through his cloak and hood. Crossing the court, he moved in long steps to the illuminated barricade then down the row towards the refinery.

It was all he knew of, all he knew that he could do, but finally, he had indeed found something he *could* do. It was all he had except B'Elanna, who was worth a hell of a lot more to him...and he hoped she wouldn't mind her unwitting addition to the pot.

If she noticed. She only wore her tunic at night anymore.

No, he knew he'd have to tell her.

There was no other choice, he reminded himself as he turned away from a blast of frozen dirt and forced his teeth from chattering. What was it, anyway? Nothing that really mattered. Nothing that would make much difference if he succeeded. None of that mattered there. Only she did.

Then he wondered why he'd thought it a big deal in the first place.

When the wind ebbed, he moved again, thinking surely there would be at least one Unar watching the refinery at night in spite of the Desalians' honesty and whatever trouble Sashana'i was sensing of late.

Finally, he spotted one--at the end of the row on the other side of the barricade, pacing slowly in the moonlight. The Unar's face, lit in the glow, was even more ghostly there than under the sun. His silvery eyes were on the building.

Tom cleared his throat, continuing forward.

The officer merely turned and stared.

Approaching more slowly then, he steeled himself. The sentry was the same guard from the other day, who had sent them to quarters. Maybe he'd be willing...or maybe not.

"Trade," he said tightly.

The officer smirked for want of a laugh.

Rolling his eyes, Tom offered his frozen hand.

The Unar looked down to the gold pieces then met the cloaked man's eyes again. "These?"

"It's the only trade I can make," Tom admitted without shame--the guard already knew he had nothing, after all. "The only one I will."

The other man grew thoughtful, examining the trembling and intent prisoner. "You are desperate," he commented. "Your woman is untreated and requires this trade."

Tom blinked, surprised to hear an Unar guard talking to him in a full sentence. "Yeah--both. She doesn't know I'm here, though."

"You would give away the ornaments of your former leadership, your identity, for her?"

He was even more surprised to hear that.

The guard continued, watching the prisoner in every move, "I was one of those who took you to your present quarters, drask, when you first were interred here. I saw your pride, your strength, and your attempts in your ignorance to speak out and claim position. It was still upon your lips, it seemed, when we put you and your lady into residence, and after."

It seemed like ages ago, but it came back in a flash, that curious stare--one unlike any given to him by an Unar then or after. "You were the one who was looking in?"

"I was," the guard replied. "Like my fellow officers, I wondered how long you would remain alive, if you would continue to be as rebellious as an Antral. It is interesting how you have adjusted to both climates."

Tom's stare narrowed with that one. "My people have a tendency to adapt to their conditions."

"And now the conditions you cannot overcome have brought you to give away that which symbolized your power, so to save your other, the female? You have yet weakened in Uillar that you would come to me with such fear in your eyes."

Blowing a breath through his nostrils, Tom willed down his despise of those people and their games. "Nice of you to notice. Trade?"

"Were it not for your diligence, Commander Hychar would seek the death of your other for her abhorrent markings and distasteful airs--and you for your near equal disrespect and disgracefulness."

Tom held his tongue.

"But you have withstood him, resisted him."

"We've tried."

"And now you come to sell your identity so to resist him in the future--by her side still?"

"That sounds about right. Trade?"

The guard's eyes squinted with thought; a curious grin curled his mouth. "Hychar may hear of this. He would be very pleased to think you have relinquished the symbols of your rank, community and prestige."

Tom tilted his head. "Then again, he might not hear about it."

"He suspects her illness, for her absence at detail," the guard informed him.

"Yeah, well, I frankly don't care what he knows at this point. You can say whatever you want to him, too. That's your right--as Unar, if I'm not mistaken." He offered his hand again, forcing his facade to remain steady, damning himself if he even blinked. "Trade, Unar?"

Again, the man looked down to the various pieces, his eyes flickering over them more concertedly. He met the prisoner's stare again, held it several seconds before parting his lips for a slow breath. "You require?"

"Antibiotics. Whatever you can get--whatever these will buy. I'm willing to trust you."

"Because you have no choice," the guard clarified.

"Thanks for the update. Deal?"

"Gold?"

"Pure. Coating duranium."

The guard turned his chin in acceptance. "Separate the mechanism from the plate."

Tom did as told, popping the front piece from his commbadge, and then removing the beacon chip with painfully cold fingers. He wondered how he could do it even while he was succeeding.

"Pass the items between the beams." Carefully, Tom obeyed again. "Remain in that shadow."

Tom looked over to the dark space of the dock where he and B'Elanna usually worked. The guard was already slipping away into a nearby building. Moving himself as ordered, Tom crouched down by the flat, huddling himself closely in the corner. There, he waited.

He waited until the next moon was almost overhead, well over an hour.

He did not move.

The shadow had crept away, leaving only a slim area of darkness between the light and his convulsively shivering body. He still waited, trying to convince himself that he'd not just given their insignia and his commbadge cover away for nothing. The experience in his life said that he'd just been too damned impulsive and desperate, and that he'd been stupider than usual, totally selfish for not

sending Sashana'i or Dalra. Now he was probably paying for it, freezing to death on the edge of an alien forced labor camp.

At least he'd get it over with...

But what if B'Elanna survived?

He continued to wait.

The guard appeared, strolling out as if he was on his usual patrol, oblivious to anything inside the barricade.

Then his hand came away from his tucked rifle to toss a fist-sized cylinder between the illuminated field grids.

He continued his path undisturbed.

Tom stared at the cylinder above his chattering teeth until the guard had completely passed. When it was clear, he scrambled up to the forcefield to snatch up the cylinder. Stuffing it in his pocket and pulling his hood close to his neck, he got to his feet and ran back across the court to the rear row of shanties, his shadow but a blur in the third moon's pre-dawn light.

The warmth of the blanket shelter hurt Tom's teeth when he crawled in unannounced. Sashana'i awoke slowly to watch Miztri crawling over to him, putting her warm hands on his cheeks.

"You shall procure your own plague," the woman whispered. "Bring yourself closer to the kettles, exchange places with--"

"No," Tom managed, rooting around for his pocket opening. Finally, he found the cylinder and pulled it out, displaying it in a shaking hand.

Sashana'i moved herself upright, staring at the tube, then Tom, then the tube again. "I'i?"

"I bribed a guard," Tom said, coughing a laugh. "The gold from our uniforms--everything except my translator matrix and B'Elanna's commbadge. That should be in here somewhere, in her trouser pocket. --Just tell me it's the right stuff."

As Sashana'i opened the tube, Miztri leaned up and embraced the younger man. "Your spirit truly bears goodness, Toma."

"It'll bear more if this works," he said, moving closer to the generator, to B'Elanna's side. Reaching down, he touched her cheek, quickly pulled away when he recalled how cold he was.

Sashana'i was already holding the small vials up to the light, examining the label plates. "Si'a awm, pu-hi, k-whega'o," she muttered to herself.

"It is okay?" he asked behind him.

Sashana'i smiled back. "Toma ka," she breathed and set the vials down on B'Elanna's stomach to prepare the subdermal spray unit. "Za'ov appwib. Z-sha'e ka ikowt Unah pahwa'us."

Miztri grinned and moved to rub Tom's arms from behind. "Your gold made purchase of far more than B'Elanna shall require. The Unar was in need. A good sign of more trading can be seen in this, Toma."

Tom watched Sashana'i expertly fill one of the spray units, tapping the side to check the level. "Or maybe I'd given him more without meaning to. Who knows?" He looked back at Miztri, a small grin curling his lip. "I'm sure you'll find good use for the rest?"

Miztri hugged him again, putting her chin on his shoulder to watch Sashana'i inject the medicine into B'Elanna's paled skin. "I shall, kini'isa va'i."

He'd only just lain her on their own blankets, which all had been aired, refolded and added to for her continued warmth. He pulled Miztri's old coat, a very warm one, she promised, up to B'Elanna's thin neck then turned to pile on her blankets.

As he turned back, he caught her swollen gaze, half open.

She drew a breath. Her lips twitched upwards. Then her eyes closed again. Her breathing was regular that time, albeit congested.

Smiling, Tom pulled the remaining covers up to her chest and began to prepare the other stacks.

The first thing she felt was someone stroking her hand. When her eyes lazily fluttered open, the first thing she saw was Tom, lying on his side, propped up on an elbow, gazing at her. He must have known she was waking up, was waiting for her to. His expression said it all.

The second thing she saw was that he looked terrible...worse than usual.

"Hey," she breathed; then she swallowed.

"Hi there, Chief," he whispered.

Her stare didn't waver--he wouldn't let it go. She saw small tears in the corners of his dark-circled, bloodshot eyes, glistening for the morning sun pouring into the half open entrance. His smile was tired and his lips were pale; the dry hand that caressed hers was tender but oddly cool.

"How long was I out?" she asked in a rough breath, clearing her throat to take another.

"Five days. You were pretty sick back there, Torres."

"I remember..." She blinked heavily, swallowed another thick itch in her unused throat. Slowly, she felt her wits coming back to her, her blood beginning to circulate--though she suspected that if she tried, she wouldn't be able to sit. Without having to think about it, she knew she'd never felt so weak. "I

remember," she managed, still breathing thinly, "you running away. I heard you...calling my name. I couldn't answer. You threw the blanket over me. I heard you slam the door, run away."

"Yeah, well, you scared the hell out of me. But you're okay now."

She blinked again, moved her tongue around in her sticky mouth before parting her lips again. "Got some water?"

He nodded and turned for the bottle they shared at detail, but set it aside for the moment. Taking her carefully under the arms, he pulled her higher up on the blanket pile behind her. She didn't resist the new position, even if her blood drained a little for it.

"Be easier this way," he said, popping open the water jug and thinking how much paler she looked upright. Or maybe it was how the light was hitting her pasty skin. Miztri had already told him it would take some time for her to recover fully.

Averting her eyes from Tom's examination, B'Elanna jerked to hold the water bottle herself. But the move quickly aborted itself and she ended up barely touching his leg. Unbothered, he eased the liquid between her groping lips until she nodded.

He pulled back, gave her time to swallow and her stomach time to accept it, too. "Okay?"

She gave a bare nod. She breathed some more as she felt the water drain into and coat her empty stomach. It stayed there, woke her up a bit more, too. She nodded again. "Another?"

He positioned the jug at her lips again, and when she had finished two larger drinks, he set the bottle aside. "Let that settle first, then you'll have more." Almost unconsciously, he reached out to stroke her hair, encourage her as she continued swallowing after the fact. "You might even get hungry soon."

"I'm hungry," she admitted, "but I don't feel like eating yet."

"How do you feel?"

"Like shit."

Tom chuckled. "Leave it you to speak your mind."

B'Elanna coughed a little laugh, too. "Yeah," she whispered, "but you like that about me."

"I just might," he grinned. His fingers flexed into her scalp, penetrating her locks to massage in little circles. Her eyes closed slowly, fluttered open again; she drew more air into her little used lungs. Encouraged, he shifted his attentions to her crown, pressing gently.

Then her eyes opened and blinked quickly. He suddenly realized he'd rubbed over a small cranial ridge beneath her hair. He jerked to stop. "Sorry about that."

Before he could pull his hand away, she looked up at him. "No." His fingers did not move, and she smiled weakly, almost shrugged. "Actually, that feels good. Keep going."

With another glance her way, he did, and she found herself both relaxing and becoming more alert for the attention, which she realized she'd never had before then. She found herself liking it a lot, really, the soothing pressure and warmth, the hypnotic rhythm of his movements. After a couple minutes, he turned

her head away so to run his massage all the way down the back, working in small, slow circles with his fingertips.

She stared at the metal wall through her half-closed eyes, feeling little tingles of sensation in her neck when he rubbed lower. "Guess this is the closest I'll have to a bath this week," she smirked.

He played along, even if he knew better about the last time she'd been doused with water. "Guess so. God knows what I'll find in here."

"Well," she breathed, feigning seriousness, "if you find something, don't tell me."

Tom laughed, embracing her scalp a bit before continuing around her head, slowly flexing into her thick locks, massaging deeply, thoroughly, until he was certain he could hear her purring.

"You're pretty good at this, Paris. I should get sick more often. I could get used to this kind of waking up."

"I'm not going anywhere," he returned quietly.

Her stare turned aside.

He eased around the places where he knew she'd been bruised, rubbed around the still swollen areas to where he'd begun. His lips curling up, he picked at a couple strands of her hair.

"Let me get that," he said lightly, pretending to throw something away. "Don't worry--it was nothing."

She snorted softly, would have shook her head and said something smart in return if she'd been any more in her own mind. Looking up to him again... His expression changed when she did, creased upwards as a little gleam touched his gaze. His hand moved to cup her head, stroked her hairline with his thumb. She was sure his look alone might have warmed the shack in the dead of night. Her own smirk she bravely held on to, though.

"What?" she asked him.

"That smile," he said softly. "I haven't seen it in a while. I missed it."

B'Elanna had no reply at first. She could see he was as relieved as he was tired. He never touched her so much and so tenderly except to clean her wounds. This time, he seemed as if he didn't dare let her go. She'd caught his sincere glances once and a while, but never such...warmth, aimed at her.

She suddenly realized that he'd just gotten back his best friend. She likely had almost died.

He wasn't saying anything about that yet, but she could tell by the circles under his eyes that he'd probably been up all those days. The intensity of his stare was like a life's worth of unspent emotions pouring into her.

A little taken by it, she compensated with the same smirk and as narrowed a stare as she could manage just then. "Are you flirting with me, Paris?"

He, of course, took it in style, switching his gears and facade with an ease that she both expected and was glad to see.

"You could say that."

She breathed a laugh, rolled her eyes.

"After all," he continued, jaunty for her unspoken coaching, "you're available and in no position to say no right now--or at least you can't hit me very hard. Might as well get it while I can."

She giggled deep in her throat. "You can be such a pig, Tom."

"Yeah," he softly returned, "but you like that about me."

With some effort, she pulled her fingers up to touch his yet unmoved hand, give it a slight squeeze--the best she could do. "Thank you," she said sincerely, "for everything."

Tom responded by carefully leaning forward and pressing his lips upon the crown of her head. "Anytime, Chief."

Only a few meters away, Sashana'i pulled her hood forward and shook a finger at her bondmate, tucking her hand into his arm as she swiftly guided them back in the other direction. As they walked, she leaned the cheek of her lopsided smile upon his shoulder.

When she'd first come from her sickbed, they almost seemed in awe of her. It was as strange as it was surprising.

With Tom's arm around her, B'Elanna maneuvered the trenched path around the shacks, slowly but surely, en route to Dalra and Miztri's space. During their journey, every Desalian they passed greeted her, many warmly, some bowing deeply in respect. "Tsad ta'i Be'i, havre zhiba'o tsi'i," they said many times.

B'Elanna could roughly translate that as "Be'i's spirit bears strength, her fortunate fate blesses us all." Just out of her sickbed, she wasn't feeling all that blessed.

They called her a good omen. She didn't believe that, either. Miztri explained that it wasn't often that people there survived infections, especially ones as severe as hers had been. B'Elanna shrugged it off anyway, mainly because she could. She didn't recall any of that time, and she didn't see much of an incredible personal achievement in getting better. The medicines and her friends' care--and maybe a little of her Klingon resilience--was what pulled her through.

Regardless, the Desalians seemed to believe otherwise. --Then she swatted Tom for teasing her about earning her reputation on her back. The cocky pilot was still pretty quick on his feet despite his slight diet, she learned. Either that or she was still very weak.

More strange was that none of the Unar guards had queried after her, demanded she and Tom join the detail. In several days, they'd not so much as glanced at her, even when they came close enough to see she was indeed not coming with the others.

Odd though it was--and possibly another of Hychar's plots--the present arrangement suited Tom just fine, as he insisted B'Elanna still needed time to recover.

Much as she hated to admit it, she knew he was right. She still did feel off at best and tired easily even then. So if Hychar wanted to play games elsewhere for a while, she wouldn't complain about getting her strength back.

As Sashana'i thought more about that, she professed that there was trouble within the Unar stronghold. Aratra agreed, and even Dalra seemed to be tuned into the atmosphere, seemed more watchful of the guards than Tom and B'Elanna had ever known him to be.

While that was good to see, every Desalian they spoke with seemed sure there would be danger to them all if the trouble increased or a sect scourge broke out. Still, B'Elanna and Tom agreed that any activity, even mere expectation, was better than the routine they'd all but become numb to.

"Even so," B'Elanna told Aratra as she pulled three rows of binding cloth taut and began turning them into braid knots, "I don't want to get my hopes up just for a feeling. I know Sashana'i believes it--and I can tell everyone's been cautious lately. But...I don't want to hope too hard, you know?"

A moment of silence met her statements.

"Dulla was a good man," Aratra then said, unstopped in his simple weaving as their conversation turned. "To Unar, he was ostensibly a humbled servant, and yet great cleverness ruled his way. His presence was that of both authority and charm; his voice was deep and clear with the timbre of a large drum. He was not a man easily ignored, even while his life required of him both discretion and relative solitude. Indeed, at the Satrif camp, he learned great sagacity, and not once had he neglected it throughout his time among us. It was believed by many that had he been fated to inherit the regency properly, Desalia would not have fallen, and his legacy would have been most honored of all for having resurrected our corrupted culture. However, his fate was not so. He instead turned his attention to his family, and, at last, to Sashana'i. He taught and loved her as would the blessed when her parents found their spirits. She bore but six ralkle then. He was a teacher to me as well."

B'Elanna's braiding slowed to look out onto the food row, where Sashana'i and Tom were gathering water into their storage sacks for Dalra and Miztri. Sashana'i had suggested they return some small service for their hosts' assistance, including weaving them some blankets from the "empty pile"--clothes of the recently passed that could not be repaired.

Sashana'i looked so vital despite the poor conditions she'd lived in for the last seven years. Her skipping step, cheerful laugh and breezy gestures allowed few clues to the life she'd lived. Only rarely did she exhibit any fatigue or frustration, particularly among the general population there. For them, it always seemed she tried to be an example.

"So her grandfather wasn't a regent?" B'Elanna asked, continuing with her work.

Aratra nodded then said, "He was the heir, yet he was not within power. He bore but sixteen years when Desalia was usurped." Aratra's eyes kept to his rows as he continued, "His father was Troka, an unstable man corrupted further by the splendor he was born into. This education was given by his father, M'hida, who once practiced fairness, yet was impulsive, expedient and fell into ways of paranoia and unnaturalness. In his last breaths, our once blessed regency had been transformed into a dictatorship in response to the strains of nearing Unar incursions. He had sent regions of his own into exile to protect his policies, banished thousands for their public callings for action against Unar, all against the will of his bondmate, Da'ili, who was in truth the blood regent. She bore great intelligence yet no force of character; thus, M'hida's nature could not effectively be balanced with proper opposition, or even persuasive council. Rather, her prayers were for hope, for that fate would yet turn their way back to

gentleness and balance. She met the spirits with M'hida and many desperate hopes, indeed, which she understood would not grow from M'hida's chosen heir, their eldest son. --No daughters graced them. Troka held the regency but ten years before Desalia was swept into the Unar's dominion."

Aratra's eyes turned down, close to the memory, it seemed.

"The spirits blessed Dulla, however, with his mother Yusi, whom Da'ili had grown to rely on--and correctly, for Yusi's wisdom and strength became both Dulla's salvation and her sacrificial end. Dulla's manhood came upon him in the first waves of desolation, with him and Yusi imprisoned at Satrif, where she bore unto him the family legacy in her final hour. Past his reassignment and eventual release, he was deposited at Cezia and remained at Sacezia. One ralkle past his arrival, he took the girl who had nursed him to health as his bondmate. Her calling was Aneschi. He secretly earned scholarship through a prichava called Watsha, and encouraged hidden scholars to find promising youths and pass on the way of Desal--the way of the scholarship. With the aid of his Antral contacts, his urgent whispers were spread throughout our former colonies; it was for this Dalra and Miztri had earned their spiritual scholarship at Maha'aje.

"Many ralkle past those beginnings, the archived memories within him were made known to Sashana'i in paintings; they were bequeathed to her in full some ralkle past that. As his inheritance had been, as she likewise bore but sixteen years. She enjoyed only cursory preparation for the legacy and remained far from desiring the scholarship. Yet Aneschi had weakened quickly. Little choice remained but to give the Allanois legacy to my bondmate."

B'Elanna finished a braid row, handed it to Aratra then took another few strips of cloth up. The more she learned about Desalian history, the more she could see why they were so careful--too careful, she yet believed. But at least she was beginning to see the roots of it. Desalians believing themselves all a part of one great source would naturally see the leadership's crimes as their own, twisted as that was.

At the same time, she understood better Sashana'i's decided way about that 'wisdom' she'd been given.

"Do all Desalians...pass on their memories, outside of marriage?" she finally asked.

"It was a practice of families since the first development of our scholar's ways, millennia ago, ka, passing family histories through the lines. Yet, this historical art all but fell with Desalia, when our scholars were separated from our citizenry and sent to their passings; those who escaped were hunted for many ralkle. Unar sought to control all Irlae's advanced knowledge, relegating our vast majority to ignorance and necessary compliance. Those scholars who have survived and successfully hidden have become Desal's only true resistance, teaching but the basics of our spiritual training to those they feel may bear it well, remaining in seclusion from society otherwise. For this practice of transferal, Sashana'i bears wisdom of the Unar movements. Though certainly not a scholar, she sees them well through elder eyes--as do I."

"Well, whatever they do, I hope *something* happens," B'Elanna said. "I really hate this place."

Aratra laughed. "How surprising you have become, Be'i! One might have thought you had grown to enjoy life here so!"

She laughed, too. "I don't know who's worse, sometimes--you or Tom."

"I heard that," Tom said as he came in. Pulling back his hood, he dropped to his knees beside her, offered a game smile. "Personally, I think I'm much worse."

B'Elanna rolled her eyes. "Of course, you're right, Paris," she replied.

Taking her seat beside her bondmate, Sashana'i snorted and grabbed a rope of cloths. "Toma ya'i o'awn vaka'od-sha'eft."

Tom laughed. "Thanks a lot."

Some minutes later, as the four quietly sorted, braided or wound the scraps, the unmistakable sound of the refinery grinding down for the day echoed across the camp. Finishing their rows, B'Elanna and Aratra set aside their work for later. Tom and Sashana'i stood to drag the remaining scrap piles away.

Returning, he helped B'Elanna--who still got dizzy with changed positions--to her feet. Nodding her thanks, she moved to bring flasks and wet cloths as the others continued to clean up.

"Far too much, Be'i, you do," said Miztri when she came into the overhang and all but fell onto a blanket pile to remove her cloak.

"You'd be worried if I didn't," she countered and handed the woman a flask. Squinting out at the row, she offered a wave to the other Desalians passing en route to their shacks. "Aratra, tell me if you see Latsari. I brought her gloves today."

"I shall."

Miztri steadily drank her water, drawing a long a breath after. Loosening her headscarves next, she aired the nape of her hair in the undecided breeze. "The weather cools, yet remains dry."

Tom chuckled. "Yeah, summer's a veritable rainforest here."

"How I have recalled rain," Dalra sighed wistfully, pulling off his own clothes, revealing his tan, lean-muscle chest. "In youth, Miztri and I danced in rain on Maha'aje when we were lovers. On the stones of Divtyada, we partook of each other's pleasures the first time, slow yet anxious, so desiring, and drank droplets from each other's cool skin."

"Niadra was made by us in the rain in such a way, I recall, my spirit," she smiled, that smile turning wistful moment later. "I so would wish for rain before our passing, to feel its blessing bathe this poor body in joy."

"In the realm of our blessed ancestors," Dalra said gently, "there shall be all the rains of a million ralkle, among the stars which bore us. --And I shall yet partake of your nourishing flesh."

B'Elanna spread Miztri's cloak out to dry and cool, smiling at their talk, so intimate and gentle. The memory of rain refreshed in her mind, too, she mused, "I remember when I was growing up, I used to love listening to thunderstorms. I don't know why, but they used to help me sleep."

"Why would your respite in storms not surprise me, child?" Dalra said. But catching her stare, his smile warmed. "I found enjoyment in them as well, Be'i. I bait you, good lady."

"I *know*," B'Elanna responded with a scolding smirk as she plucked his cloak and shirt out of his hands and sat back on her heels to air them out. "Seems to be the fashion around here lately."

She'd opened her mouth to add a jab at Tom and Aratra, but she straightened and turned her head instead.

It was so far in the distance...

Tom saw her, felt his chest flutter. Almost a distant memory, but he remembered it well, that expression of sudden, instinctual readiness... "What is it B'Elan--"

She held up her hand to him, cutting him off wordlessly. The others, also noticing her, quieted. Stretching out her fingers towards him, Tom got that message, too, and helped her to her feet. She walked to the edge of the overhang, listened another moment. "Speaking of thunderstorms," she whispered, but then turned to the others.

Together, they listened again. That time, Tom blinked, felt his heart beat hard in an echo. "Are those torpedoes?"

"Here?" Dalra asked, rising as he spoke.

"What were the Unar like today?" Tom asked quickly.

The older man shook his head. "Distracted, as they have been in increase since Commander Hychar's return."

"I know I heard it," B'Elanna insisted. "I've been in a lot of battles, Dalra, more than you'll ever know about. I know the sound--and I have very good hearing."

"I heard it, too," Tom joined. "Would the Unar sects fire on each other's camps?"

Dalra looked at Tom, to B'Elanna again, and then back to his bondmate and to Aratra and Sashana'i. All were looking on, knowing, yet expecting and waiting for his words. "They would," he finally answered. "They have."

"Damn," Tom breathed, paling at the thought. There would be nowhere to go...

"Danger approaches, indeed," Dalra abruptly told them. "We shall clear the housing, line this near wall. It is the only safety, I would believe. Should they arrive here, there shall be no defense but on the feeding row."

"There's not nearly enough room for the whole camp there," B'Elanna protested.

"This is known," Dalra responded grimly as he turned for his shack, "yet there is nothing else."

Another rumble echoed, catching the attention the other Desalians in the backcourt. At the other end of the camp, the forcefield flickered.

"The main power assembly," Miztri breathed.

As Aratra stepped out to warn the other Desalians there, Tom and B'Elanna took a collective breath, stared at each other.

"You up for this?" he asked.

"Let's get to it," she nodded.

Miztri had already scrambled with Dalra into their shelter to retrieve dry clothes and reappeared

moments later. Dalra opened a holding case and handed them glowglobes. "When the first moon brings itself--and only should you require light. Take yourselves to the front division, Toma, Be'i, for it is known to you. --Aratra, Sashana'i, you shall take yourselves back. I shall move to the refinery rows with Miztri. Be with the spirits, within yourselves, my friends."

"Be careful," Tom told him, pocketing the glowglobe in his cloak. "That'll be one of their targets here--the refinery and the main base."

Miztri pulled her hood forward then reached out for Tom's as well. "Yet targets are we all, good man," she told him, gazing into his eyes. "Swiftly take yourselves with our good lady, else I shall meet you among the ancestors, Toma."

Closer yet, the next strike sent a tremor through the ground. They all braced themselves.

Tom nodded anxiously, knowing what Miztri meant. "Good luck to you, too."

The older woman grinned, embraced B'Elanna then dashed off with her bondmate.

Sashana'i hurried up to them, kissed B'Elanna and Tom in turns. "Ag yi'a zhuw-ah," she said.

"You bet we will," Tom grinned gamely, patted Aratra's shoulder.

"Take care," B'Elanna told them and drew a steady breath as they disappeared in the opposite direction of Dalra and Miztri. Seeing it twitch in her direction, she then accepted Tom's hand to head toward their section of the shanty. "Here we go," she said then started with him into the waning sun, around the overhang's perimeter and into the crooked rows.

On the darker horizon, several land ships lifted from the Unar stronghold and roared away. Tom hurried himself and B'Elanna into the thick of the shacks, even as he told a few of their friends where to go. Looking down another row, B'Elanna did the same when she saw a few people turning around confusedly. Catching up with him, she could see Tom's jaw muscles tighten with another boom in the distance.

"I know we've been anxious for this," he said, "but they could've at least waited until after dinner."

B'Elanna choked a laugh. "Only you would think of food at a time like this, Paris."

"That's a relative term here, remember?" he returned, guiding her around a narrow turn.

"It's *always* been a relative term to you," she quipped back.

Everyone still out of doors now noticed the unusual sounds and vibrations in the camp. Some others had appeared from their shacks as the rumbling continued, and soon the thunder of torpedo fire could easily be heard. Stopping every person they saw, they repeated the Dalra's orders and told them to gather others as they immediately obeyed. "Then get to the dispenser wall--grab a blanket if you have to and collect all the water and food you can when you get there in case the systems go offline."

"Zha tsa ye'o," many responded as they moved.

"E'o av tsa," Tom replied when he could. *May whatever spirits be with all of us now*, he thought as he caught B'Elanna when she tripped over the trench. Much as he'd waited for that moment, he wasn't joking about the Unar's rotten timing. Just that he hadn't been talking about food.

For that matter, it'd been several months since he'd felt as much a rush in a looming danger, in spite of its constancy there--and had as bad a feeling about--

"Tom!"

He spun and saw it too--a thin cruiser skirting up the horizon, its power systems whining upward...

"Take cover!" He screamed and grabbed B'Elanna's arm, yanking her ahead--hoping the ship would pass them somehow. "Everyone, go forward!"

Those who could hear him scattered, but B'Elanna caught up with him as he darted them into the middle rows.

The cruiser paused--its power systems climbed higher.

"Naja matsa'i!" came a yell from behind them and B'Elanna turned and saw Kepli leaning, weaving through the crowd, her dark hands reaching out from her dirty dove grey cloak, starting to move but caught in the opposing traffic of prisoners--

"Kepli! Go with them!" B'Elanna yelled hoarsely.

"Don't look back!" Tom yelled.

"Kepli!" B'Elanna called again, pulling back. She saw Naja running towards her--she was waiting for him...

Tom had also looked back. "Kepli! Damnit--run!"

The cruiser dropped slightly and fired a phaser blast...

When Kepli and the crowd around her disintegrated in the blast, Naja collapsed.

The entire section of the camp filled with screams and a scattering of Desalians. Some fell as Naja did, tripping down others, who scrambled back to their feet to sprint towards the food slot wall.

Tom grabbed a breath and jerked B'Elanna along. Shaking herself, she swallowed her reactions and nausea and caught up with him again, cursing as they circled back, ordering whomever they could find. She felt her blood pounding--and her eyes tearing with both sadness and fury for the loss of their friends. Clawing for her breath, she met Tom's direction pace for pace.

"Get to the foot slots!" she screamed at another group.

"Be'i! It is too far!"

"It's the only shelter! Obey Dalra's orders!"

"Be'i ka!"

Opening a familiar flap, Tom found a sickbed and immediately grabbed another Desalian passing outside, a friend from the overhang. "Gihetra, carry her--she's too weak to walk yet."

The man obeyed without hesitation. "I shall take her, my friend."

Tom only glanced inside at J'vishi as Gihetra entered and grabbed the medicine satchel and then J'vishi. The young lady's yellow skin and fever had only begun to be treated with the reserve he'd given Miztri.

Tom blanked her likely fate out of his mind, even as he gave J'vishi a grin, a bow, and then turned back to continue with B'Elanna.

"I'm sorry, Tom," B'Elanna told him when they slowed a bit.

"Yeah," he said, turning them into another row, his eyes pinned hard on their path alone. "So am I."

Fire from the looming craft filled the air with a deafening boom and screech, and screams followed. The refinery and processing unit belched scarlet flames from its center moments after the hit.

B'Elanna turned to look at it--and for a moment, she was glad to see the structure's destruction. But a moment later, she was running again by Tom's side, damning her sore lungs, swollen eyes and threatening exhaustion. One by one, they ripped open every shack--she took one side, he took the other--to vacate anyone who might have huddled inside.

Another strike on the refinery row wall and then at the rear shook the ground and knocked both Tom and B'Elanna off balance.

A hazy, black smoke began to fill the small rows as the Desalians ran away from that destruction, all for the direction of the opposite wall.

"Take that side!" Tom yelled and pointed, though he could barely see her as a puff of smoke passed between them.

B'Elanna spun to another structure and opened the flap door--then hung onto it for a moment to regain her equilibrium. Adrenaline only went so far, she reminded herself, especially without that dinner Tom had been right to miss and a growing thirst in the sooty air. Being only a week past near death just made it that much worse.

Squinting at the form inside the shack, though, she blew a hard sigh. "Suoti, come! You have to get out of here!"

The young woman kicked herself tightly into the corner, staring at the wild-eyed lady. "Yet Jabra--"

"If he dies, so do you!" B'Elanna snapped. "--And vice versa. Come on! NOW!" Suoti didn't budge, but shook convulsively in the shadows.

"B'Elanna?!"

"I'm here, Tom!" she called back, but moved inside to grab the other woman. "Suoti, you must come-- they're firing on the housing!"

"I cannot! Do not take me into the fire, Be'i!"

But B'Elanna had already grabbed her sleeve and yanked her up with what strength she did have in reserve.

"B'Elanna!" echoed Tom's yell again.

"Be'i!" She turned to see another Desalian man pass her to take hold of Suoti. "Jabra awaits you in the rows, good lady," he assured her, steadying her with his hands on her arms and an assured stare. "All the others have been sent ahead."

B'Elanna caught his quick stare over Suoti's shoulder. "We're all living by our spirits now, Plecta," she told him in thanks.

"Be'i ka," he smiled bravely in return and whisked Suoti out and away.

Removing herself from the shack, she immediately coughed. The sunset had well begun and the smoke poured thickly through every row. Both made seeing increasingly more difficult.

"Tom!" she called out, hearing only a distant reply. Moving quickly towards it, she heard the rumble of the cruiser again, circling the installation.

"Be'i!"

"Sashana'i?" B'Elanna spun around, but couldn't see anything beyond the scattered motions of cloaks in the red and black haze. There were fewer, then. They had cleared who they could.

There could be more, she yet knew.

She could barely breathe, her head spun harder than it had all week. Her heart still pumped hard, though, and all her instincts were at the ready. It had been a bit too long since she'd felt it, she realized.

She didn't know where she was for all the smoke.

The cruiser turned--and another joined it. Suddenly the two crafts shot up into the atmosphere.

The refinery exploded again--but only the glow appeared, on the far side...

"Tom!"

"B'Elanna!" His call was around a couple of corners now, and within the screams, fires and explosions, she didn't know at first which direction to look... "I'm near our shack!"

"I don't even know where I am!" She inched forward, hoping it was the right way. The fire found new life behind her, roaring up. *Behind me...move away from it...towards the right...*

"Well, use that redundant eardrum of yours and follow the sound!"

Slowing to spit a throat full of soot, she tripped and fell against a corner--but held on. "Very funny, Paris!"

The whine of cruisers zoomed overhead, blasting through the lower atmosphere.

"Still there, Torres?!"

"You won't get rid of me that easily!" She coughed out the last part of that and sucked air only to cough again and harder.

"Well, at least my big mouth can come in some use now! Sashana'i's just been here--Aratra's gone to

look after the people on the wall!"

She felt her way into another row, grabbing every breath she could. She could feel the soot sticking to her sweating skin. "What about Dalra and Miztri?!"

"Aratra said they're going for the comm center while there's still power! The force field's down and the Unar are pulling out!"

"It's about time something went right around here!"

"Damn right! And you're getting louder!"

"So are--Agh!"

"You have brought this scourge--and in your companion's curse," came a hiss in B'Elanna's ear as her breath cut off completely.

Her thrumming heart dropped, her blood drained.

Her smoke-stung eyes cut back to see the glowering, white face of Commander Hychar.

Her heart froze.

He was holding her cloak collar. She was rising to her toes...

I'm dead.

"B'Elanna!?"

Oh God, Tom, don't come!

"My life is obliterated--but not before yours," Hychar growled.

Hanging by her throat, she felt her hood rip back and Hychar's large hand clutch into the back of her hair. She opened her mouth in an airless scream when he pulled it, almost out of her head, spun her.

"Maghet," Hychar said behind him, "the *leader* is yours."

In the haze, the fire loomed. A puff of wind and movement, she saw the shack wall coming closer...

"B'Elanna!"

Oh God, I'm sorry Tom. I've killed us both...

"Your corruption ends now, drask!"

Make it quick, you asshole, she prayed.

To her shame, she felt tears. She cursed them--cursed Hychar, cursed the Unar, cursed Voyager and Janeway for stranding them out there, cursed her own mother for giving birth to her--making her the one that got them stranded there, got her killed by that Unar scum...

"B'Elanna!"

She saw the wall--felt the strike...

It's over...

...then the next and the next--her skull grating under the force, in the unrelenting metal--and the next blow, and...

"No!" Tom screamed as the tore across the row and tackled Hychar onto the darkening dirt, taking B'Elanna with them. She fell loosely to the dirt, raising dust.

In a glance, he saw the bloody pulp that was her face--unmoving...

With a cry, Tom threw his fist into the Unar's sternum. Hychar immediately rolled them, but Tom scampered out from the trap, spinning to kick the other man in the face.

Hychar was thrown back, dazed momentarily, but recovered enough to stagger to his feet and turn back to the demon's companion...

Tom, gasping, crying, was ready for him.

Hychar lunged and Tom struck, directly below his collar and to the left--where he'd been told an Unar's heart was. Hychar struck back, cracking an upper rib. Tom feinted when another jab came at him and whipped back elbow first into Hychar's nose--cracking it on impact.

"That's for B'Elanna," he snarled and followed Hychar back, readying for another blow.

But Hychar somehow got his hand up first and used Tom's stronger momentum to grab his cloak collar and swing the drask around and into the shack. Thrusting the man against the rippled metal, Hychar doubled the impact with his fist.

Feeling his wind crashing out, Tom felt next a heavy impact in his jaw--then on the back of his head when the white-skinned, rage-twisted official slammed him against it. Turned, another strike fell into his kidneys...

Then a clean, sharp sensation tore into his side. Tom felt it, like a draining, barely painful. And suddenly, there wasn't any pain. He didn't think he needed to breathe all the sudden, but felt as though he were floating...

He felt himself looking down, looking at B'Elanna, closer...then closer....

"You die, Tom Paris of Voyager, with your filth. I die, but I die purified."

The words were a universe away...But she was nearing....

Hychar dropped the man's body by the female's, straightening with some effort.

The cleansing of her filth had not been successful, once the ministers had come to know the level of her disgracefulness. He had learned this after weeks of ritual; upon returning to his post, he knew the Kahseht enemies who long were poised to strike his sect would hear of his vulnerability.

They learned quickly. They acted swiftly upon it.

But now, dead before he, the female would not follow him, would trap him no longer. The companion drask's curse died with him. There was some redemption in that.

Hychar staggered back, feeling the hot rush of blood pour down his thin face, over his lips. He wiped at his nose. The companion had indeed been a difficult foe...who had been intended for...

"Maghet?"

He turned into the wafting smoke and soot, and he heard again the roar of fire in his refinery--now gone to his enemies. The industrial complex all but destroyed, his years of work and dedication to the Unar mission had been reduced to flaming stone. Publicly disgraced, his existence was ended.

All for the curse of the abomination.

He stepped forward into the row, and as he neared it, he began to recognize the lump of cloth on the ground--and then the open-eyed death mask of Maghet, torn at the throat.

"H_how?" he stammered, looking back to the bodies he had left. "The...The Gozhor female...could not..."

"Gye."

Hychar's head snapped around only to see the glint of gold-specked eyes glaring into his--and two small hands wielding a sharp scrap of metal...

"*Pwihah!*" Sashana'i cried, searing into his ears and thrusting the makeshift spear up into Hychar's throat. Tearing into his tender white flesh and driving him back then downwards, she did not stop her move until the Unar was pinned to the red and soot-stained dirt.

He lay frozen in his shock.

Sashana'i gasped for air, her small, thin hands still locked on the broken beam, now stained with the blood of two Unar, as was her spirit...by her hand--by her will.

"Pwihah ye'a osw-ke'o, Hyshah," she whispered hard in her throat, staring with wetted eyes at the quickly dying man. "Guw-hyaw e'o ah Desawea. Sashana'i a'izh, Duhwa anai os pahag, va'i Ahwanois."

She wanted him to know that he indeed would rot--and why, and how.

He did not move, but she knew he had heard her.

She released the beam when Hychar's last breath seeped out. Then she stepped away and around the corpse.

Stumbling across as the fires continued to blaze and heavy, black smoke poured across the rows, she fell to her knees beside her friends, touched what she could of them with shaking fingertips. She opened their cloaks and touched their still warm bodies with utter care, knowing what she must do. Her fingers drifted downward to their hands.

Little sobs choked her as she probed things she knew she should not have, when she touched the lady's

palm for a moment, and then the man's...

The darkness had begun to bring the cool, so she opened her cloak. First pulling out her glowglobe, then Tom's from his pocket, she activated and suspended them.

Leaning over Hychar's victims, she spread her cloak over them then once more embraced their spirits in the only way she knew--albeit barely so. Touching their temples and then their palms again, she then eased their central left fingers into her own palm and concentrated hard. She could only work from her predecessors' memories, after all. She certainly had no experience or scholarly training. But what other choice was there? None, she knew, and puffed with relief when the connection was made. Collecting them into her mind and maintaining them there, she prayed for Aratra to come with all the gifts their bonding had leant her, and prayed to all her ancestors that somehow, *somehow*, she had not lost the hope she had finally found in her desperate life.

She had prayed before and the two had come of that. Her sin had brought their fate. That fate could not end upon Uillar. She could not--would not--let them go. So, bent like the butterfly over precious blooms, Sashana'i waited, tears from both the smoke and her own reeling spirit trickling down her nose as she prayed for Toma and Be'i.

For the future, they must live. I have sacrificed my body and spirit to all the flames of Prihar, yet I must demand their continuance. My ancestors, grant me this wish, only this one additional wish...our wish, for Desalia, all which has been placed upon me.

And she prayed the descending cold would be as swift and effective as the night and smoke and fire were not.

I need them.

3. Appraisal

"Never had the cold dark of Uillar been blessed so than then. The wait was yet endured, unmoving in prayer, in the dark, smoke and fire...yet to be acknowledged by fate."

Her throat sore, her eyes misting with that difficult memory, the recollection of despairing prayer and fearful resolution still so strong within her, Anai stopped. Beside her, she knew Ara was asleep, breathing in tiny rasps. Feeling his ease, mentally preparing him to awaken, she finally focused on her audience again.

Her family did not move. Rather, they sat with pale faces and parted lips, staring up to her as though half-expecting her to tell them it was fiction. But of course, it was not. They knew this, too. Havetsi, the next to bear the Allanois line and finally hearing the details of her elder-mother's history, drew quick small breaths as she clutched Cera's hand to her heart. Her eyes shone with tears.

Anai easily forgave their stillness and lack of response. Outright murder, after all, was unheard of among her people--and shuddered at among others. Even prostitution did not carry such weight, only great sorrow. The taking of whores by Unar, formally and casually, was a common practice, and the torture and murder of Desalians was indeed a regular occurrence during the occupation. Both were accepted.

A *Desalian* snuffing out the life of another person--two others--with premeditation and their own hands was another issue altogether.

Many tales of the occupation and later war were as grisly. In the resistance, incidental loss of life in battles, some rather determined fighting between ships, and even the planned assaults and deceptions were considered forgivable sacrifices, defenses as the lesser of many evils. It was a war, and though Desal certainly did not practice such behavior again afterwards, they understood the necessity of the time.

Planned, vengeful murder, even in defense of others--and by a regent--was simply unfathomable; the curse delivered to the victim was more shocking still. The terror of such blasphemy never had been completely resolved in Anai, either, in truth, and had long brought great dissent to the many more spirits

within her. Though, she never once felt regret. Quite the opposite, in fact. Quite the opposite...

Her family would understand why this was. Knowing what they did of the war and its resulting blessings, they certainly should not wish any other fate, and yet they would wonder about the killing. For different reasons, her guests would soon see the full meaning, as well. Though obviously more seasoned to such violence, they waited for more from her, some more concrete conclusion to that terrible night. They were still in the world Anai had given to them, slowly blinking themselves back into reality with her silence, almost unbelievably.

They would require more patience. Anai herself needed time to recover.

"Zha hevrra," Anai whispered, touching her temple solemnly with trembling fingers. "Until next sunset, our silence returns. --Babaki, Osna--my ni'ach shall assist us."

With a breath, Babaki moved forward to help her mother to her feet, her small mouth pressed closed, her eyes aimed at her work. Anai's bony, kraja marked hand immediately grabbed her daughter's arm, and she looked back to Osna, who woke Ara and similarly took him.

"Doctor Gihora shall be brought this sun," she said quietly.

Babaki nodded, also looking back to her weakened father. "Nali ka."

Harry Kim got to his feet when Anai had called for her daughter and exchanged glances with both his captain and Kes, and then with Chakotay. "That's all?"

"No, there's a few nights left," Janeway reminded him, though she too was a little put off that the old woman had chosen to end her story there. Two of her people sold and all but forgotten, the other two tortured and subjected to inhumane living conditions, eventually believing their crew had left them behind. The last thought was the worst of it for her, and she felt moderately ashamed, even if it had been out of her hands. Though she could certainly understand why they would believe it, she also knew those were two people who certainly didn't need to be abandoned.

They did seem to handle that well, however...together. They went down, together, too, left for dead by the beast who put them there.

Glancing around to her other crew, she could see they all were hanging on that unsteady limb, were even a little indignant that Anai had ended the night without excuse, but rather as though it were a natural stopping point.

On the other hand, the woman was clearly tired. Her description of murdering Hychar raised gasps and hands to mouths among her family, and it had been difficult for Anai to continue with, Janeway noticed. Her voice had grown rough soon after Ara had drifted off, still holding his bondmate's hand. By the very end, Anai sounded distraught, and her words came with effort.

Unfortunately, sleeping tonight's going to be about as difficult, Janeway sighed.

Anai seemed to notice this, too, despite her half-closed eyes. She slowed as she neared the Voyager crew, letting Osna with Ara pass them by as she held her hand back. "Havetsi," she whispered.

The younger woman immediately came to her elder. "You require, Nali?"

Anai blinked a nod, looked at Janeway and Kim. "Upon our next early sun, Child, take our friends to

Uillar upon their word. There, they can be shown what is known to them only in story."

Havetsi stilled at the request, but nodded a moment later, glancing at the others. "Nali ka."

Satisfied, Anai embraced her daughter's arm again and left them there, her small feet shuffling beneath her gown and robe, a shadow of the woman they'd met that morning.

The torches flickered, their fuel likewise depleted for the evening, and the family had slowly begun to rise and move from their places. Many were wordless still with the story in their minds, others needing to speak quietly on it. Mothers and fathers gathered their children, others turned back to their guests to offer what they could. Their mood overall, however, was thoughtful.

Havetsi's own tone echoed it. "Only if it is wished shall we take ourselves," she told her fellow captain gently. "My spirit mother's suggestion is not a decree."

Janeway shook her head at the kindness. Her mind still played over that hot, red court, the filthy shanty and all the people forced to waste their livelihoods there while somehow keeping heart, working to their deaths--and her people, Tom and B'Elanna, consigned to the same worthlessness...

"We're still waiting for the galacite and deuterium," she said. "I'd like to see where they were imprisoned."

Looking around to see a general agreement among Janeway's close officers, Havetsi nodded. "Then you shall be taken," she replied simply. "It is but a day trip in a Adetrit shuttle craft, which can be flown comfortably and privately. With a prompt dawn departure, we would return well before sunset. Please dress thinly and I shall transmit what medical precautions you would require before traveling there."

"What was so poisonous about Uillar?" Chakotay asked. "Anai mentioned it a few times."

"Natural deposits of sulfuric benozine are prevalent. The atmosphere is survivable; however, it bears deleterious cellular effects, as you have heard this moon." She looked over and touched her temple when her bondmate came into view. "I press you again, friends, please dress thinly. Its closest sun looms there at present."

With that, she bowed then collected her robes to join Cera, who embraced her upon arrival.

Janeway watched them disappear into the house, half wrapped in each other's arms the entire way. Before they turned within the doors, Cera touched his wife's head as she placed it on his chest. Her graceful, robed arms clutched him.

"You shall take yourselves to the gates?" asked a young man. The captain snapped her attention away from the doors, looked back to nod to him. "I shall take you now, should it please."

"Thank you." With a questioning look at her other officers, a more telling look to Chakotay, she drew a deep breath and followed the young Desalian through the yard gates.

They were as silent as Anai had become.

"How quietly you bear yourself this morning, my little wren," said Cera as he leaned over his bondmate at her dressing table, before which she kneeled, braiding a temple section of her long hair with a thin scarf. "I should think you might be annoying me just now."

She grinned. "And you might be boring me to exhaustion, my little *turtle*." He snorted at her usual jibe as she finished the one side then brushed out an opposite section. Her humor faded. "There lies much to think on."

He nodded, sat on the corner of the vanity. "Nali has kept much from us, from us all." Her eyes turned down from the mirror, her mouth parted with her sigh. "My spirit, what troubles you?"

She did not look up, but began braiding again. "The brutality of the Unar at Uillar is well known to us," Havetsi answered softly, "yet such exceptional torture, such intent but for Be'i's markings of nature being like the ancient Unar superstition of Gozhor Jihap, like the arches of their demon's realm--in my arrogant opinion, ridiculous. The Commander Hychar..." She shook her head, looked up to Cera again. "He was... I cannot understand such psychology. Though I am learned of his few records left in tact and study others who were as he, such...corruption of purpose... It is difficult to understand."

Cera nodded his agreement. "Nali said telling us this now, allowing others' stories to be told, retaining this, had purpose. Her words carry great force: He indeed found his spirit damned in the final attack at Uillar."

"By the hand of one of our own," she breathed, shaking her head at the images still spinning within her. "I may have heard it of Toma or Be'i, born as outsiders; however, a pure-blooded and bred Desalian? Perhaps Nali wished to spare her own of such horrors until all Desal was healed enough to hear of it? She is possessed of enough wisdom in these matters, as is known."

He thought about that, holding her stare in the mirror. "A part of her purpose has been served," he said, "to show us truly what we have endeavored to grow from."

"The ground they set when Desalia was liberated--that from which *they* grew." Havetsi finished off her braid and tied it off, reached out for her pins. But then her hand drifted down to the table surface, rested there. "Nali has borne much ache in her wait, so much toil for her spirit--far more than is generally known, of course. Yet it is known to us: She and Tola have borne a terrible burden in their scholarship. Now it is all revealed, all we had been curious to know..."

Havetsi blinked slowly, opening her eyes again to her reflection, clean, healthy, fed, unscarred. Her dark hair shone, was neat. Her dressing gown was trimmed with embroidery. The skin beneath it, she knew, was golden fair and soft to the touch. She knew without vanity that she was an attractive, well-tended woman. Peering into her reflection, she could see how Uillar would have fared on her, what lines it would have marked on her, how violence would scar her. She had seen it in her sleep.

"Cera," she whispered, "I confess...I would have done it. I would believe, had I lived in their manner, in such violence and humiliation, with such protection, I would have drawn the passing of that man and cursed him to damnation. I, too, would have sent him to Prihar with my hands and my words."

Cera let that sink in. Oddly, it did not surprise him, considering his bondmate's being. She had always been quick to feel and to correct. Still, her gentle spirit naturally protested the thoughts their nali had left with them, with good reason.

Reaching out, he stroked her temple and let his finger run around her full cheekbone until she turned

to him. His lips turned pleasantly up. "I should think I would not have placed you at fault, had you, my spirit."

"Yet murder, Cera. The thought had never been imagined by me before this past moon."

He leaned forward and pressed his mouth to hers. "Nor by me, Havetsi," he admitted quietly.

She took his hand, pressed her lips to his palm. "I shall bear wellness. And yourself?"

"I shall as well. Take yourself with care this sun, mes va'i."

She straightened. "I would, of course," she replied, restored to a note of humor in response to his concern. "Do not endeavor in my absence to make all your students slumber. Too little of your sun would be burned by this moon, which I may do nothing with at present."

He grinned at that before he left, his feet a light rhythm on the flagstone floors.

She sighed again when the door closed behind him. She could not afford too much talk on it that morning--which would ultimately grow into a long, difficult day.

Havetsi returned to her braids and pinning, silent before the mirror as she wrapped her long plaits around her crown, pinned them in place. With a finger, she moistened her lips with tinted balm. Then she found thin leggings, a lightweight, long-sleeved gown and a vest coat for the day. She remembered on her way out that she would also need a hooded cloak and pulled one at random from the closet.

She barely thought, or tried not to think much more, as she drifted into the main wing of the house and down to the breakfast. The tables were already full and clamoring with the children's happy eating and their parents and grandparents--cousins, aunts or uncles all--hurrying around them to get them fed before their school processions began.

It did not surprise her to see the patriarch and matriarch absent that morning. The table seemed bare without them.

She would need to become accustomed to that soon, she knew. Soon, she would have their seat, with Cera by her.

She kneeled down to kiss baby Lazeta's fuzzy head before reaching into the table for a sheet of bread and a couple pieces of cheese, rolling the latter quickly before straightening. "Peace in your sun, all," she said, smiled briefly to the responses she got and made her way to the kitchen.

"Your spirit brings itself among us well?" Babaki asked, already on her way out.

"My thanks, Yeshalli, it does," Havetsi answered and stepped quickly over to kiss her aunt. "My mother takes herself to the square at this quarter?"

"Beshelli has wished to busy herself," Babaki answered, "as many of us upon this first cycle of Nali's painted words. And Captain Janeway and her own shall be taken by you to Uillar this sun. I wish you well in your spirit, as it is a grievous sorrow we bear in our history."

"Yet only now is truly learned, thus again to be reconciled."

"Many rallkle shall be available for theology and debates of ethic beyond what Nali must finally bear

for her and Tola's long wait."

"And now we must wait in equal silence," the young woman added with a quick sigh. "Yeshalli, this would not be done this but for Nali."

Babaki smiled, her crinkled gaze as intent as her niece's was intense and averted. "Havetsi, your sorrow is felt--and shared. Yet we shall allow my parents their way. All my ralkle, I bore knowledge of words yet to find the sun, hidden behind her eyes, behind her acts. Though not in their nature, they did bear intent in their withholding."

"This is known," Havetsi stated. "Yet I would have preferred to bear more of this knowledge earlier. We have visited Uillar all these years not knowing so many intimacies of our family's suffering there, and also for our own people's inaction and ridiculous acceptance of a way they knew had been created by Unar, not Desal. We only knew that it was so. I would think my knowledge now would..." There, she stopped, knowing what the conclusion was but too stirred up to admit it.

Grinning, Babaki served that end: "Bring your pilgrimage that much relevance?" Leaning over again to kiss her niece, she touched her own markings then Havetsi's. "Be at peace in your spirit and permit yourself to feel what Nali has intended. Our elders' wish is that we accept their lessons and *interpret* our responses with renewed truth. This is the purpose of the telling for us, for *you* in particular among us, who shall carry their way beyond their passing."

Havetsi nodded. "Yeshalli ka." After watching her leave, she turned herself back to her original destination, for a strong cup of tracha to go with her customary light breakfast.

More than usual, she felt a need for that comforting warmth.

Janeway was not surprised to see the mess hall quieter than usual that morning, with more people sitting in larger groups, talking quietly or simply quiet.

Within the conversations, though, she did hear a few of those names she'd obsessed over for the past ten days, more so in the past one than the rest put together. She heard Torres' name on the other end of the room and felt her heart drop all over again.

Not long ago, she and B'Elanna had shared coffee there, a quiet, serious conversation of difficult choices that had to be made. Her eyes had shone with hurt and wonder as she explained her experience, finally closing in on itself, with her choice. A necessary choice.

It was hard to think that B'Elanna had been forced to make so many more, far more important, in a half year worth not quite an hour on Voyager. And it was obvious that there were far more to come, considering the legend B'Elanna and Tom had apparently left behind.

The need to know more returned to Janeway so suddenly that she had to draw a breath against the swell in her throat. She needed to know what happened to those bright young people she was only starting to know well, the ones she'd sworn to get home, all four of them, among so many others...

She needed to know why Anai had waited so much time, why she wanted to tell them the story, wear herself down when there were records they could have easily read. There had to be more purpose than waiting for an "appropriate audience."

She wanted also to know why Anai was the first to suggest they visit Uillar. For what purpose should they go but to see a Desalian memorial to a resistance that was but a collection of scavengers at the time?

Moving herself to the counter, she immediately reached for the decanter and gladly smelled the rich coffee as she poured it. She made a mental note to thank him for his trouble.

He wasn't in the kitchen, but that also was not troubling. Most of the crew who had been at the Allanois house had slipped into their quarters the night before and had remained relatively quiet after. Even walking with Kim through the corridors on deck four, en route to the turbolift, she had tried to assess his state. His sentences all were left with a shake of head, a sigh. She had mouthed something comforting--she barely remembered what it was--before leaving him. She knew it would do little good, whatever it was. It'd take time for them all.

Command or no, losing people was never an easy thing. The circumstances there...She didn't even know what to think about it at that point. In a way, Anai's story had helped her see that Tom and B'Elanna had bravely faced some of it--even if they did, naturally, get in a good deal of trouble anyway. On the other hand, the "painted words" were making Janeway impatient for the gist.

She wanted it over with, to be told what she wanted to know and allowed to mourn and move on. However, Janeway got the impression early on that the ancient elder, matriarch of her house, co-regent of Desal and the bearer of lifetimes worth of memories would do it as it pleased her to, and would do so at her own pace. Judging from her experiences at Uillar alone, she clearly knew it was her right to do so.

The captain turned, saw her usual seat open and went to it. That day, however, she took the seat facing the viewport, attracted by the sight below. Desalia laid quietly before them, a lovely beige, green and teal world with thin clouds and several moons.

Somewhere in the distance, Uillar sat, sulfur red and dry with three moons spinning around its hot laridium deposits.

Janeway didn't know what to think as she sipped her coffee and stared numbly out of the window. Tom and B'Elanna at least had handled themselves the best they could, given what little they had left. It was only natural that they would move on, try to survive...give up on their ship ever coming for them.

It was a queer relief to think that Tom had been angry at her, thinking she'd left them there.

What B'Elanna had to go through, with such strong hatred pointed against her: That alone had to be hell for such a sensitive woman. And Tom, defending her to the best of his abilities, eventually developed more feelings for her than protectiveness, and then finally gave up what he'd worked so hard to earn, not even thinking about what the Unar guard had suggested about his sacrifice. He'd let go of Voyager--but Janeway knew that wasn't all. Despite his wishes to resist, he'd come to live with the rules and ways on Uillar, and even learned how to beg sincerely and without shame. B'Elanna had also given in, learned to weave scraps for blankets and serve her hosts their water, live day to day, more humbly, without expectation and accepting her inabilities. Such a reduction in their characters would be natural--necessary--given their situation.

In a way, Sashana'i had wanted them to adjust, and in a way, she wanted them to remain unchanged. Why?

The pain they endured...

The Doctor had been blunt the night before, when she'd brought him the information he would need to create an inoculation.

"Sulfuric benozine is a difficult agent to counteract once it enters the bloodstream," he'd told her. "It's detrimental to most humanoid tissue with prolonged exposure."

Janeway had forced her stare to remain straight with his words. No matter where she turned, she just couldn't get anything but grim news. "Lieutenants Paris and Torres spent nearly six months on that planet."

"And were constantly exposed to sulfuric benozine? I would think they suffered quite a few ill affects."

"B'Elanna more than Tom, it seems."

The Doctor grimaced. Regardless how it funneled through his programming, he could deduce nothing at first except, "It's a miracle they survived."

"They were treated many times--I don't know with what."

"It must have been excellent treatment," the Doctor commented, "to have prevented the symptoms of benozine poisoning."

She eyed him at that. "And what are the usual symptoms?" she asked. "Off the bat?"

"Chronic bronchitis with pneumonic tendencies, loss of resistance to simple infections, various forms of ocular dysfunction, among many lesser physiological mutations which would be aggravated with prolonged exposure." As he ticked them off, his voice grew quieter. "It would have been...painful."

Janeway nodded. "Yes."

Still sipping her coffee, appreciating the glorious sunrise, Janeway dreaded to hear what was to come, but she wanted to hear it, too.

"Captain," she heard above and behind her then felt her first officer's gentle hand on her shoulder.

"Is Captain Havetsi here?" Janeway queried, her cup perched at her lips.

"She's on her way," Chakotay said, looking up to share the captain's view. "I've had word from the Doctor. He says our inoculations are enough to shield the effects of Uillar's biosphere for a short time, but he recommends that Kes and Neelix don't attend."

"Because of their impaired lung capacity," Janeway finished for him. "Do they know?"

Chakotay nodded, though she couldn't see him. "They're disappointed, but they've decided to visit Desalia again instead. Captain Havetsi suggested they visit the commune farms with one of her cousins, to collect plants for the hydroponics bay."

"Well, the food was nice, I'll admit. They certainly have my permission. Contact me when Havetsi arrives."

He did not acknowledge her unspoken dismissal. From his point of view, he could see how firm her face looked; she was hiding the loss--as were they all. Likely, she was also hiding behind the mug of

coffee, still suspended before her closed mouth, the lack of sleep they'd been sharing as well.

"I took a vision quest last night," he said quietly, moving around her to look out at Desalia again. "I wanted to start coming to terms with this. I knew it wouldn't be easy even with help. I guess the only comfort we have is thinking that B'Elanna and Tom went out with some dignity. At least that's what I'd like to think."

"We'll see," Janeway said neutrally.

He peered back down to her. "How are you?"

She had a feeling he'd ask. "I keep feeling this isn't real. It's so hard to believe--and at the same time, hearing what they went through..." She shook her head and waved to the seat by her.

"I wish Anai would just let us read a report and let us go," Janeway continued, a bit shortly. "Hearing the details, like she's telling them, is...almost like she's teasing us with what she knows."

Chakotay pursed his lips, gave a nod. "But she seems to need to do this. When I spoke to Havetsi, she told me that the details Anai is sharing were not a part of the open war files on Desalia, but remained in Ara and Anai's private memoirs, to be opened when they died. Only their personal account keeper is privy to all the contents. And it was B'Elanna and Tom who wanted them to wait."

"But why? Why would Tom and B'Elanna make such a request?"

"Maybe because they knew we'd eventually come?" he guessed. "Maybe when they found out about the Barrier, they left the request as a sort of will. Or maybe they didn't want their lives to be subject to translation until then--which I can understand, coming from them."

Janeway considered that. "Why didn't they try to come through the rift when they found out about it?"

"Maybe they got involved," he replied. "They had a good reason to stay, after what the Unar did to them. It's also likely that they couldn't make the trip through the Barrier with the ships they had at the time."

"That's possible." But again, she shook her head. "I don't know, Chakotay. The more I think about it, the more I want answers, because something just isn't right about this. I keep getting the feeling there's something Anai isn't saying. It's like she's still watching and nudging, like she did on Uillar."

He let out his breath slowly. "I guess we'll find out if she wants to tell us."

She grinned uneasily. "And until then, we'll just have to be patient."

"It worked for Anai in the end."

Her grin melted away. "Yes."

"There lie four plots in the commune gardens intended to my tola's house," said Dilsa as she tied her apron over her day coat and pulled her long hair over the ties. A teenager, the willowy young woman was yet as full of energy as much of her family and gracious to Kes and Neelix when she opened the door

for them. "It would be please to share them with you, friends."

"Babaki said we might have a few samples," Kes said, "for our hydroponics bay."

She nodded, her brown eyes twinkling with her sincere smile. "You are welcome to take what pleases you. Yet a sack of your own is yours first. Bring yourself and we shall procure what we require."

Stepping in and walking by Neelix's side, Kes followed the girl through Ara's house, which like everything else, she noticed, was built with natural lines. A wide, curved staircase, stretching languidly up to the second storey and oval flagstone floors dominated the back corner of a large, round hall, while arched doorways led into room after room of subtly colored accessories, books and furniture, walls decorated with murals and real, fern-like climbing vines that had been trained around the arches. Some of the vast family sat within the rooms, working, talking, drawing, sewing, even napping on pillows with their babies.

In one door was a library--the straightest of all the rooms--stacked to the ceiling with books and decorated with low tables and plush pillows to kneel upon. Desalians did not have chairs, she noticed, but more like high benches for temporary rest and pillows for sitting. At the end of a long corridor was a warm, earth-colored room with three glass wall fountains and several long, low tables. Fruit bowls and breads in glass cases sat at about every other meter. It was likely the dining room, suitable for at least fifty, the way they seated themselves.

Passing the room, Dilsi turned into an atrium and, crossing it, pulled aside a long set of mosaic glass doors. From there, she led her guests into the back garden, where the stories of the night before had been told. Anai and Ara were easily visible in its center, within the lush ferns and vines of gold, coral and blue flowers.

She was leaning over him, her wrinkled hands rested upon his temples, smiling gently as she stared down, very still. His trembling hand was on her lap, caressing gently and giving her leg an occasional squeeze.

Hearing others enter, however, Anai looked up then carefully leaned down to kiss Ara before removing her fingers from his face. Rising, she collected herself to give the others her attention.

"Your forgiveness for our intrusion, Nali," Dilsi said with a low bow as soon as the elder woman moved unevenly to her feet. "Cousin Havetsi has suggested our friends explore our harvests. We brought ourselves to procure sacks."

The elder held her hands out and the young woman moved to bring them to her temples. "There was no disturbance," Anai said quietly and patted Dilsi's cheek. "Tola and I have finished."

"Nali ka."

Anai looked across. "Certainly, the fields would be of some use to your own," she told Kes and Neelix. "All they offer is open to you. I would wish it."

"We saw them on the way in," Neelix said, still slightly uncomfortable at having disturbed the elderly couple, whatever they were doing. "The fields look very abundant."

"A blessing in consideration," Anai said, a bit inward before she drew a new breath. "You have brought yourselves past our midseason rain. The full harvest is in a du'ave." Drawing up her robe, she stepped

nearer to them, turning her eyes back to the Ocampan.

Kes blinked.

"Yet," the old woman said in a second thought, "perhaps you, Dilsi, would take Neelix. It is the man's duty to collect food, as it is the lady's to show a way. He shall gain acquaintance with Laricha and Mru'a, who tend there now, while I care for this child."

Dilsi giggled. "Nali ka--should this not be a burden to you."

Kes had not broken Anai's stare, but finally did to give Neelix a smile. "I really would like to know more about what's here. The flowers are so interesting. Very fragrant."

Neelix, bemused by the change in his plans, looked back at the garden in question before he responded. "Well, I guess I could," he conceded. "I know you love your flowers. --Unless you'd rather come with us."

"Actually, I'd like to explore the garden, since we have the time today. You don't mind, do you?"

The Talaxian shook his head briskly. "No, no. You're right. We might not have time tomorrow."

"If you need help when you get there, contact me and I'll come."

Glad the man had little trouble with Kes' decision, Anai waited for the man to kiss his lady in a short farewell, motioning to Dilsi to procure the sacks in the meantime. When the Talaxian continued to tell Kes exactly where and how long he would be, though, Anai sighed, shrugged to herself and went to sit Ara up in his place. It had been enough time for him to do so.

"What pot do you stir this sun?" he queried softly, cringing as he felt his bones creak at the new position.

"She bears empathic abilities and is of willing spirit," Anai told him in their finer tongue, "She is a better choice considering our wishes, I would believe."

She need say no more. Ara picked up his book and flipped it open to the ribbon. "Mes va'i ka," he replied, bowing slightly in return to Dilsi and Neelix--who bowed three or four times, much to Ara's amusement--as they exited. "Our good child shall find great enjoyment in the garden."

When Kes turned around, she saw the ancient lady's marked hand held out to her, gesturing her to come closer. As she did, the man of the house offered a small nod then bent into his reading, licking a finger to set aside a ribbon then turn a tissue-thin page. Like when she first saw them the night before, Kes couldn't help but gaze at Ara and his wife. So genuinely kind in their expressions, so welcoming and wise...and yet...

Kes couldn't finish the thought, and so she only smiled at her hostess once they were alone. The elder raised her chin as she returned her attention.

"What meets your mind, Child?" Anai asked.

Kes shook her head, replacing her unfinished idea with another curiosity. "I was just wondering... How old are you--if I may ask?"

"I bear this sun one hundred and thirty-five years." She giggled at Kes' reaction. "Ka. Our passing shall arrive at enough years among Desal, I should think."

"Your people seem to accept death very well. Even on Uillar, in your story, you talked about the death ceremony as being very beautiful."

"When bodily life passes, the living force itself is celebrated as it is now," Anai replied. "As natural as birth is our passing, and both are cherished."

"I'm curious as to why you fought for life then," Kes said, "if death was so acceptable."

Again, the old woman smiled at her. "Who would not wish to continue life and their beloved to continue, even while the inevitable shall occur despite our methods? We live to remain among the living world, Child, to fill its blessing with experience--as do you. This too is of nature's breeding. Yet when the passing meets our fate, it is just that--passing unto our truest beings, returning to that from which we came. Nothing is left but to celebrate what has been experienced among the living."

Kes nodded, understanding, and saw Anai's pale hand rise from the folds of her robe again. Her knotted fingers twitched, motioning. "Yes, the garden."

Anai waited until Kes came near then placed her warm hand on the younger woman's arm to lead her. "You shall first see the daknals, Kes," she said softly. "A breed bred here is not unlike a one I knew in my youth, upon Cezia."

From his reading, Ara peeked up to see his bondmate leading the fair-featured girl towards the fountain. His mouth creased upwards before he returned to his book.

"Past the Unar War, we have gathered here to share remembrance of those who suffered and passed upon this world."

Havetsi's eyes closed partially as she spoke, pausing at her controls as they drifted around a small moon, the closest moon to Uillar.

"For fifty-two revolutions, forced labor and painful illness was the sole reputation of Uillar. It was rightfully feared by all within Irlae. That ones like Dalra and Miztri made some bearable life here is a testament to my people's perseverance. While true, they did languish perhaps too willingly in their contrition for the mistakes of the previous generations, they yet survived and struggled for their purity to be retained in opposition to all which sought to exploit their spirits and destroy all we knew as our true way."

Havetsi dove their small craft into the upper atmosphere, revealing the endless crimson horizon of Uillar.

Janeway could only sit and stare as the woman ticked off a few coordinates and flew them closer. She felt her gut churn to see the hard red planet--to see it near as her crewmembers might have, when they were taken there as prisoners.

It certainly was foreboding: A large, desert world, Janeway could see only only a few verdigris streaks

of rivers between polar oceans. Spots of former habitation could be seen: They were flat, ugly yellow blots against the burnt surface.

They were headed towards the northern third of that world.

"It has been left in tact," Havetsi continued, "has borne no alteration, save when the final preservations were made to the items in the camp, and the dedicatory stones were set by my elders ninety years past. --I remotely reactivate the barricade, now: It is customary."

Harry blinked away from the sight to the captain. "Is this Desalian territory now, then?"

"Gye. Only our own territories were reclaimed at the war's end. As it has always been in our modern time, this planet is neutral. The Worlds Council agreed upon its formation that all the former camps of Unar remain for all to see, so that we always learn and do not forget. In truth, it was Tola--our good Ara--who wrote the proclamation and, later, the memorial we visit was consecrated by him and Nali."

Tuvok raised his brow, but nodded a moment later. "Your 'tola' was an influential political figure at the end of the war, according to your family, with the other races of the region," he commented. "The 'painting' last night illustrated his ability to assume his role when necessary among your people, though neither he or your grandmother seemed to claim their power as regents otherwise."

For the first time on the trip, Havetsi laughed. "By the spirits of the blessed ancestors! Good it would be that Tola is not accused of being a politician." Her smile fading, she began to concentrate on her readings again. "Upon his scholarship," she explained further, "Ara has been a teacher, progressive in his trade and, ka, an influence to be heard. Being Allanois regent made it necessary for him and Nali to speak for others and make what pronouncements were necessary for progress. Well past the war's end, their voices and influence were *required* by Desal, as guidance was requested by the council in those new and uncertain times. Yet my spirit-parents wished no more power but good example and to be a centering force for Desal, as is the true way. They have worked tirelessly to return the regency to that ancient state. Only in the past two generations has their goal proved complete."

Banking the craft, Havetsi steered them to the main camp with an ease that spoke of her many trips there. The old Unar tarmac was sprawled out below them, flat and plain, with no ornaments but a few slab-like consoles.

A small bump and a slight whine of systems shutting down sounded around them, and finally they were landed. Without ceremony, Havetsi rose to her cloth-booted feet and pulled her hood forward. The others followed suit, filing behind the young woman as she went to the port.

Belying her moment of lightness a few minutes before, Janeway noticed that Havetsi had become subdued again. Though she had been willing to bring them, their trip had been quiet except in her fielding different questions about the region, the commonality of asteroid fields and other curiosities Kim and Tuvok mainly brought up. Havetsi promised to send them data rather than explain the very complex subject. Aside from that and her amused explanation of her tola's position, she had been rather thoughtful.

Janeway had been feeling rather quiet herself, too.

Glancing back, Havetsi told them, "Prepare yourselves for the heat thrust." With a few unintelligible words to her engine assistant aft, she tapped the controls for the doors.

As the hatch ground open, Janeway had to take a step back from the blast of arid air that whooshed into the hold. "Oh my God," she gasped, looking aside to see even Chakotay and Tuvok drawing back from it.

Havetsi did not look back again, but paused appropriately, letting them acclimate a bit before stepping down the gangway and onto the hard, grey and red dusted platform. There, she kneeled, placing her fingers into that dust and smearing it onto her temple.

"Ta'otsa korral o'avem atschi vallov ye'is," she intoned softly then got back to her feet.

Janeway cautiously followed out, feeling the sun scorch the heavy hooded cloak Havetsi had given her, driving its heat straight into her scalp. "This was where they were brought?"

"All prisoners arrived at this slate," she answered and held out her arm, pointing to the half-ruin of a flat-faced building. "This was the building where the Unar remained, where systems, people and visitors were kept." Moving forward, she walked them around the shuttle and pointed again. "The camp lies there."

They all looked out from their slight rise to see the double barricade, humming steadily in a crisscrossed pattern, rising about a hundred meters into the air. The remains of the large court sat within, decorated only by three large octagonal stones near the barricade. To the left was what remained of the processing and mining centers. About a kilometer to the right was the feeding wall.

In the middle, from about fifty meters past the octagons all the way to the rear barricade, sat most the shanty, which was just what Anai had said they were in her painting the night before: squat, ugly and unstable in haphazard rows. A puff of hot air threw a cloud of vermilion dust through them, dispersing and disappearing there. A hole within the shack sections, to the rear left of the grouping, was apparently where the enemy Unar sect had fired, killing Kepli and many others.

Janeway could do nothing but stare at the land. *My people were subjected to this hell?*

Indeed, it felt like hell: She could feel the water trickling down her back after but a minute there, and she noticed Harry trying to breathe normally. Only Tuvok seemed relatively unbothered--which wasn't too surprising, considering the climate of Vulcan. But the rest of them had only been there a few minutes. She couldn't imagine how drained and dry one could get living there.

"Bear you the ability to walk farther, my friends?" Havetsi asked them, noting their reaction to Uillar. Seeing their nods, she blinked. "Retain diligence in your coverings; do not breathe too deeply or take movements more than is needed. We shall travel to the entrance now."

With that, she led, skipping down to the straight, wide path that led to the entrance. She slowed there, peering aside to a strangely carved stone. Taking a deep breath, Havetsi paused, her eyes suddenly drilling into that rock.

A wind pulled around the corner--as hot and dusty as Janeway had seen inside the camps but that time clawing into her unwilling lungs and itching eyes.

Without a word, the Desalian captain sucked a breath and spit at the foot of the stone. "Prihar jekrria ye'i d'sak." She glanced back at the others. "That is not tradition," she muttered and began again towards the barricade, and then within a gate inside it.

Janeway cautiously followed, feeling the forcefield pass over and around her. She could feel the energy pull her hair to stand on end and tickle the sweat on her skin. The wind picked up again and she covered her face with a piece of her hood to block the dust that flew up. She heard Harry coughing behind her, not so quick to act.

Ahead, the Desalian woman made no moves, only cleared her throat. Instead, she allowed the grime to hit her, turned her face up into the wind.

Havetsi slowed again as they followed the path top a plain grey block of stone, near to which another entrance loomed. "This is the wall where Hychar inspected the incoming," she told them, "where Be'i and Toma were first seen by Desal, as has been told."

They looked, though nothing was there but the stone and the dirt below it, no signs of the away team, of course, though even Tuvok had pulled out his tricorder to investigate it for himself. A moment later, he closed it.

When the looking was done, they all turned to find Havetsi awaiting them at the second barricade. Her eyes, already bloodshot from the dust, found each of them in turn.

"In the time of the Uillar Labor Camp, over three hundred thousand Desalians were brought for labor. They were chosen for their ability to withstand the elements, for though infection here was deadly, they did not suffer violent reaction as did the Antral, Brijian, laskeb or others near in Irliae. The most troublesome of those races were brought here to hasten their passings. Desalians survived; we would work as told and not bloody our spirits against our jailers. This was efficient and convenient to them.

"Greater than five hundred thousand, including the two outsiders, were brought to work at Uillar over fifty-six years, and over one-half passed to the blessed ancestors within this barricade. Countless others passed for its lingering effects past their transferal elsewhere. It is to never forget and to teach our children the same, all that was left has been preserved, past the descent of Commander Hychar."

With that introduction, Havetsi drew a breath and turned to go inside.

Janeway glanced at Harry, gave him a nod--and one to Chakotay, too, when she caught his eye. Moving forward herself, she drew a breath of the hard air and pressed her mouth tightly closed, her eyes skirting across the crisscrossed force field.

Her people, like the Desalians who had passed through those gates, became nothing, slaves to the Unar and their "games."

Her heart shuddered against her will as she passed through the field, but she clenched her fists, straightened her posture and kept moving.

In her next thought, she wondered why she bothered to attempt any pride. Indignation was enough. It had been enough for the others.

"Ah, until sirril has been tasted, one has not truly lived," Ara said, his voice like puffs of a draft in a Cezian inflection. "It is like waking to a fragrant sunrise past a polar winter, one's first taste."

Kes eyed the elder man across the table from her, the thin grin buried within his thick headscarves. "Didn't Anai just say you shouldn't have fruit again today?"

"I am a wish away from the ancestors, Child," he replied. "A sirril pod shall not be my spirit's liberation." Handing the oblong, red fruit to the girl, Ara dipped his thin, knotted fingers into the bowl for one of his own. "Like this: Remove a part of the skin with your teeth, then sink them into the soft of the fruit and push the skin back with your tongue--and then find the pleasure in it."

Kes smiled as he ate his example, his heavily folded eyes crinkled with pleasure. Tentatively, she took her own bite, peeling back the skin as he'd shown her. "Mmm," she hummed and got a good bite of the flesh beneath it. It was extremely sweet, but like...almost like a pear with more sugar--and very wet. The scarlet syrup of it dripped down her hand and she laughed. He nodded to a rag, which she took to clean herself up. "Thank you," she managed as she swallowed. "This is delicious."

He also swallowed his portion, coughing lightly before he did so again. "Then you shall take a vine for your 'bay,' Kes. I shall procure a hybrid group that shall grow with ease."

"You're very kind."

"Offer proof of this by completing your meal," he returned, nodding approvingly when she obeyed. "Were you an orphan, I should think you would have been adopted by us. --This is an elder's compliment, yet it is meant."

Kes wiped her lips and hands again. "That you would take me into your house?" she said, watching him return to his eating. "Yes, that is a compliment. Thank you again."

Ara nodded and gestured for her to continue.

"By the spirits, you have corrupted the child already!" Anai sighed as she came back out of the house with a satchel. "Ara, the steam of Prihar flies before you, I should believe. It has been told--"

"I lie not on my passing bed, woman," he said.

"Tempting your heart so should make it so." Anai looked at Kes. "Sirril contains much chisak and speeds the pulse accordingly. My Ara's sweet spirit requires no more of such beneath this sun."

Ara sighed. "Shall every pleasure be forfeited in our end, Anai?"

Her mouth pressed down and she too let out a breath. "No, my spirit. --Yet eat slowly."

"This always was more pleasing, yes," he smirked.

She suppressed a giggle. "Kes, finish your sirril. No harm should come to you. It is good for children, as it bears great nutrition."

Laughing at their interplay, Kes didn't bother to remind the elder lady that she was an adult by Ocampan standards--though even someone Tuvok's age could be considered young in their eyes. Either way, she didn't complain. The two had been more than solicitous--mostly Anai, who had openly welcomed her, shown and explained every flower in the garden and even collected a variety of medicinal ones to take back to Voyager for the Doctor. Anai complimented her often as well, comparing her to her daughter Kyori in her youth--another thing Kes was learning was a sign of great regard among Desalians, though she hardly knew how she earned such adoration.

Meanwhile, Kes still couldn't help from time to time feeling a strange turn in their purpose, kind as they were. It was just something she couldn't define, or at least piece out in a coherent thought. She had noticed it when she first came into the garden.

But she did know that Anai was catching her looks but not addressing them. Ara was too. That alone made her curiosity grow stronger.

Unfortunately, she didn't even know what to ask.

But then, she didn't have to.

As she finished her fruit and cleaned her hands off again, Anai found a seat by the girl and reached out to touch her temple softly. "You bear a fine spirit, Child," she said, "one of senses yet undeveloped."

Surprised, Kes did not respond but with a small, quick breath. Not that Anai expected anything, though she did note again the young woman's examination, felt that curiosity about her hosts creep back into her mind.

"What is felt, Kes?" she asked. "Speak with truth. There is no fear of this, I should hope."

Kes shook her head. "I don't know. It's... There's something about you that's...more than you're saying."

"I should think this would be similar to any you may meet," Anai replied. "And certainly, many others among your own believe there is more than what I speak of."

"I could tell you noticed," Kes said then quickly added, "But that doesn't mean that we think anything's wrong. I don't think there is."

"This pleases."

"But..." Kes gave herself a few seconds to put it together more clearly. "...you know so much, have so many memories inside of you. We can feel that. I can feel it. And it's so...deep." She smiled, a little embarrassed that she hadn't explained it that well after all. "Do you understand?"

"Though your syntax translates as poorly as any other's," the elder quipped, "I might bear some understanding, ka. Many lifetimes reside within us, which to the perceptive is quite noticeable, and for some others, it brings much disturbance to their senses. They feel the activity within us, the stirring of spirits about our beings. What is sensed by you, however, is more than this presence. It is our curiosity." Drawing a full breath, Anai found the young woman's hand, wrapping her wrinkled, indigo marks around the young woman's fair fingers. "You retain a position in sickbay, ka?"

Kes' eyes blinked and widened at the change in topic. "You know I do. What--"

Anai stopped her with a gentle squeeze of her fingers. "Indeed, more than I speak of bears purpose here," she said softly, meeting Kes' eyes directly. "I require you to procure an answer for my bondmate and me. There remains the relief of my wait to paint the words of my earlier life, the lives of those we have loved and lost, not only for your own but also for my family, my people. Yet as well there has been waiting for equal answer. Your assistance is required--in absolute confidentiality."

Her instincts proven, Kes looked at the old lady askance. "What answer?"

"To a quandary, in truth." Anai paused to swallow the moment that finally brought her there, remembering the words she had planned for so long. "Many crimes of need were committed during the Unar occupation, on many parts. For my part, I own the conscience of a girl who prayed so that her spirit, silenced for necessity and circumstance, found desperation. While her chosen family knew only a true and honest spirit, there was an equal and purposeful deception. Be'i and Toma were left to nature by design as well as love.

"Upon our spirits lies the need to balance that necessary crime, yet I would not fill your good captain's spirit with a hope for a thing impossible. Would she yet live by her reputation, she might press it and cause more duress than the healing we rather desire.

"Our need is to know if our research of this past century might be feasible. Should it not be, we would yet take ourselves to the ancestors in peace, the words having been painted and our having met you. Yet more might be borne: another promise put unto us which we have sworn to see into. Thus we are charged to ask your assistance in testing a program we have developed."

Kes took the old woman's words in, almost hypnotized in her gaze as she spoke, emotionally yet with intent. Completely opened to Kes now, the elder's need radiated from her as she spoke of curiosity and hope. Kes felt no ill intention, too, only a powerful need.

At the same time, she had not forgotten her own ship and crew.

"Why choose me?" she asked.

Anai was honest. "Were I to ask your silence, your word would be reliable."

"What is it you want to correct? And why sickbay?"

Anai glanced at her bondmate, who sat unmoving, allowing her to take the lead she had chosen so long ago. Looking at Kes again, she said, "In desperation, Be'i and Toma's hope was prematurely destroyed. Though this preserved their insecure places by mitigating their impulses, they also were brought quickly into the fold of fate's turnings here. In sworn sacrifice and chosen duty, they passed for Desalia and in certain vindication of their own spirits. Yet there might be a way to settle their fate among you and--with greater possibility--find balance with Susik and Derra, too."

Stopping there, Anai decided again how to go about her freshly dusted plan. So long it had been in waiting, and having approached one she had not thought to in all those years, she knew her presentation would also need to change. Thanks to her cognitive and slight but workable telepathic abilities, the Ocampan was being easier than she had expected of their initial target.

So she decided to use that, too.

Taking a breath, she met the girl's searching blue eyes yet again. "Your good captain did bring herself to Irlae for her people--and she certainly is not positioned to continue with such loss of needed crew, ka?"

Kes' eyes widened with but a partial understanding. Then, the elder's stare turned, silently allowing the thought to develop well enough that she did not need to ask for more.

"No," Kes breathed, "she isn't."

Captain Janeway had to think to close her mouth. She felt her chest twinge with presence, her breath become shallow. Beside her, Chakotay's sweaty jaw had shut tightly.

They all stared into the tiny space that Havetsi had opened, just over two meters long and a meter and a half wide, two meters tall and dug slightly into the rock hard ground. Dusty rag blankets sat around the space, with a folded blanket at the end, substituting for a pillow.

On the wall hung a satchel next to a bolted shelf and a glowglobe, which was suspended from a makeshift bracket. Below it, a cloak was thickly wrapped around other articles.

It was surprisingly neat, that tiny space.

The sound of the whirring tricorder in Tuvok's hand seemed like a desecration of the residence, as if the wind and their choking breaths weren't.

"I am picking up humanoid DNA in these...quarters," Tuvok confirmed.

Havetsi nodded. "This shack hosted many occupants in its time of use, yet all here was left in the condition it was found. Only the articles have been remotely sealed, for preservation, Tuvok."

Janeway thought about that. "Then I suppose we wouldn't be permitted to investigate that DNA for ourselves," she said, hinting her preference otherwise.

Havetsi drew a breath in her turn to think. "A sample may be procured, should it please. It would be preferred you leave what you uncover in the condition you found it, however. I shall send back archivists to reseal the articles when we are finished this sun. In this unique circumstance, your wishes would not be considered unwarranted."

With Janeway's nod, Tuvok bent and moved carefully into the space. Divining through the shack, he respectfully overturned nothing but corners of blankets, a small stack of cloths, nodding to himself; then he turned towards the robe.

"That was the robe given by Aratra to Toma soon after his arrival here," Havetsi informed him.

Nodding to that, Tuvok unfolded the thin cloth, revealing a small stack of articles, one of black and gold cloth, the other of black and red. Both were rented and stained terribly, and the black was more like the color of dark brick. The arm of the gold-topped item held was together only by threads; a portion of the red cloth had a ragged hole near the collar.

Watching, Janeway felt her heat-flushed face pale to white as the Vulcan worked, taking up his readings and specs of samples. "Report," she said, more a cough than a command.

Tuvok was finished, and he began to refold the tunics as he had found them, and then the robe around it. "According to my initial data, these are Lieutenants Paris and Torres' uniforms. The samples I collected are dried blood, a viable source of DNA for the Doctor to examine."

His voice was quiet--about as gentle as a Vulcan could be.

It wasn't much help, even if she appreciated the effort.

Janeway's eyes flickered around the space again. It didn't take long. "Tom could barely have stood up in here... It must be over forty-five degrees right now..."

She shook her head, moved away only to see Harry's stony, troubled face. Placing her hand precariously in the sun's reach, she patted his arm. He swallowed at the touch, turned his stare down. Janeway drew another breath, barely glancing over to Havetsi. "Thank you, Captain."

When Tuvok had exited and Chakotay had taken one more look, Havetsi slowly closed the flap then stepped onto the trench path. "Ab, we shall take ourselves now to the overhang and find shade and respite there, as many others did."

Starting them off, the Desalian pulled her head higher as she looked around the shacks.

It was no secret to her, after all, her pride in her people--with or without her nali's stories. Her people had survived that damned planet and the Unar, lived in those horrific shacks, unclean and worked to exhaustion on a daily basis. They had never lost their spirits, however. Rather, they had recovered from that to procure for their people the good lives enjoyed at present.

Havetsi grew to womanhood with knowledge of that time, told so often by her great grandfather. The fifth prime minister of Desalia past the war's end, he had been elected for his exceptional intellect and intuition, his outright honor of Desalian nature--not to mention his subtle humor and genuine, endearing nature, which carried well into his relations with Desal's neighbors. Also, though upon his bonding he belonged to the house of Gidarel, for his parents being the regents was he deemed a good choice. Even so long past the occupation, one's family still bore undeniable influence.

It was he who first brought Havetsi as a girl to Uillar, told her of their people's plight and their later vindication. He showed her, as he had shown many others, so that she would not forget, would hold it in her spirit as he did, and pass on the same. He felt the great importance of his ancestry, and so with great reflection and love did he teach all he had learned and knew of that time.

As with most things in her life, she had learned it faithfully, made herself know as much as she could about those who had suffered and survived on Uillar with her elders. Yet just as Babaki had predicted, there was so much more relevance now, with her nali's words having enriched her knowledge. As they followed the undulating red path east through the shanty, finally nearing the replicator wall, she for the first time could truly sense her people's presence there, feel their hunger and pain and yet their continuance, smell their filthy, sunburnt skin and the stench of their tattered robes, hear their quiet voices, consigned but hoping, always hoping. It was quite a matter to feel one's true understanding, Havetsi reminded herself, breathing again the hot, hard air.

She wondered if her guests could ever understand as she did just then. Their people had been upon Uillar, too, and yet their race seemed not to have memories of such dominion over their beings. Did they, with their scanning equipment and stunned yet stony expressions, share her people's deep sorrow and dread to know planets like this had once been their fate? And could *she* truly understand, even then? Would she truly, after the legacy was passed unto to her?

When they turned at the end of the row and headed toward the shade, Havetsi shook herself away from her thoughts for the time to address her audience again. "The camp bore fifteen overhangs as Dalra's," she said, "and in his were hosted almost one hundred of his fellow inmates. Dalra was not of age to be named elder, being of but forty-six ralkle at the end of his internment here, though he took much the way of one in his duty. He oversaw their settlement, warmth and feeding, Miztri procured their needs in healing, clothing and tending in what ways she could."

They turned to see the rickety overhang, which was merely a series of large sheets of metal held up with poles extending out from a three meter high wall. At the side of the area sat another shack, which Havetsi pointed out as Dalra and Miztri's.

Gesturing the guests to remain, the young captain moved across a wide mall to the replicator wall. Upon her reaching it, a bowl and a water sack appeared in the slot and she took them into both her fair hands to bring the items back into the shade. Finding a blanket, she motioned for the rest to sit around her.

"This was their staple," she told them, taking a bite then passing it; then she passed the water. "Twice daily a bowl of ration was consumed, which despite its lack of taste was nutritious enough to maintain the health of our people. This was an act of Hychar." The last word came more solidly to her tongue, and more so as she continued, "He wished it that Desalians lived longer, wished their work be more productive. Their ration was adjusted accordingly, and they were permitted water to clean their items and bathe every tenth sun."

She watched them all hesitantly take their piece; ironically, the most reluctant was the man who claimed to control his emotion. Havetsi couldn't help but grin that he certainly was exhibiting something near to repulsion. Still, she understood, having smelled it often enough.

Janeway felt the soft morsel stick in her teeth and--true to description--become tasteless almost as soon as she exhaled the odor of the food. Finally, she swallowed and felt the meal sink into her stomach. The water she took from the soft canteen afterwards was clean but warm, not too satisfying.

"I can't imagine anyone even wanting to eat with this little sensation attached to it," she commented.

Havetsi nodded. "The prisoners of Uillar bore much thinness, ka," she agreed. "When one starves, however, one does not think of taste, or its lack."

"Of course," Janeway said, correcting herself mentally, too. "I suppose it's difficult to think about how Tom could have dealt with it so well, with this on top of everything..." Despite her mood, an inward grin slowly curled her lips. "He did like good food--was something of a connoisseur, *always* needing Neelix about his cooking."

Chakotay and Kim both chuckled at that. "He always said I was risking my life," Harry said, "eating in the mess hall."

Havetsi giggled, leaning forward, her hands and chin on her knees as she watched the others finally smile that day. "And Be'i...B'Elanna? Did she too scorn her meals?"

"Odd," Janeway said quietly, realizing. "I never remembered her eating."

"That's because she was all business about it," Chakotay said. "She got her food, ate it, drank a couple cups of coffee then went to work." He shrugged to the younger captain. "Not much of a connoisseur."

"She still thought the coffee was lousy," Harry grinned.

Janeway pursed her lips. "I suppose even acquired tastes can be missed. I can understand why they would be here."

"And yet, the talk, the community," Havetsi said, "made the meals pass with speed, eased the pain of this place. It was for each other's good spirits they remained as well as they did."

Harry's eyes moved around the space again. "Do you know where Tom and B'Elanna usually sat, Havetsi?"

She pointed ahead of herself to a lump of worn blankets. "They sat on the side center, near to the fire, as Be'i bore weakness in the chill. Miztri had feared she would find her spirit's liberation for the cough and cold and not Unar's treatment."

"Because of her Klingon physiology," Tuvok confirmed.

"It does seem to have been a lot harder on her than Tom," Chakotay observed.

Havetsi sighed. "Ka, cold gave her great pain, and her lungs and sight had been much affected. Toma, too, had acquired the cough, yet his lasting difficulties grew from internal injuries inflicted yet never quite corrected. The maladies of Uillar pressed hard on their untested bodies--which all could not be fully treated after. Yet this all shall be told. Far more remains for us all to hear."

Janeway peered over to her. "But you know what happened to them."

"Be'i and Toma's histories are known to me," Havetsi told her, "yet the many details which typically inhabit true word paintings have been the words of those outside their circle, those who had looked in. My spirit-parents have likewise related the many details of that era, while their intimate knowledge of your people has been retained for your presence, else committed entirely to their memoirs. To withhold in such a manner is not a common practice, and yet it is the right of an akarr tiras to do so--as well as the right of regents.

"Great care and time was taken in the recovery of our scholarship, our planet, our ways and community," she told them. "Supplies and desire were plentiful, yet change among my people by nature is slow, and I should think a primary purpose for merely facing the present was a means of protection. At the time of my birth, the peace of Irliae was a common fact, yet in the preceding generations, there was a great need for our leaders to be prime examples of all that Desal should be, and in that, which rebuilding all that Desal had borne and then expanding upon it, my elder-parents labored tirelessly, always, solidly placed in our present while ever peering toward the horizon, seeking wisdom in their steps."

Chakotay nodded. "That sounds natural for people recovering from a war. It takes time to rebuild and reorganize a civilization, aside from an entire region of space."

Havetsi's responding stare was plain. "War had never been waged in this region, Chakotay. Unar were precedent to Irliae's history amongst each other. And not once had Desalia waged war against itself or another."

Harry blinked a stare to her. "Never?"

The young captain watched them finish passing the bowl and water. "Difficulties were taken to scholars or to our elders and settled among a public forum," she said. "It is the way as ever, as is our belief that it would be unnatural to intend harm onto another, else we should bring harm unto ourselves. To injure another is to injure oneself and all."

Janeway nodded slowly, watching Havetsi gather the half-eaten bowl and the water sack. "Little wonder your people didn't want to fight the Unar."

"All among Desal wished an end to the occupation, yet until the resistance formed, there was fear that injury to them would be only another debt earned of them--Desal's suffering was a natural way of retribution for the degeneracy of our predecessors. We are all from one source and are interconnected..." Havetsi paused at that then went on, "Destruction of life by our hands, even for our lives and future, was not a concept accepted at that earlier time by the majority of Desal. They rather trusted that fate would be balanced eventually."

"But that changed," Chakotay said.

"Ka," she said. "With the public resurrection of the regency upon Cezia, with the resulting conviction to protect Desal's traditions and spirit, the way of contrition shifted. It was realized then how much mindful leadership had been needed, as shall be learned. I thank the spirits each sunrise for the sacrifices made for this purpose--more so now. So much more so now."

Moving to her feet, Havetsi pulled her hood forward with a spare finger and moved out from the overhang to dispose of the food and water.

Harry sighed and shook his head as he watched the woman step across the hot red dirt, her cloak snapping in the unrelenting wind. "How could Tom and B'Elanna live like this? How could they have even stayed here without going nuts?"

Janeway drew a deep, dry breath then let it out. "Because they had no other choice," she told him then pushed herself to stand as well. "They were only trying to survive."

Leaving there, they circled back to the court on the detail trail to see the processing centers, where Tom and B'Elanna spent their days recycling junk--their shuttle included. It was a short tour, according to Havetsi, nothing like the usual pilgrimage there. Their human bodies should not remain long, after all, and so she led them out to the gate when they had seen enough of the processing units.

Janeway was glad when it ended.

They were snapping pods in half, not unlike an activity Janeway once shared with her own mother as a girl. The vegetable was yellow, though, and shaped more like a snow pea than a green bean. About fifteen of the family was there, supervised by Tramasas, who with two other men carried prepared portions inside to the kitchen. Kes knelt with a bowl in her lap, turning her smile down to the scattering of young children running around in the yard. Loose gowns and leggings danced against little bodies as they hopped over the rippling pond or skipped up to their nali, who laughed and gave them a pod every time.

"She shall be filled far before our sun's ebb," smiled one lady, partially reclined to embroider a ring of red silk stretched in a large oval loop. Her tone was so endearing that it could hardly be called a reproach.

"You enjoyed the same curse, De'illi," Anai returned, patting the young girl's cheek. "You shall yet permit her memory of my person to be of dotage."

The lady laughed, shook her head at the fading sky. "Oh, the spirits' arms shall be full of will when you and Tola are returned to them."

"As is proper," Anai quipped and turned her stare across the yard. Bright hazel reflecting the late sun, her eyes drifted up to her great-great granddaughter, who stood still stained with the red of Uillar. The young woman's gaze, dark with the pain of her day, turned and found hers.

Anai ached for her, knowing well. Too well. Uillar was no land for the innocent.

The old woman pressed the low table, straightening herself to her feet. Moving a few steps away from the table, she simply opened her arms. Havetsi released her breath and walked across the yard. Upon arrival, she felt her nali's firm yet loving embrace, secure as bedrock, warm and ever knowing. She closed her eyes tightly, sucked a thick breath.

"Nali, the spirits blessed you truly to have overcome the damnation of Uillar," she whispered. "My own spirit hardened to find myself there this sun, knowing its pain so fully for you."

"Blessings may reside in curses, child," Anai said, squeezing the back of Havetsi's soft headdress, her hair beneath it. "These matters must be learned--as you shall know as I do."

"Nali ka," the lady responded, standing straight again to smile down at her elder. "Yet now the stench of its lesser curse coats me, I should think."

Anai grinned, too, knowing the girl needed the cheer--and to be away. "Best it is purged. My presence remains. We shall speak upon sunrise and ease both our minds, should it be wished. Go--be quick and a basket of ticgor shall await us."

The younger woman nodded and touched her elder's temples before stepping away.

She watched until Havetsi removed herself to the interior then pivoted on her cloth-shoed foot to look at the other captain there, cleaned already but dressed in a casual frock a couple of shades lighter than her eyes. Her steely gaze was the same, however, sitting above a whisper of a grin. It was a reserved greeting in a kind look, seemingly appropriate.

"You have returned alone?"

"Yes," Janeway said, offering no explanation. "I came back with Havetsi. She was kind enough to wait for me."

"Ka," the elder commented, "your dress befits our gathering this moon. I would believe you should be more comfortable. It pleases that you are well enough to bring yourself here without purpose until sunset."

"You have a beautiful world, Anai. It's not that that's making me uncomfortable."

Anai smiled thinly at the captain's hint. "Young Kes has enjoyed the garden. Would you wish to view it as well?" Without waiting for an answer, Anai pulled off her apron and held out a graceful arm. It trembled ever so slightly.

Janeway stepped forward and took it around her own. Surprisingly, Anai put a good deal of her weight upon it as they began to walk.

"By nature, Havetsi is in possession of a passionate spirit," Anai said, draping the apron on a table they passed. "She bears much strength and desire, works best with her hands, thinks with quickness and at times bears an excessive will. Errors in her life often result from this. Yet there is much gentleness in

her being; she searches always for right. --Much like a girl known to us, ka?"

"Yes," Janeway said quietly, surprised that she hadn't thought about it herself. "She's young, but she seems like good captain--and an excellent technician. Which brings me to wonder, that with your people's limited travel, your technology is impressive."

Anai's smile remained a knowing one. Janeway had turned the conversation nicely. "The resistance bore excellent teachers," she confirmed. "Certainly, post-warp technology was known to Desal well before the occupation. Desal's technical standards were rather superior to our neighbors. None in Irliae forgot this, merely did not possess it. Gratefully, the lessons of your crewpeople were taken in full, which prepared us to reclaim and relearn the knowledge taken from us. My people by nature devour information--they are difficult to change once taught, yet voracious when a particular well is tapped. Yet all in Irliae past the war were quite hungry, and yet well-fed with time."

Janeway looked down at the old woman, but she could only see her white headscarves at that angle, partially woven into her silver hair and pinned with amber stone beads. The ancient, wrinkled hand clutching to her forearm bore the markings signifying her marriage. Delicate lines of indigo like on her temples, the hand markings were truly beautiful. All couples shared unique patterns, she'd noticed. Anai and Ara's were like an abstract paisley, tiny lines in swirls and dots, not covering all the skin, but marked enough to be discernable from other bondmates, even with Janeway's untrained eye.

"Much was also to be relearned after the war," Anai continued. "Beneath the very sun which first shone on Ara and me as scholars, we were called to Desal to assist in the restoration of our society and knowledge. All things remained without the care it required, left too much to nature--and sadly, it was Unar nature.

"During the rebuilding, Ara and I likewise claimed this house as ours, promising to fill it properly. We cleansed it upon our hands and knees, removed the wild growth from its walls, and graced its surfaces with a balanced spectrum of matter and life. The house and this garden were designed to reflect all things wished for and sacrificed, an example for others. This garden was and is our vision fulfilled, our dreams materialized."

Anai slowed them, and then stopped. Raising her free arm before them, she said, "Have you seen, Captain Janeway? The sand by the moss? The willow shading the succulents? The pebbled path and the flowering grasses? The fish skirting the water rocks? This very garden within a great city, in which Ara and I have lived over one hundred ralkle? There is a balance to all things here. This was meant."

Janeway did see it, but said nothing.

"Fate does well to be purposeful, when expectation is balanced in return; like building this garden in want of its life, while accepting not every form placed within it shall flourish. Yet to do nothing, and little but wilderness would remain amongst the sparse, stained remnants of its past care. Desal had been left to nature; many Desalians had become complacent in their fate. There would never have been balance in this. It was this thing Ara and I wished would change first, to see all our people regain what was Desal long before--what truly resided within their spirits, yet could not be realized in their needful submission. Our fates were dedicated to our duty, to free us from more than Unar occupation--yet another purpose put forth with careful expectation...and much show of example on our parts, I admit."

"Havetsi said you were rather influential people."

"Ka," Anai replied, proud without conceit. "We had earned our places as well as having had inherited

them and felt belonging there."

"And you were influenced by Tom and B'Elanna," Janeway said, holding back the next thing that came to mind on that topic. She did wonder, however, if her young officers had thought about their affecting an alien people as they apparently had--or if by then it mattered to them. "They were very intense and willful people in their own ways."

"Ka, they were," the elder grinned, "--and obstinate."

"They must have been very persuasive."

"When they wished to be, ka--and yet they too found persuasion. Both matters required time and assurance--for Desal and for themselves--of their good intent."

Anai paused, staring out to the pond, where her great-grandchildren's grandchildren were kneeling, looking in to see the fish, chatting happily among themselves, their big eyes shining with wonder. She wished to touch them, then, feel their youthful energy within herself, their untouched spirits.

She drew a shallow sigh, became still as she watched them.

"So many years belong to me. Too many years. For that which has been borne in my experience, I should not be among the living. Yet many times I have thanked all that is blessed that my bondmate and I were fated to remain. At the sum of *your* years, Child, I had lived an amount of many lives. I have made every attempt to show my gratitude beneath every sun, despite and resolved by the many losses and challenges given me and my bondmate."

Anai blinked slowly, caressed the arm she held. "I have earned my age and elderhood with much effort and the spirits' many blessings. Yet when my spirit is freed of this body, I would gladly be taken with Ara unto the ancestors and smile upon him as I did the moon of our bonding--and see him smile upon me likewise."

Janeway shared the view of the pond. In a way, she knew what sort of longing the woman was feeling, looking at those children. As much as she had come to look upon Academy graduates as fresh and young and recall her own greenness, she could only imagine what a toddler would seem like to a woman like Anai.

"I would wish," Anai whispered, "to have not pained you as I have, for your dear memory of Be'i and Toma. Yet, it was required. It is yet required. For my oath, I must complete what I have begun."

"I would have had to find out in one way or another," Janeway admitted, feeling the stab of her recent memory return, but warding it off with a shake of her head. "I am willing to hear what you have to tell us. At this point, I think I need to know."

Anai did not return the gaze. "Even as you are left with more questions than answers?"

Janeway had to give the old woman that much--she was perceptive, able to play the game while knowing that everyone knew the turns. Of course, it was Anai's given right to do that. "I have been."

She laughed a quiet, rustic laugh. "Then my words have been painted well."

"I still want to know what happened to Susan Nicoletti and Kurt Bendera. You said before that they survived the war. Where were they when Tom and B'Elanna were on Uillar?"

"This shall be known," Anai replied. "With fate's blessing, all shall be known to you in time."

Janeway bit her breath, sighed it out. "Anai, I know this is important to you..."

Her stopping there finally earned Anai's full attention. "Ka?"

The captain's eyes had hardened slightly. Her arm pressed unconsciously against her side, squeezing the elder woman's. "I would have thought if you'd followed Tom and B'Elanna's examples, you'd learn not to play games with people. Forgive me, but I'd have rather read an account instead of being obliged to wait day by day for your story to conclude."

"Such is fairness," Anai kindly allowed. "They were your people, and you bear much pain. Yet, another thing I learned from those who made me what I am is that the flower of purpose is better brought to fruit with more sun--with patience. When you look upon the bloom, it is difficult to see what the food becomes--unless you have seen already the harvest. I need not display a key to how the flower develops its flesh when you may see it for yourself, should your gaze merely remain fixed. And to see it with experience is far more than what any bland explanation may procure."

Janeway's lips turned up in defeat. She hadn't expected Anai to change her mind.

"We all are creatures in this wilderness," the elder said, resuming their slow walk, leading them around to the rocky path that led into the back of the terrace, "living, yet not all our purposes are bestial. My games are played with no hurtful purpose--rather the opposite. It is for a consideration unto you I have taken such pains in my life and in my telling."

Janeway straightened. "I beg your pardon. I wasn't accusing you--"

"This is known, as is your wish for more. In its own manner, this sentiment is shared. You are known to me well, Captain--more than you would prefer. When all is passed, but a few of your suns for the hundred ralkle I have waited. Your time, so short, for mine so long. This is not a great sacrifice on your part, to play my game for this time, to allow me to paint the words of my spirit, which importance you have admitted already."

"Yes," Janeway said. "And I admit, you are telling us a good deal more than a record would. Babaki told me you carry many memories in addition to your own recollections. Maybe I'm simply not accustomed to your method."

Anai's lips turned up as she reached out to clip off a straying vine. "You know little patience when it is a matter of your own--and this when you would not wish this *need* be told. You would not bear cause to punish yourself, as their leader, for this loss you bear."

She grinned, a bit painfully, at the observation. "You are right."

"Yet we all bear this responsibility. I too bear the burden of my past, and thus the only redemption I may earn is though the acts I perform at present. It is my privilege as elder and regent. Such power in placement offers an odd comfort, ka? And yet, how arrogant are we to be, good child, in claiming charge of fate, which is ever untamed?"

Janeway's smile grew, even as she wondered how she could feel it as she did. She hadn't realized that, in her own way, Anai had an equal command conscience to deal with. "I don't know. I suppose we take what we feel is enough--even if it seems like too much to people around us."

"You are more natural than you allow, Child," Anai told her, stopping to take up another leggy growth in her fingers and snip it off.

"Please," Janeway said, reaching out herself when she saw an equally overgrown vine, "call me Kathryn."

Anai smiled. "Kathryn, then. Zhar vrra a'i tsa volparej yi. In faith and in peace, your spirit is seen by mine."

With a starting breath, she clipped off another sprig with her flat, discolored nails. "Would you like to assist our preparation of the ticgor, Kathryn?"

"I'd like that," said the captain. "I was thinking before how it reminded me of when I was young. My parents had a farm--corn, mostly. But my mother also grew green beans, and when she could keep me still long enough, we'd sit on the porch and snap them on hot afternoons."

She smiled wistfully, seeing it so clearly as she looked at Anai's wrinkled hands, thinking her own mother's might be as old when and if she returned to the Alpha Quadrant.

"I should think we would take our meal earlier this evening," Anai said abruptly. "My painting shall be of longer duration, a portrait of ascendance with which more detail shall be devoted."

Kathryn's brow rose. "You were almost four hours last night, Anai."

"Answers are wished, ka? Then more shall be procured for you." Anai's voice was simple and assured and her eyes did not leave her work. Reaching into the vines, she extracted a flower and clipped that as well.

"I wouldn't want you to wear yourself out needlessly--no matter what I want. And Ara--"

"Sleep shall find by bondmate when he tires," Anai cut in. "I bear wellness this sun and I have withstood greater levels of exhaustion."

Janeway gave her a look. "But you said yourself you're not a young woman anymore."

Anai was not fazed by the stare. Rather, she giggled at it. "Who spoke of youth, Child? My youngest, one you know as Babaki, was borne in my fiftieth year without assistance but from Ara. It is certain I might kneel upon the settee and speak of the past without greater hardship!"

When the captain laughed, Anai reached up and touched her temple then stole into her hair with the small flower she'd just clipped. Though her fingers trembled slightly with the exertion, she was still able to deftly weave the stem of the coral bloom into the captain's ruddy strands then pat Kathryn's cheek again.

"You are very pretty," she said. Taking her companion's arm, she started them back to the table.

Havetsi had found her way back to the terrace well cleansed of her day. Guiltily, she was thankful once again for the goodness her present society had afforded her as she stripped away the cloak and coat

and shoes so badly stained with Uillar after only a few hours there. She threw them into the laundry unit and activated it without looking at the settings.

Having bathed and dressed quickly, she gladly met her tola and gave him the pleasure of escorting her down to the courtyard. They arrived on the back terrace several minutes later to see Anai handing the nicely dressed captain a bowl of ticgor pods and showing her how to break them properly.

"Kes? Va'a, our good lady wished to help her lover with their procurements," said Dilsu, digging into her own bowl for another handful, "then tend her matters before their evening meal."

Anai merely smiled. "Her absence shall be filled nicely," she told Janeway and looked across the table. "Po'evra, bring our good lady a plate for the compost. --Do take some, Kathryn. They may be eaten without cooking."

"Now you want to feed me like your grandchildren?" Kathryn asked.

"Eat, Child," Anai scolded affectionately. "You bear too much thinness."

Po'evra, a fair-freckled boy of about twelve, laughed as Kathryn's lips fell open to reply. "Obey your elders, good lady, and you shall be well-guided by the spirits--and Nali shall not remind you to be guided, as well."

"My blood bears good effect, indeed," Anai grinned and bent to kiss his scarf-covered head, raising giggles around the table for Kathryn's sake.

Ara watched this all, his gaze following his bondmate in her every move. Her shrunken body and thin hands, her deftly braided grey hair and age-lined mouth touched with the remainder of her smile. "She bears such loveliness," he said devoutly.

Havetsi smiled. "Tola ka. I believe this, too."

"I miss our intimacy," he mused, his eyes roaming over his bondmate as she petted little Maswha'i, who had wrapped her little arms around Anai's legs and hugged tightly; then she buried her round face in the folds of her nali's gown skirt. Anai smiled lovingly to the baby, fussing her little braids over her shoulder. "A curse worthy of Prihar's teeth, that my arteries may no longer bear the pleasure we shared."

"In your spirits, you partake of each other," Havetsi offered, "and shall among Tsa'aita, as her bondmate, Tola."

"Then for our passings, I would bear relief," Ara returned, slightly wry, then peered to her. "And you, Child? Shall you find healing past what our way has borne?"

"To see her now, I know I must," she answered. "What brings me most fear, my elder-father, is to know the capability also lies within me. I dreamt of this when Nali placed such horrors in my mind. Never have such thoughts touched me before." She sighed. "My inheritance now is a fearful matter, Tola. There is awareness of what is to be given, yet...I hesitate at what it shall bear upon Cera and me. This should not be felt, it is known."

"Gye, Havetsi. It is understood--and not unique." Looking at her clear, wide eyes, he had to smile. She truly was a youth, in every way, both joyous and naive. "To survive and to preserve what we have been so blessed to receive is our life's work," he told her. "It is the way, and we must, in age, learn to embrace all the colors of existence, lest we blind ourselves. Bihla and Sa'alli wished to preserve life so

dear."

"Ka--and instead Prihar was called."

"With all things good, bad must exist as well--as all things in the universe are balanced, Havetsi. It is nature and it is truth, you well know. Our own primal instincts must never be dismissed for awareness of it alone. Anai and I are both well taught in this."

"And yet fear remains," Havetsi admitted. "Of course the knowledge of unpleasantness is borne within me, yet I have thought to avoid what in teachings showed negatively. By avoiding such dark paths, I thought I should learn a better way."

"This is a good thing in children. Yet it lends to a static nature when performed too well, as Dalra learned."

"He had not owned Miztri's faith in the return of light after darkness," she agreed.

"And yet, Dalra bore strength and a pure spirit. What was not understood in the beginning was that imbalance in nature allowed the Unar to serve our consequence, not the essential nature of our people. The overcompensation leant just as well to our destruction and desolation. Good and bad must both be borne and balanced accordingly in order to persevere."

"Thus the arguments to help free him of such imbalance."

"In some sense," Ara said. "And yet, within the youthful and pained spirits of our good Be'i and Toma, their manner was not necessarily unselfish. However, a modicum of this was likewise required at the time."

"And zealousness, I should say," Havetsi added lightly, feeling quite finished with her more thoughtful mood twice over for the day.

"Ah, we all could claim zeal," he said. "However, some forms of this could be far more pleasant."

Havetsi grinned at her tola, glad to see him so well from his nap and so neat and proper in his dinner coat and fine robe. So long had she seen him ailing, she had come to appreciate so much more his better moments, such as that one, as his eyes still followed his beloved Anai in the garden.

"We pass this on to you and Cera with unwarranted pride, dear Child," he said softly.

Havetsi embraced his thin torso, grateful to know that his wits and care had never dulled either.

"Tola ka."

They had gathered again as the matriarch and patriarch of the house settled as they always did on the stone seat. Their bellies filled comfortably--though one human captain's had been filled just a bit too much by a persistent elder's suggestions--their beings a bit soothed with a day to dull the pain of the last evening's difficult history, the family and the house guests settled into much the same places they had taken the evening before.

It was Chakotay, the last to return to the garden, who tapped his captain's shoulder and whispered in her ear. She turned and, looking around, found Neelix and Harry sitting by each other on a collection of pillows.

"Well, Tuvok's been recording it for rest of the crew who want to hear it," she said. "But I know Kes wanted to be here."

"She said she'd be here soon, just a little late."

Janeway shrugged, nodded.

Across the yard, Anai peeked up to Ara and shared his small smile.

In a workspace created on the holodeck, she breathed to steel herself to what she had indeed promised to do. The panel was foreign to her at first, but her directions written so carefully, they alone were more than enough to get her started.

She understood perfectly why the elder woman had pressed her secrecy, though. If it worked, then all would be well. If it didn't work, it would be one less period of mourning for the crew.

Kes had agreed in the end that to let them all hope in vain would be as disheartening as the away team's deaths were tragic. At that point, at least, it was best to run the tests, even if it was far from her specialty.

She began tapping in the calculations and rerouting the simulated pathways, wishing in a way that Captain Janeway was indeed there; at the same time was glad she wasn't.

She was missing the story, she knew, and also knew she should only set up the simulation and hide it back away as she had been told, and then go down to the surface, lest she be missed.

She wanted to run it, was tempted to, wondered if she might take just a few more minutes--as it shouldn't take too long. At the same time, she knew it in itself was very complicated. It would require two different procedures; even with a good deal of Desalian technology converted to Starfleet systems and other precedents helping it along, it would take a good deal of effort and knowledge. It would also require some certain luck, considering the timing involved.

She was missing the story. It didn't matter, though, she knew. She knew how it ended...and how it could end again...Could.

She straightened at the console, her gaze drifting outward.

But then, the ones involved would be the only ones who *wouldn't* know anything about it, if everything went as it was supposed to. Without that success, at least one half of what she was trying to do would never be. The elders would not allow the procedure in that worst case.

It was not desired, they insisted--the plan was enough against their ways as it was, and so it had to go according to their directions or not at all. They refused to betray the spirits and nature any further than they had already, even if it was for their sincerely made promises to their sworn siblings. "Fate shall

decide upon this in the end," Anai had told her, "we shall ask no more than that."

Kes understood why they would think that way, of course. At the same time, she personally believed that for it to work at all would be good enough.

Knowing all that she did just then, she *needed* it to work.

She was already having trouble with one of the parameters--the very one she was debating to herself. The program stopped in the middle of its numerical translation; it would go no further and could not provide an explanation.

As she backed out of that part of the program for the time and went to work on the other two, Kes wished again that Captain Janeway were there. She wished that *anyone* else were there.

But they had trusted her, and she had promised...

"Empty space unto the stars, darkness unto the pre-dawn light; sounds of thin children and metals clinking. A covering, light and soft; soft speaking somewhere near... Numbness, and yet pain, lurking deep in the shadows, and also a drifting, floating, then the sharp corner the cloud was pierced by. Forth and back, forward and receding again, all these things brought themselves and passed...

"And a scent which was foreign...then another all too known, just behind the horizon, creeping along the winter swept mountain peak, ever alluding the sun.

"Yet the sunrise is inevitable..."

4. Cezian Ascension

"There is a use of prayers, and of patience...and of love."

A swirl of blues and greens, dotted with brown...like a paisley, and a sharp, hazy ray of white sunshine shone straight through it. It was hard to look at. Pain met the light.

She heard voices, familiar and foreign, but she couldn't speak. Not just yet.

The air was warm but comfortable, dry but not terribly so. Her skin felt...clean. Somewhat, anyway.

Her head hurt like hell, like nothing she'd ever known and so much so that her mind instantly worked to blank out the sensation. The native skill hardly touched it that time.

She breathed--then thought against doing that too much. A cough and the headache would probably explode. Her lungs were as heavy as ever. *Why does my head hurt so much?* she cringed. She couldn't find it in herself to reach up and check it out, though. Instead, she exhaled, half-growling, half moaning. The voices ceased.

"B'Elanna?" came a voice, seemingly far away but intent and warm, anxious, hoping. The sound swirled in her memory and stopped as it came to her. There was a shuffle on the hard floor, then his scent found her nostrils. "That you, Chief?"

"T-to...m?" She exhaled the rest of that effort. Her eyes fluttered, warding away the light. "Hur-hurts."

"I shall draw the shade, good man," came another voice, heavily inflected. "Light should not be beneficial at present."

As the room darkened, he appeared above her, grabbing her hand in both of his and gazing down to her. Everything was blurry, but she did not mistake his smile--the big, joyful, relieved smile that mixed with a breathed laugh of relief. She weakly bent her fingers around his.

"About time you showed up," he said, thick with emotion.

In the darkness, she managed to focus a little. Blinking to see him, she scowled at first, then realized, *That scar was there, he had circles under his eyes, his skin got tan from the sun...* In her delirium, she'd forgotten for a moment what her closer memory knew about him.

"W-w-wha-t h-hap...p-pene-d?"

And why can't I talk?

"After the attack?" Tom asked and she blinked again. "Dalra and Miztri--yeah, they're okay--they managed to get into the base and contact a couple relay ships to get us out of there." He paused to breathe a small laugh as he touched her hair, looked her over. "Koban cargo vessels barely fit to fly, from what they've told me about them, but enough. After the Unar were out of the system, the traders picked up the survivors and brought us here, managed to keep us alive until Bakali could get her hands on us."

With that sentence, he turned a wink to the other side of the bed. B'Elanna didn't look. She didn't dare shift her eyes.

"You're going to be just fine, by the way," Tom added, stroking her hand with his thumb. "Bakali pulled a few strings and fixed you up. Unfortunately, the Unar took everything from their own buildings when they pulled out. We've already used what they dropped. But that's okay. We're on Cezia now, where Sashana'i and Aratra were born."

B'Elanna blinked again. "S-sash-shan-na'i?"

"Oh, she'll be hovering as soon as she gets a whiff you're up," he grinned.

She felt a hand on her head--another hand--and she stiffened. "Wh-ho...?"

"That's Bakali," Tom told her, glancing up.

A tall, elderly lady with bright, crinkled eyes and a perch of silver-white braids on a white-scarved head appeared in B'Elanna's line of vision. "Your spirit, Be'i of the Allanois House, has held to the living world," she whispered, a warm, motherly voice in an oddly trilled inflection not unlike Gresbri's. "A sign of your strength and conviction--and, ka, the benefit of frozen Uillaran darkness, as well. I had yet to see injuries such as yours survived. Yet you shall recover." She reached carefully down and touched B'Elanna's cheek, closed her eyes for a moment. "Truly, my sorrow that I may not assuage the pain, good lady. We bear little, less still past the purging of Uillar and its prisoners."

B'Elanna said nothing, took another small breath as an acknowledgment of the woman's apology. She hadn't even thought to ask for a painkiller, not expecting one in the first place. The headache *was* becoming intolerable, however, and finding she couldn't move was almost as disturbing. She flexed her toes, her legs and arms, and knew she should be able, but also that if she tried, it wouldn't do much. It was worse than before, when she woke up the last time...

"H-how loh-long has it b-b-been?"

"A few weeks," Tom told her, still very soft. "We've been on Cezia for just over two."

"W-weeks?" B'Elanna took another breath to ease her surprise. The last thing she remembered was...She couldn't remember the last thing she... "W-we w-were r-running. Th-the a...at-t-tack."

Tom nodded, watching her expression darken as she pieced it together. "Yeah."

After a few more seconds, she it came back to her... "H-Hych-char," she whispered; then she shuddered.

"He's dead." Tom's statement was flat and sure. His hand squeezed hers warmly.

A sigh was her first response. The Unar commander's demise, however that came about, made her far less mindful of the lances and flares inside her skull. That pain was little in comparison to the moments that now rained through her memory; moments when she had been sure she would die, when the glowering white face above her had finally gotten what he wanted, had destroyed the abomination and would likely kill its companion, too. The grated wall and his grunts of effort reverberated in her.

But he didn't succeed. She was alive, and Hychar lost.

"Th-thank y-ou," she breathed. That knowledge digested, she drifted back to sleep. She'd heard what she needed to know.

Seeing Bakali's reassuring smile, Tom didn't try to wake B'Elanna up again. It'd take time, he knew, after the substantial injuries she'd survived, to get back on her feet.

He'd had a week of doing the same--getting back on his feet without doubling over or passing out. He'd only just begun to think about when he might try to find some housing in that already overcrowded place. Taking in eight hundred and thirty-one more refugees certainly hadn't eased the situation in Azlre. According to Aratra, the capital city was even worse, so it was a good thing they'd landed where they did. Either way, being just two more among the squalor didn't make them anything special, so he'd wanted to wait until B'Elanna was awake to commit to any idea, figuring out where she in particular should go, considering the care she would need in the beginning.

B'Elanna probably wouldn't like it, but she had awoken at last. It was a start, and he could start thinking on where to go from there...or at least about how he should broach the subject with her.

For the mean time, he just held her hand and watched her sleep.

B'Elanna stared down at the tray Tom set on the table beside the bed. There were vegetables on a plate. Vegetables. They were cooked a bit too much--not that she felt like chewing just yet--and accompanied by some small pieces of thin flatbread. Beside the plate was a steaming white earthenware mug. Bakali had been careful to administer enough nutrient during her unconsciousness that she would not awaken feeling starved. B'Elanna had woken thrice by then without an appetite and fell back to sleep not even thinking about how long it'd been since she had last eaten. But now, she felt her mouth begin to wet at the sight of real food and hot tea.

"It's not Bixel's," Tom told her, tossing a casual grin her way, "but it's definitely better than Chez

Uillar."

B'Elanna did not resist when he came to sit her up and tuck some pillows behind her back. With hands that barely still felt like they were attached to her body, she smoothed down the soft gown she'd been dressed in sometime during her unconsciousness. She hadn't thought yet to ask about her uniform--what was left of it, anyway. At her last recollection, she'd been wearing her trousers and undershirt under her cloak. She noticed that Tom didn't have any of his uniform on, either, but rather the airy trousers and long, rustic tunic typical of the Desalian men. Maybe their old clothes couldn't be--or shouldn't have been--saved, when they got there. The dirt was considered poisonous. They had probably been burned or were buried somewhere.

When Tom handed her a cloth napkin, the concern moved out quickly of her mind. She was starting to smell the food and spicy tea. "Th-thanks," she muttered. The flow of blood from her steadily throbbing skull made her head loll, but she held on, concentrating on the choices before her.

As if he'd read her mind, Tom pushed the little table up very near to her then sat on the side of the bed. "By the way, it's still finger food mostly. Desalians don't use utensils. The trick is to pick it up by dipping or bending the bread, or wrapping the bread around it."

"C-cute," B'Elanna smirked and reached out tentatively for a piece of bread, and then one red, round vegetable. Before she ate it, she watched Tom dig into his half. "Y-ou look like y-ou've g-got it down."

"Trust me, I learned the hard way," Tom grinned. "But yeah, I've been up for a while now. Go on. Give it a shot."

She did, easing the food between her teeth. Chewing it, she gave a nod. "N-ot bad," she said, snorting quietly at herself. "Com-pared to Ui-llar, it's a f-east."

Tom smiled as she went for another.

From there, they ate quietly, enjoying the warm solace of the darkened clinic front room and heavy rain pattering outside. The rain season, as it was called, had begun the day after she first awoke, and it would last a couple of months.

As they gradually emptied the earthen plate, Tom's eyes stayed on her, watching her reactions, seeing how weak her hand was as it gripped the bread, then each morsel, how it shook slightly. Outside, the sounds of other Desalians passing in front of the doors to the clinic mixed with the rain. Tom knew that on the front patio, Sashana'i and Aratra were talking to Bakali and Bala, arranging a place where they could have a bed after they both were released from the clinic. He'd also asked them to stay out of the room until he could talk to B'Elanna. He knew she wasn't well enough to know everything, but she'd get curious eventually, or reach up to scratch, do something.

She seemed to sense that, too, as she looked up to him again. "Wh-at is it?"

To his credit, he remained casual to some degree, picking up another vegetable. "We do need to talk."

She eyed him. "A-bout?"

"A few things," he said, meeting her stare. "One thing is housing. Remember how Aratra once described what things were like in Sacezia? How crowded it was? Well, Azlre's no better. It's just another refugee camp as far as the Unar are concerned--in other words, packed. I hope you don't mind, but we'll

probably have to live together a while longer."

"Y-ou don't s-nore. I can t-take it." She didn't add that like many other things, she hadn't even thought about that changing.

"I'll make sure you get your own bed, though," he added offhandedly. "I'll bet you miss that."

She grinned briefly in reply.

"Good news is that the weather here's much better. No more frigid nights."

"Th-ank God," B'Elanna breathed, coughing slightly behind it as she picked another piece of food. It was more satisfying than she'd imagined--tasting food again, and food that really was good. "Wh-at else?" she queried.

Two down, one to go, he thought. "Well, you might have guessed you're in pretty lousy shape." She glanced up again at that in mid-chew, blankly, then resumed. Tom took a breath, decided which way to go first.

"Bakali's not a real doctor--not a Federation-type doctor," he told her, poking a vegetable around on the tray. "When the Unar took over Desalia, she was about your age and she was just beginning her practice in the homeopathic sciences. She's had plenty of biology and exobiology, and she's had to practice it a lot since the Unar took all their technology away. The medical equipment they do have was bought off their version of a black market. Anyway, Bakali knows how to handle alien physiology and studied ours as much as she could about us while we were out, when she was treating us."

"Ob-viously it w-orked," B'Elanna ventured, watching his motions, squinting in a futile effort to focus on his expression, on his eyes, which evaded hers just then. She could see that much.

"Yeah," Tom said, "five transfusions and four surgeries between us in a seventy year-old biobed that wasn't Desalian to begin with--and that using a laser scalpel with barely enough power to close a seam. The laridium only goes so far, which isn't much. She did all she could to save our lives, which was a lot, trust me."

B'Elanna drew a breath. "But?"

Tom's lips flicked upwards, his grin attempting both comfort and preparation. "We're pretty banged up. You... You had some pretty serious injuries."

"They s-till hurt. E-veryth-ing's foggy, and m-my head..." She stopped as he noticed his eyes move up there briefly, his little grin fade completely. "Wh-at?"

Tom finally sighed. "You're going to be out of it for a while," he told her. "Your vision's going to be pretty bad until they can scrape up an optical scanner and regenerator from their black market. Hell, even mine's messed up--but in my case it's the dust and it'll clear up. By that rule, yours should get a little better, too, just not as much as you'd like. You'll probably have some bad headaches until it gets fixed. Sunlight will probably bring them on, too, so you'll have to avoid it hitting you directly in the eyes."

Her head hurt already, but she remembered what she felt when she first woke up. "Okay."

"You'll probably be tired a lot, until you get your strength back and really start healing--and only time

can do that. You're also still recovering from that infection. The head injury on top of it wasn't any help. You lost a lot of blood."

"I c-can tell," B'Elanna said, looking to his very serious face, lit only by his tiny, supportive smile. As always, he was trying not to be so gloomy, trying to spare her, even when he was telling her the gist of it--which wasn't good. "Wh-ere did the b-lood come from?"

Tom snorted. "A little bird."

B'Elanna smirked. "Th-at p-pokes her b-beak into everyth-ing. A-nd it was okay?"

"There wasn't much to it, really," he said. "Very few rejection problems according to Bakali. She took care of it with some sort of root--don't ask me what or how. You'll need time, and I guess you'll get pretty stir-crazy in the middle of it. There's not much to do here."

She was not surprised.

"Not yet, anyway," he continued, his lips turning up again. "There happens to be a little depot of ships and some parts in a gorge outside the city. Junkers, really, but something we might be able to play with."

B'Elanna's hand stopped in mid-air and she forgot her remaining hunger momentarily. "Oh?"

Tom's grin grew. He had a feeling she'd like to hear that. Still, he deflated it appropriately. "It's nothing to cheer about, being that they're about as put together as those scraps we were separating on Uillar. But it might be interesting. Bala--that's Bakali's husband--says that since the Unar make it a practice to hold on to anyone with technical skills, Azlre could use a lot of repairs, especially the sanitation system and solar units. There are parts in the ships we can use for a little of that."

Though that work wasn't what she'd had in mind at first, she gave a nod. "I'd l-ike to s-see them."

"When you're strong enough, we'll go."

The conversation lulled at that, and B'Elanna had almost finished her meal before another voice was heard, which came just after a soft rap at the doors.

"Toma. Is it well?"

"We're fine," Tom answered, chuckling at the ginger tones he'd easily become used to in the past couple weeks. He shook his head when B'Elanna looked curiously at him.

"It may be wise to cover our good lady's eyes, for I mean to enter."

Tom glanced back at B'Elanna, who sighed and closed her eyes to wait. Tom put his hand in front of her face anyway. "Okay, Bala."

She saw behind her lids a bit of the greyish light and felt a stab of pain at the change. She opened her eyes again when it darkened, only to see Tom's hand pulling cautiously away; then she saw a tall form in clothes much like Tom's and framed by a floor-length, lightweight robe.

An elderly man approached, his steps like shifting sand as he crossed the long front room. Placing a single red fruit on the table with a wink, he bowed deeply to her, reaching within the dangling ends of his well-wrapped white headscarves to touch his wrinkled temple markings. In that position, his robe and

headress looked twice as big as he was, he was so thin.

"Be'i zha lastnya," he said, very quiet but equally cheerful. "Cost'a inic la'a fro'utisla. --My calling is Bala, bondmate to Bakali, elder of the house of Na'ihaj. I bear you welcome to our home at Azlre, Cezia, and thank the spirits for the blessing that makes our acquaintance."

Even B'Elanna, feeling like she did, couldn't help but smile a little at the old man's gracious introduction--and suddenly knew why Tom had, too. Like Bakali, she could feel his gentleness in his sparkling hazel gaze and the smile that creased into his strong, tawny cheekbones. She knew without knowing him that he was genuine and kind--a rare thing for her. Such was what his facade projected.

"Nice to m-eet y-you," she said, trying to pull her words together and forcing herself not to growl at her failures.

Bala paid little attention to it. "And you, Child. Ka. It is good we meet." He looked at Tom then both of them in turns. "Good man, my bondmate and I have found a solution. It is known...the condition...?"

Tom drew a quick breath. "I've told B'Elanna that she'll need some time to recover."

"Ah. This as well is good." Bala reached over the table and touched B'Elanna's arm, meeting her gaze. "Good lady, our sorrow that we cannot bear our known technology and procure your health with greater speed and completion. We have been in truth a finely advanced people, with all our needs and desires at our disposal. I should think you bear awareness that this has changed. The Koba underground, well known for their clever procurements, is yet unable to procure the equipment required by us. Medicines--at times. We accept our fate as impoverished, yet we strive for the needed, to heal and comfort. This too, is meant."

B'Elanna shook her head. "Y-ou've done a l-ot. Th-ank y-ou."

Bala nodded. "It pleases us to see the effect, good lady." His gaze drew to Tom again. "Toma, as our good lady Be'i requires prolonged tending, and your observation, Bakali and I have endeavored to keep you both close. In this desire, we have recalled our roof area, where once we would hide scholars to be smuggled from Unar's sight, above our living space. The mantel stones run through it, so it would be warm in our moon and require no separate heating. We may procure the floor and bedding materials with some dealing, yet with speed. Aratra shall endeavor to find milkstone to freshen the plaster. It shall require effort, yet there would be privacy, and it shall be yours without need of repayment."

Listening to all this, B'Elanna suddenly realized what they were getting into that time. Her old quarters on Voyager popped into her mind, how well she'd lived in comparison to Uillar and what was to come there. An attic. She was going to take up living in an attic. Still, it was better than a shack.

Hearing the way Tom agreed to that, with a breath, then his thanks--though sincere--she could tell he'd already considered that change, too. From son of an admiral to refugee was quite a switch for the worse--prison experience or not.

"That sound okay to you B'Elanna?" Tom asked.

She shrugged. "F-ine," she said quietly. But returning her attention to the elderly man, she tried to be more welcoming to his generosity. After all, once again, she and Tom were being taken into another person's house--that time literally--at their cost and responsibility. "Th-ank you, Bala. Y-ou and y-our wife are being v-ery ge-nerous."

But he did understand, seeing her wide brown eyes, so pensive and yet intensely emotional behind the fog of Uillar, still apparent. "Good child," he said, smiling gently upon her, "This old body was borne in Desal when all upon our homeworld was lush and fruitful, when our technology well surpassed Unar, a time which saw our people enjoying every pleasure--in excess, we have learned. It is known my house is not of the standard known as your own. I mourn your loss as I have my own. And yet we survive, ka? Pray for strength and our forward beings to bear truth?"

"I didn't m-ean--"

"This is known. Yet we feel as any feels. It is a good practice in healing." He touched her arm again, bowed to her and to Tom respectfully. "You may cover your eyes again, good lady, as I mean to leave you. I shall bring myself again soon and the building of your chamber shall begin. We would endeavor to make it sufficiently pleasing. This I promise, by my spirit."

Moments later, he had slipped through the door again, and when B'Elanna opened her eyes, she saw Tom grinning thoughtfully at the door, then turning his gaze back to hers. "These people are so nice," he said, "it makes it hard to know them sometimes."

"Th-ey are," she agreed. Pausing, she blinked with an entirely different thought, shamefully unasked. "B-bendera, Nico-letti--did y-ou...?"

"I've already sent word out to look around," he told her. "Bala says it might be hard to find them. Their names were most likely changed by the Unar if they ended up in service. If anyone spots them, it'll be the underground, granted they weren't taken to a secluded place."

B'Elanna closed her eyes. "I hope th-ey're all r-ight."

"Everyone I talked to said they were probably lucky to be sold. Not free, but preserved, especially if they're in training--and a hell of a lot better than we got. Bakali asked the Koba and laskeb traders she deals with to poke around, see if they find anything."

He'd tried to make it less ominous than they both knew it was and returned to his food soon after she nodded, accepting he'd done what he could--as usual. Patting her leg with his free hand, he offered her a smile as he chose another piece of bread. "Maybe if you're up to it tomorrow, we'll talk some more? There is more I need to tell you about...well, everything."

She shrugged back. "Why n-ot now?"

"I think you've had enough for one day," he grinned.

She wasn't amused. "I'm n-ot a b-baby, Paris."

Tom didn't shrink at her changed tone or her hardened stare. He did, however, bite his lip and kill the grin he'd tried to blow off the topic with. Then he wondered why he thought it'd work with her.

"B'Elanna, you..." He sighed, gently took the food out of her hand so he could hold it. "You have no idea how bad off you were when you got here. When I woke up, they were still operating on you. I was watching them..."

She shivered at the feel of his warm fingers, gently squeezing hers as she tried to focus on his dead serious stare. She saw enough to know he was definitely uncomfortable but trying to be straight with her. But she knew she wanted to know--would have to know sooner or later...

"Wh-at, Tom?"

His blink was slow and his facade fell away from the casual one he'd held up the whole time they'd been talking. "When I saw myself in the mirror the other day," he said quietly, "I didn't know who I was looking at at first. I mean, I knew it'd be bad, but...I don't know how you've even looked at me without cringing."

"M-aybe I got u-sed to it," she said, turning her eyes down to her lap for lack of anywhere else to look. "W-e've al-ready talked a-bout this, on Ui-llar."

"Yeah, I know," he whispered, giving her fingers another light squeeze. "And I'll admit, you're not as swollen up as you were before. Still, you'd better not look until you're healed more. Bakali didn't have enough power in the laser to seal the wounds all the way and, well, you really look rough. I mean, you don't look frightening--you aren't at all--just... The damage might be pretty hard to see right now. Without the right equipment, there's nothing they can do but let it heal."

She took that without response at first. The way she felt, the pain she was having, remembering her days and illnesses and her last memories on Uillar...and Hychar. She could only imagine what she looked like. Though she'd never really praised her appearance, she knew she'd always been somewhat vain about keeping herself neat looking, making herself look like she had enough pride to keep herself up and present herself well. Even in the Maquis, she tried to look in control of herself.

For Tom Paris--the one man who had seen up close and personal every way she *could* look--to feel the need to prepare her for a mirror...

"Okay, Tom. I'll w-ait."

Worse than the rest, he sighed with relief.

"Bwuh-ke," said Sashana'i as she scooted up to her knees behind her friend and carefully took the hairbrush to the mass of short umber and ochre locks she'd unbraided.

"Y-ou think it's n-o trouble," B'Elanna said, shaking her head.

"Be'i wuw h ka'i."

"Wuw h?"

"Lull," Miztri supplied with a little snort.

B'Elanna bit her lip. Between the men banging and drilling two floors above them and the woman pulling the skin on her well-beaten skull, she wasn't exactly in the mood to have anyone telling her *she* was being stubborn. "L-ook, I n-ever asked to h-ave my hair b-br-- Ah! Damn!"

"Ywus e'eki w-haw," Sashana'i replied and sunk the brush in again.

"Y-ou're doing the p-pulling--not me," B'Elanna choked, her excitement having welled another cough, which she willed down unsuccessfully. "Wh-at's the big deal, a-nyway? It's n-ot like I'm going to the em-bassy. --Ow!"

"Be'i tsu ye'i." Sashana'i went about her work undeterred.

Miztri, who stood aside helping Bakali with her equipment, giggled. "This is their way. Become accustomed to it now, my good elder."

Bakali peered back to the young ladies, who still tossed jabs back and forth in two difficult to understand tongues. She was unaccustomed to Sashana'i's slurring, and Be'i's half-functional translator only did so much to weed apart her people's confusing syntax. More was the force behind it, too. Though it was good to see such spirit after so many years among a humbled populace, the elder's brow rose as their conversation became terse. "My gratitude for your warning."

When it was over, however, the Cezian native leaned down and embraced her alien friend, kissing her cheek from behind in a close, sisterly fashion, and the umber-haired lady broke into a grudging smile and gave her hand a pat. This too was good to see, Bakali decided, for their sakes and for Desal's. Their young blood regent had a good deal of youth to go along with her weather-beaten features and rough manners. However, while certainly no match for her grandfather, Dulla, she did possess some charm and sincerity, and she was complimented by a well-spoken bondmate. Combined with the sense of conscience Dalra of Maha'aje professed of her, Bakali felt more encouraged by the girl. Time and full recognition of her place among them could improve her, the elder hoped.

They were finishing upstairs just then, and a blessed silence filled the clinic at last. Bakali sighed her relief. Though the banging and shuffling had been kept to a minimum for her patients' sakes, it had been a constant thrumming above those past three days. Aside from that front room, she had a half-full ward of ailing in the adjoining hall. Likely, none had found sleep in the day in spite of the men's efforts.

Minutes after the silence, they appeared, flushed with effort and gladly accepting the water Miztri procured for them.

While Dalra and Bala found seats near the window, Aratra snatched his woman up from the bed she still kneeled upon. "You must learn not to tend to Be'i too well," he chuckled. "She shall be left raw with abrasion."

"Awatwa!" Sashana'i laughed, squirming in his awkward embrace.

B'Elanna smiled. "Th-anks, A-ratra."

More than a little stiff and sore from the little work he'd been allowed to do, Tom pulled himself up to sit on the end of the surgical bed--then promptly winced at the grind of pain that flared through his side every time he remembered he wasn't supposed to do that. Of course, he knew he'd only forget again once the pain dulled. Rubbing futilely at his waist and lower back, he distracted himself with the sight of B'Elanna fussing her fluffed hair down.

"I see she's already got you groomed," he grinned. "Not bad. A few more inches and she'll have a proper ground for sculptures."

B'Elanna just shook her head. "Sh-ut up."

He snorted, took another swig of water.

Dalra took a deep breath. "Odd that I have found longing for this."

Aratra had brought Sashana'i down with him to sit on a stack of blankets in the corner. "As I, good

man--yet it would be more pleasing to find our talk here."

"Ka," Sashana'i breathed with an emphatic nod, looking over at B'Elanna again. "Be'i twe-hsah Ceh-sin pwis-ka'is."

Aratra caught the woman's glance. "She says you shall heal with greater speed here, at Cezia."

"I can't i-magine anything being w-orse," B'Elanna returned.

"Ah, yet not all was accursed upon Uillar," Dalra noted, "for it was a place we did remain among the living. The plain of Prihar, it may have been, good elders, and yet should the elements be overcome, we bore permission to live by our Desalian nature without interruption aside from our work..."

Tom said nothing on that, slipping down from his perch to get himself a refill of water while his friends continued to explain to Bala and Bakali the companionship and community in the camp and tell them about the two who had come to Dalra's overhang a half-year ago. The way they talked about it, Dalra and Aratra seemed sentimental about that place.

Tom had no such illusions. Uillar was a hell that rightfully brought a pause to every person he'd seen witness the name. More, in the sect scourge that had liberated them, they'd lost many friends there--namely Kepli and Naja, T'lleka, Vadni and O'sya, among nearly two thousand other victims. Others they knew, like Latsari and Bolmra, Gihetra, J'vishi, Plecta, among many others and including him and B'Elanna, were still nursing wounds earned in the sect attack. Something small and desperate in Tom made him know he was damn glad he and B'Elanna had made it to Cezia no matter what the cost had been. Or maybe it was just gratitude with a conscience. That wouldn't be the first time.

But the point stood, they weren't prisoners anymore. Refugees, sub-class individuals in territory the Unar claimed as theirs, certainly. But they weren't in prison. It was crowded as hell, but the people did maintain a community where they been all but ignored completely by the Unar for the last ten years. According to Bala, Antral and Brijan traders came to enlist and drop off laborers, a stable operation not needing supervision for long enough that the Unar did not have a reason to return after a sect scourge reassigned the unit at Cezia. Certainly, that was fine with Tom. Azlre also had some commune gardening, wheat in the fields around the city, a woman who called herself a healer, dirt that wasn't poisonous and weather that wouldn't leave them to bake in the day or freeze at night.

It was a big improvement--and he forced himself to remember it at least a few times a day.

He would've killed and died to get himself behind the conn of a ship, though, or just do *something* that made him feel halfway competent. At the same time, he feared it--feared his more thoughtless impulses catching up with him, getting bored there, getting itchy and careless. He remembered acutely how he'd done so before in his life. Like on Uillar, he couldn't afford that stupid kind of thinking. Problem was, there was so little to do in Azlre. Most of the other people there seemed content with that, but he knew he wouldn't settle as his Desalian friends had.

He had to give the Unar that much. They'd kept him and B'Elanna very busy, too busy to think much about anything but staying alive.

Now what? When B'Elanna's better and we've settled into this place, what do I do with the rest of this...survival?

Sighing silently to himself, he decided not to think about that yet. Instead, he watched Dalra, Bala and

Aratra rise and don their cloaks to go procure their dinner--from the east commune garden, they said as they discussed what to get. Unable to join them for that long a trip, per Bakali's orders, Tom moved to help B'Elanna shield her eyes from the bright grey day when the men filed out.

For the present, B'Elanna needed his help, and that would take up enough of his time, considering. It was time he didn't mind spending.

He looked at her again as shade enveloped the room once more. *Especially now.*

She looked back, noticing again how he tried not to let his gaze waver anywhere, but stuck to her eyes maybe too well. Since she'd woken up, they all looked at her so directly, she'd conversely felt confronted by the mystery her appearance now was to her.

She also didn't like that no one was saying anything about what was wrong with her--even Tom. She remembered such "politeness" from her childhood--when they bothered to be polite--and hated that, too. Now she felt like that *Klingon* girl again, knowing they were all staring behind her back. But this time, she didn't know why they were staring. Even before that *thing* happened to her, when they were on Uillar and seeing the changes in Tom, B'Elanna had been grimly curious to see herself. She'd wondered how the conditions had likewise affected her. But just then...

Seeing her mind working behind her shifting stare, Tom lowered himself to sit on the edge of her pallet. "What's up, Torres?" he asked.

B'Elanna rubbed her lips together, raised her chin a bit to look at him. "I w-ant a m-irror."

He blinked, and she spotted the expression that followed it. Beyond him, Bakali and Sashana'i both stilled.

"You sure?" Tom asked, feeling his heart slow a little, and then thump. She looked determined.

"Y-ou've prepared me en-nough."

He didn't look like he agreed with that, but turned a look back to Bakali, shot another to Sashana'i before she could disagree with him. Seeming to examine and decide for herself, Bakali wrapped her robe sleeves up on her arms and went to bring the desired object. Tom turned back to B'Elanna.

"Just remember," he said, "Klingon blood or no, you need time to heal the most recent stuff, okay? Once you've healed more, Bakali's going to start you on some balms to take care of the scars. But that'll take time, too."

B'Elanna sighed shortly. "I'll m-anage, Tom. God, wh-at's so damn b-bad?"

Tom paused then just shook his head as Bakali came back in. Taking the old, framed mirror, he handed it to B'Elanna, hoping silently her vision was worse than Bakali said it would be.

Increasingly impatient with his caution and everyone else's tiptoeing--the whole of it--B'Elanna quickly decided just to have it over with and flipped the mirror up.

Her breath stopped.

It wasn't her.

Even in the dim light, Tom saw B'Elanna's face drain, her full mouth fall open. Again, he looked back. "You mind?" he asked their friends. "Give us a minute alone?"

The women left without complaint--and swiftly. Sashana'i paused at the door to the other room, though she did not look back before she finally slipped away.

B'Elanna's hands began to shake, further blurring the wreckage before her. Tensing, she managed to keep it still. She took in everything. There was a lot to see. Too much...

This isn't me, this can't be me, this isn't...

In her reflection, she saw her fog-coated eyes start to glimmer, but fought it back, gasping against it.

"T-tom...Th-ey...m-m-mutilated m-me," she managed without breaking down, without slinging the mirror against the nearby wall, without breaking the glass between her iron gripped fingers. "Th-th-they..." She caught her breath.

Tom didn't know if he should even touch her at that point, but did, slowly, then put his hand on her leg. She tensed at that, too. "I'm sorry."

"Th-they m-utilated me," she repeated, softer, hoarser, turning her head from side to side in numb disbelief of what... Her heart continued to drop in her chest.

Somehow, naively, she expected to see herself thinner and dirtier, but still *her*.

Instead, a set of dysfunctional, red-fogged eyes and a gaunt, sunken face she barely knew stared back at her. Her skin was deep sallow and blotched; her lips were pale and chapped. Her hair, though freshly brushed, stuck out in ugly, sun-bleached, wavy tufts. Her nose bridge... She might have expected a little bending--she'd felt that before--but when she turned her head, she could see how angled her profile had become, though it still lead up to...

She tried not to look, but couldn't *not* look, examined with squinted, nearsighted eyes how the Unar had battered her over the months...what they had done to her.

She was horrified to think she had ever been, even though a child, ashamed of her ridges.

Hychar had wanted to destroy those, too...

Her skull had been crushed, crumbled. Fragments of her once arching ridges under scarred skin swam randomly on the right side, one piece here, another piece a little farther up and skewed to the side; a third about a centimeter higher than that was bent precariously then continued its original path. The center ridge was discernible, but looked more like a dotted line with skewed fragments dipping slightly into her eyebrow, meandering to the right at the top. Across from there, the highest left ridge was bent upwards into her scalp. In between there and her left eyebrow laid...nothing, really. It was smooth, sunken slightly, and the skin that covered it seemed to have been sewed on, as she didn't mistake the thick red line framing all that patchwork...

In her horror, she wanted so much to touch it, if only to disprove what she was seeing. But her fingers stopped short of her skin, dropped lifelessly to the blanket.

Tom watched where her stare traveled. "Bakali had to put a donated graft there because she couldn't repair the bone," he explained quietly, very gently. "She did everything she could--and it was a miracle

you even survived."

B'Elanna was still staring in disbelief.

"I know this looks really bad, but you still need to heal. Bakali says--"

"What *h-ealing* is g-going to c-c-correct *this?!'*" she gasped, finally relieving herself of the sight to glare at him. "Lo-look at m-me!"

"I have," he replied firmly, taking her eyes directly. "I have been for a while now."

"How c-c-could you t-tell me I'm n-not...? I..." She choked--coughed, then again and harder, leaning forward to expel whatever was caught in her lungs that time.

Tom instantly leaned up to pat her back, even when she shrunk away and shook her head to ward him off. Nevertheless, he whapped a few more times to help it out, even as she groaned in pain. Finally, she leaned back again, cringing and growling at her promptly returned headache.

B'Elanna didn't address it. With an effort, she turned onto her side, away from him. "G-g-go aw-away."

He understood. He would have likely asked the same in her position. Nodding, he touched her shoulder, forcing his hand to stay even as she tried to pull away. She waved him off, even then. Were she stronger, she probably would have hit him.

The weaker move made Tom stop, however, change his mind as soon as he had thought he'd made it. There was just something about her...shrinking, natural as it might have been for anyone in her predicament. He squeezed her shoulder, making her know that he was still there.

"I'll come get you for dinner."

"N-o," she muttered. "L-eave m-e a-lone."

"B'Elanna..."

"I don't wa-ant to s-see a-nyone."

He pushed himself to his feet. "Okay," he said. "But don't let them win, B'Elanna. Hychar would've liked that."

"Wh-at do y-ou mean by th-at?"

"I mean," he said, knowing maybe he shouldn't be saying it, but feeling a firmness meet his tone that he couldn't help, "you have every right to feel as lousy as you want. God knows you've earned it. But they wanted to do this to you--to us. I know I'm in a better position to say it, but I'll be damned if they win in the end. We've got nothing else to do here but get past this."

"Th-ey did w-in, Tom," she growled. "Th-ey k-killed the abo-mination--m-me."

"The hell they did," he returned in a growl of his own. "I didn't survive this long to see them get the better of us--and neither should you." Bending closer, his voice was soft and pressing. "We're still alive and now we're free. There's no Hychar, no guards, no barricade, no goddamned detail lines. Now, I might have wasted a lot of chances in my life before, but that life's gone--and so is the mentality that made me

do it. If the Unar killed anything, it'd be that. We have a chance to fight this now and I'm not about to forget it. And I know you feel the same way. You'll heal, get your strength back and then we'll see what's out there. You'll want to, when you start healing."

When she turned and saw him again, she squinted to see his words written in his narrowed, intent eyes. Closing his lips, he sighed out whatever else was in there through his nostrils. He touched her hand, gave it a pat then moved to follow Bakali and Sashana'i. Even beyond the doorway, B'Elanna didn't hear him, only the thrum of his steps up to the second floor of the clinic.

B'Elanna lowered herself onto her side again. The mirror, still leaning on her lap, slid down onto its face, and she suddenly wished Tom had taken her up with him. She didn't want anyone else to see her like that. Not yet, not like that--half blind, scabbed, scarred and broken, barely able to get out of bed, much less do anything useful.

She hugged the blanket tightly against herself, shutting her eyes against the remainder of the light, clinging to the hope that she wouldn't be like that forever.

"You should eat, Child."

"I'm n-ot a child and l-eave m-e alone, M-iztri."

The older woman sighed hard and placed the meal of the side table. "Your forgiveness. It is known your pain is great."

"I n-need to be a-lone," B'Elanna replied, not bothering to turn over. "P-lease."

With a touch to B'Elanna's hair, Miztri did go, speaking only to warn B'Elanna that she was opening the door.

B'Elanna could hear the sounds outside rise and fall with the opening and closing of that door, the sounds of pattering rain and children playing in the puddles, people talking, walking past. It muffled again upon the click of the door latch. Everyone was getting on with their own lives outside that door.

How the hell can they do that, knowing what's out there, suppressing them, torturing and raping their people? Damned pacifists.

At the same time, she knew that quite a few of those pacifists had become her friends, saved her life and protected her and Tom...

She wasn't hungry. Not only her mood was bad but her head was killing her. It was like fire at the base of her brain stem rising into her temples and circling around her brow; the white-hot hammering it fed forced her to keep visualizing the day-after battleground that laid there.

A battleground she'd hated and hidden, had been so ashamed of and finally stubbornly determined not to care about. Her face. That which she liked was blotted and abused, and that which had marked her as part Klingon was now the hateful ruins of her stupid, useless insecurities.

She didn't know how to accept that--that violent replacement--nor the pain, which was like nothing she

had ever experienced.

"Any other should have found their ancestors from your injuries," Bakali had told her earlier that day. "I have learned from Toma that you are like the tree in the gale winds, to bend but not be broken. Speaking with you, this I find is truth."

B'Elanna didn't care. When the lances returned, flared and made her curl inside, had even made her vomit a couple times for the nausea that coupled it, she had wished Bakali and Tom and all the rest of them had just let her die and get it over with.

In those swings, B'Elanna passed the time, turning away from those who came in, refusing to leave the bed except for the latrine--a disgusting, makeshift contraption in the back court that she didn't want to know any more about. It was even worse than the facilities at Uillar. She picked at her food, but didn't eat much of it and wasn't sorry if it was wasted. She'd told them already she wasn't hungry. Over and over, she willed herself to get out of that bed, away from that room and everyone's attention, but she simply didn't have the strength to make the move. A couple times, she thought to look at herself again, but decided against it. With the additional days of consciousness, her eyesight was a bit better.

She didn't want to see it any better.

Days had gone by, in and out of pain, seething and consciousness. Finding all three, she rolled over, moaning aloud from the pressure in her skull, feeling her eyes swelling, her nose bridge pounding, her stomach churning. By then, night had come again, and there was no one to call for, except maybe someone in the next room. She knew there were children in there, though, could hear them coughing or calling to Cali, Bakali's assistant, who was busy at best. Aratra had mentioned there'd been some influenza lately.

How can these people lie here in the Stone Age? she fumed to herself as if she never had before. *With Unar walking over them like trash? If it'd been the DMZ, the colonists would've made mincemeat of those hairy bastards...*

Instead, the Desalians took it. So she and Tom were stuck in that nightmare, being beaten down for some ridiculous prejudice and watching others disintegrate in Unar crossfire, their friends prostitute themselves for easily replicated medicines and listening to so-called sages rationalize all of it to some stupid fate that had nothing to do with them personally.

She rolled over again, hearing her own strangled growl and knowing she was unable to stop herself. It was too much, the pain. She finally knew that it was too much. She could feel the incisions in her skull ripping apart and tearing bloodlessly down her ears and eyes, down her neck and back. She was hurting too much to even cry at that point.

The Vidiians once made her believe they'd stolen her courage after they split her in two. Likewise, she was nearly convinced the Unar had taken every ounce of her resilience.

Thankfully, Tom--who a year ago she'd have accused of trying to duck out of such a fight--had implanted the hope of revenge in her. Better, he was right. They were not on Uillar anymore. Though she looked like the proof that the devil, Fek'lhr and Prihar all existed, she and Tom were still alive, would someday be able to fight back, for themselves, for the others, all of them. That was something she definitely knew how to do.

It was a hell of an incentive--granted she survived that long.

She groped at the table without looking at it, feeling for the commbadge Tom had left for her. Feeling the smooth cool and familiar shape with her fingers, she whacked her half-powered receiver until it beeped.

"Tom!" she gasped and heard only static behind it. What was left of his badge was in worse shape than hers. "Tom!" she repeated, choking on it. "Wa-wake up!"

A minute later, he shuffled into the room, ruffled with sleep and tying on his shirt. A moment after that, he was leaning over the bed, touching the very top of her head, looking her over, and then helping her to sit. Before he could ask, she clutched his arms.

"They did this to m-e. I w-want t-t-t...T-tell me how Hy-char died. Y-ou're sure he's d-dead?"

"I wasn't conscious," he told her, not flinching at her grip. "Aratra told me what happened. Believe it or not--and not a word to the others," his voice lowered to a whisper, "Sashana'i killed him."

B'Elanna's eyes opened again, though she didn't look up. "What?"

"Hychar left us for dead and she made sure he didn't go back," he said, soft and simple. "Only the four of us know about that, by the way. We don't think Dalra or many others would take it too well."

"*Sh-she* k--" Her voice softened when his fingers touched her lips. "Sh-she killed Hych-char? She's De-salian."

"She's also someone who had just as much right to hate the hell out of him--and Maghet. Yeah, him, too." He rubbed her arms comfortingly, even if he knew it wouldn't help. "Frankly, I'm just glad he's gone. I don't care how. He didn't get what he wanted. That's what matters to me."

"But the Unar are st-till in power," she pointed out.

"Can't do it all in a day, Chief," he returned, telling her the rest with his stare.

He really was serious about fighting it someday, she knew and didn't doubt at all anymore.

He felt her grip recede a bit, though her trembling hadn't ceased. Her eyes were nailed on his chest, not daring to move anywhere for the strain. But the information had relaxed her a little. Thinking quickly, he glanced back at the door.

"You think you can walk? It sounds like the rain's stopped for a while, and it's pretty warm. Maybe if you walk a little, you'll get some of the tension out? We can keep talking."

"I don't kn-ow," she muttered through her teeth.

"I'll help you," he said. "B'Elanna, we don't have the right medicine here, and you're wound too tight to get any worse. We might as well try everything. I think I need to walk, too, since I wasn't really sleeping, and you're probably going nuts not moving around."

Unwillingly, she snorted. "Th-at's a m-ild word for it."

Her grip finally slid away, and she willingly let him help her sit up completely. He left for a moment to grab one of Bakali's cloaks, hanging nearby. He helped it on her, helped her up from the bed then took her around the waist to ease her across the room. Sliding her bare feet over the smooth stone floor, she

held onto him stiffly, hesitating when he opened the clinic door. Closing her eyes, she leaned her head against him as they passed through it.

"You okay?" Tom asked, readjusting his hold on her.

"Y-es," she breathed, drawing her head up to feel the misty, tepid air. She opened her eyes slightly. She was already exhausted, but now that they were there, she didn't want to go back. "Keep m-oving."

Gingerly helping her across the rounded patio and down the short front step, Tom turned them onto the flagstoned street and into the foggy moonlight; then they went toward the middle of the square. She barely remembered anything she managed to see.

Her head still throbbed, but the air and movement did help, if anything then to distract her, tire her nerves. With only a slow, shuffling stroll towards the ruins of a large building Tom said was a temple, she was more than ready to return, feeling her blood rushing in her ears for the exertion. She heard herself groaning a little from time to time as they slowly made their way back, much as she tried to stay quiet. Her eyes remained planted on the waterlogged street, blobs of shiny marble that even in the night was too bright for her to bear too long. But she couldn't make herself look forward anymore or pull her head up straight. So she narrowed her eyes and tried to breathe regularly until Tom maneuvered her up the clinic step again. Inside again, he sat her by the window and brought her some leftover bread and tea from dinner.

Not an hour after they had begun, she let Tom lower her onto the bed and cover her warmly. She heard him whisper something to her before he left, but barely heard it. The walk had indeed helped her work off some of the tension, even if she fell to sleep wincing.

...at the grate floor, as the corridor grew thinner and thinner. She turned each corner, hearing their breathing become louder, feeling her heart beat, gloriously unafraid. The phaser in her hand, she looked down to set it to kill, her manicured fingers quick on the small panel. Below, a glint of black, her boots, covering careful feet that had gotten her in that far... Feeling herself smiling, she went on. She knew her duty.

She passed a mirror then stopped at it. She looked like she always did--presentable, strong, neat, with a little bit of lipstick. Rose that day. She noticed the old, turning designs on the frame...Were they Desalian patterns? Didn't matter. Pretty, though.

Around another, thinner corner--the breathing was louder--was another mirror, and in it she saw... She turned away quickly. That wasn't her.

There was a window, and she looked through to see Tom playing pool with Chakotay and Aratra. Tom hit the two ball with a crack and all the balls flew into the holes. He smiled jauntily. "That one's for B'Elanna," he said.

She turned back to the corridor when he said it, not knowing when he'd said it, just knowing that he had...When? But it didn't matter.

"Who is she to make the decision for all of us?!"

"...I want you to know how very deeply you have disappointed me."

"That doesn't sound like you. You've changed."

"It must have been difficult to destroy what you created."

"It was necessary."

Around the corner and into the last juncture she heard them, smelled them. Raising her phaser, she took the last step and saw Maghet.

"Looks like you finally got what you wanted..."

"I'll try not to break any noses..."

Nicoletti was whistling the requiem somewhere far away.

He was pushing up against a form in robes against the walls, pumping like an animal, grunting with the pleasure, drawing blood from his brutal grip on the pale, thin leg wrapped around him.

"Sashana'i, get away from him!" she ordered, aiming.

Someone took her hand, eased it easily down and turned her. She looked up to see Hychar's ruthless smile. His hands found her breasts and her back found the wall as he leaned down and kissed her, opened her mouth with his serpentine tongue.

"B'Elanna, he would take you and you may not fight," she heard Dalra say.

"I don't want him," she moaned, feeling Hychar's cold hands pulling away her tunic, yet not resisting him, feeling the pleasure, seduced by the cold radiating from his body, his hands arousing her against her better will...submitting. "I want to kill him."

"Abomination," Hychar whispered, sinking his teeth into the skin of her neck, cool and sharp, like a slow cut. She felt her blood drizzling down her bared shoulder from the bite. "I will have you."

"You can't," she breathed. "Ye'i a'o tsa ta'ich." He squeezed her breasts painfully; his smile was stained with her blood. "But you can kill me. Please kill me--Trras ye'i zhra'i warn..."

"Looks like you finally got what you wanted."

Lazily opening her eyes, she saw Tom, filthy in Uillaran robes, turning around and walking away, back to the detail lines with the others.

"But I'd rather have had you, Be'i," he said softly.

Her uniform became her Uillaran robes, and Hychar lifted the skirt of them to access her all too easily. "You wish this?" he asked her.

"No."

"But you enjoy this." He moved into her. She didn't feel him there but knew he was there and she couldn't move away. Her legs wrapped around him; he struck her thigh with his gloved hand, raising welts. "You would have me," he grunted.

"No." She felt him pressed against her, his rough hair, cutting her skin...She turned her face away, her head hurting, her heart pounding in dread...And yet she did not pull away. "You can't have me. I will

never belong to you."

"You already do."

"I won't let you."

"He shall take you, Be'i," came Sashana'i's weeping. She was huddled in the corner, pale and trembling, speaking only slightly slurred as she pulled her hair from her eyes. "It is the way. He has taken my voice, my people's voice, and he shall take you as you would have it..."

"Hychar would've liked that--"

"They won't have me!"

B'Elanna's eyes shot open as she jolted awake. Her heart had sunk while still hammering and her throat was swollen. She could feel the tracks where her tears were drying. Her hand, trembling slightly, reached up to smear them away. Turning onto her back, her stare fell upon the blur of painted patterns on the ceiling, barely lit by a tiny footlight somewhere in the room. She stared numbly at it for some time; finally, she blinked and calmed her breath again.

Eventually, not thinking to, she fell back to sleep.

"Be'i?" Sashana'i jerked up from her hip to her knees.

Tom looked up from his breakfast to also see B'Elanna clutching at the door frame on the top step, her ghoulish face staring blankly around at them all, squinting a little for the light. He had to force himself not to jump up--and definitely not to smile too much.

"You hungry?" was all he asked instead and saw her nod slightly.

She had woken only a few minutes ago; hearing the voices on the floor above, she found herself going up the stairs at last. Upon seeing her, Bakali moved to close the shutters, thanking the spirits along the way. Bala saw her nod to the offer of food and moved to his feet to the mantel, where another plate laid. Sashana'i reached over and squeezed Aratra's hand.

By her own effort, B'Elanna climbed up the last step and moved into the hazily lit main room that sat just above the clinic. Pausing to catch her breath, she let her eyes wander, curious to know where they and Tom had been when not outside or with her.

In all, Bala and Bakali's house was a wide galley with a sandstone tile floor and dingy beige plaster walls. Being right above it, their main room was the same size as the clinic's front room, about four-by-eight meters, but rather than the hodgepodge of equipment, hutches and cots that populated the clinic, the upper level was partly for sitting and eating, its only furniture a collection of pillows and a few small wall tables. The back half was made for cooking, with a wide, half-circle stone fireplace and neatly organized cookware at the center. On the same wall as the entrance was a long storage chest, open to reveal a collection of linens. If Bala and Bakali had any other possessions, they were not on display. The other room, an afterthought adjacent to the fireplace, looked more like a closet, though inside she could see a small bed on the floor and a tall cabinet beside a couple thin windows. In a nook behind the fiery

mantel was a small cubicle--storage, it seemed--and a heavy, leaning ladder that B'Elanna correctly suspected led up to her and Tom's space.

Thinking on its plainness, she recalled Aratra saying the elders bore the finest home in Azlre. Though it was tidy and seemingly organized, it said a lot about what else was out there.

B'Elanna moved near Tom, who had smoothed down an old, oft-mended pillow for her. She put out her hands. He took them and helped her to sit. She tried not to stagger down, but she realized in the process of the act that her knees gladly weakened with the promise of sitting. Tom supported her well, though, and lowered her to the pillows without any trouble.

She closed her eyes, catching her breath again and checking her humiliation.

"Water?" he asked and got another nod. He served her some; soon after, a plate arrived. Tom was wise enough, she noted, to let her go at it herself. Sashana'i looked ready to jump across the floorcloth.

Before the other lady could decide to, she picked a piece of flatbread.

"It pleases to see you moving of your own will again," Aratra said kindly. "Your strength shall be regained in but suns"

B'Elanna didn't look up, but nodded as she folded her selection around a mysterious blob of something.

"Be'i ahw-eht wowhp aizh'is," Sashana'i added. "Ka, Toma? Ma'owh ta Be'i me'itsa paw-buh."

B'Elanna only caught half of that, but didn't care. It was enough that she managed to get herself into that room and to a meal like a somewhat normal person. "I don't w-ant to talk a-bout it," she said slowly, trying not to stammer, even if her mixed-up brain was still telling her to.

Bakali sighed. Done with her meal, she could only watch her young patient eat with a sinking heart. She had been told much--and witnessed herself--of Be'i's passionate spirit, of her and her companion's fight for survival. To see her those past days had made them all feel their new friends' losses more.

"Ka, Be'i, there is yet regret that I could not procure the full healing you require, which ails you now."

"Ba-kali..." B'Elanna warned softly.

"My rights are equal to yours, Child," scolded the old woman, though she spoke more for them all. "May a healer's sorrow also be expressed? No bone regenerator can be claimed this sun, nor bear I the means of procuring one; rather, scanners and the surgical bed bear as many years as our occupation. The tissue regenerator we possess was corrupted by the laridium-based cell, thus it as well requires repair. Natural antiseptics and some synthetics are available, yet so little more. This heavy fate is borne by me with every child who must be left to nature. Your pain would not be could I prevent it, Be'i. It is not acceptance, yet it is my honest being which feels this."

B'Elanna took a bite of food while the elegant elder spoke, discovering that the blob was in fact a piece of mild cheese. Not bad. Did the job. When she swallowed it, she nodded, again and without looking up. "You did what y-you could. It's en-nough. Y-you can't do m-ore. I don't blame y-you."

What she blamed was that brutal system that let the Desalians rot and had kept her and Tom there. The monster race that had essentially destroyed what little life she had, one she had been finally feeling she'd started to make some difference with...

If they'd been on Voyager, she knew, she'd be back to Engineering by then. The Doctor would've gotten impatient with her and she'd have left him in sickbay with a sure strut and not looking back. Maybe Chakotay would have caught up with her, making sure she was sure about getting back to work--or at least making sure she was ready. But she would've insisted, likely with some impatience.

She'd have been returned to normal, her brow put back together, her eyesight fixed, her bruises and scars nicely healed. She'd have gotten a shower and clean clothes and a comfortable bed...She would've even complained about those damned rations or Neelix's food before sneaking off to put in some off duty hours on the Cochrane project...

But there was no use in thinking about that impossible thing. Voyager was long dead or gone. That life was over. Just another hat to wear, another stage in her life, like Kessik, like the Academy, her freight work, the Maquis... Now she had Tom Paris, Cezia and a smashed skull, and she had to make what she could of all that now. At least Tom had been a good friend from that start, one that hadn't balked or shirked the strain of their situation yet. She wouldn't have to start from scratch like before.

Like Voyager, she sure as hell hadn't chosen to come to that place. But it didn't seem to be getting away from her too quickly that time. So, it was time to just get on with it, hope Tom and the others were right and she wouldn't look so damn bad after the incisions and bruises went away, try to do something in that place for the mean time that might make a difference. Screw the rest.

She was too sick of being sick and tired for the rest.

Tom had been watching her eat--or more, watching her eyes dart and blink with her thinking about something then finally settle as she let out her breath and chose another portion of bread from her plate. Meanwhile, her expression faded into something more...familiar. He decided to take that as a good sign.

"B'Elanna?" he asked quietly and she jerked her head, not looking up. "How about after breakfast I take you upstairs? You haven't seen it yet."

"I'd...like th-at," she answered. "I'm a l-ittle tired." She wedged a soft green vegetable with the bread that time then briefly turned her lips up, thanking him with that before continuing her meal.

He saw it, nodded, took a sip of water. Only when she turned away did he allow himself that smile.

Torrents, swirls, spinning up from the ground into small tornadoes rising into the air like fire, spitting beads of black death. Red poison, blinding in the scorching sun, and its dirt filled her lungs in every breath--she could feel herself coughing, the swelling, the scratching pain...

Hychar appeared within the dust vacuum, his black hair floating in the hard wind, Maghet at his side, surveying her, awaiting his order...

Over the hard earth, she flew at them, screaming, crying out, ready for murder. Her calloused fingers clawing before her, she wanted their blood, focused on their throats. Then she was in battle, striking them both down and waiting for more, a noble battle that could only be praised by her mother's people, two against one for the sake of her honor, a thing she hadn't cared much about in the past. But it was honor--survival, hatred, terror--her vindication.

Bludgeoning them, ripping at them, making them fall beneath her blows, her blood was pounding, her eyes were everywhere, she could do anything. She bloodied them with bloodier hands, doubling them with her kicks, laughing evilly as they shrunk at her warrior's yells, kicking them again and again, feeling the thrill of seeing them spew their poison on the hot, cracked earth.

But every time she put one down, the other would rise and come at her again, as though she'd never touched them. She fought on anyway, sinking her fists into their bones, breaking, yanking out their organs, glorying in their shock and pain in a way she never had--had reeled from. But it was vindication--it was revenge. They would never win. She would have victory--she would be freed. She had to be freed...

But they still came at her, over and over, and her hands began to shake.

No! she cried inside herself. You can't get tired! Don't let them win! Don't let him have you!

She was coughing, unwillingly sucking in the tornadoes of dust, which flew straight to her gaping mouth as if intent to go there, even though she thought to close it. She felt the strain in all her muscles, but she couldn't give up. --But then, she couldn't move, she was being lifted...

Then she felt the ice cold grip of Hychar at the back of her neck and his breath on her jaw.

"You have brought this scourge--and in your companion's curse--you disgrace only yourself."

To her horror, she felt her body go flaccid, all her muscles relax and wait...wait...not rise against that certain defeat as his gloved hand reeled up and back, then, as if a spring had been released, whipped around--

"You are DEAD, abomination!"

B'Elanna's woke, her heart fluttering.

She was in a cold sweat. Breathing, she suddenly tried to catch her breath so not to cough. She could feel her lungs rumbling in protest. She swallowed it down. Above her, the rain pelleted the metal roof in waves in time with the thunder. At the foot of her bed, the stone chimney creaked with heat, radiated its dry warmth into the thick, knotted blanket covering her. There was breathing near her and she could smell him. A stabbing in her temples faded to a steady throb.

The dream was fading off as she realized she really was awake. Instinctively, she tried to recall what had woken her--then she didn't want to remember the visions, flashing back in snapshots with the feelings followed them. She forced her eyes to lock on the smooth plaster wall she faced. She heard another breath, a shift...

"Tom," she whispered.

"You okay?" he asked. He hadn't been asleep.

She didn't feel him behind her, and she suddenly recalled that he was on a flat pallet beside her bed. He had asked Aratra to get him one, thinking she'd prefer to have the bed to herself. She thought she would, too. But there they were on her first night out of the clinic room and she didn't want to go back to sleep, knowing what awaited her there. She had expected to feel him behind her, but instead lay alone in a warm, soft bed.

"Had a...dream."

"Yeah. I know how that goes."

"I w-as on Uillar, and...w-ell, it..."

He breathed what sounded like understanding. "You're awake now, though. You're okay."

She knew that, but it was still good to hear him say it. Oddly, it made it more real. Even so... "Come up here," she said then swallowed, still feeling the cold clutch, shivering despite the heavy blanket...her skull swelling with the pain of what... "I...I don't w-ant to s-sleep alone."

Her request was toneless--trying not to show her embarrassment for asking. Tom understood. He hadn't had the courage to ask her if he could join her. For some reason, he thought she might take it the wrong way, even after everything they'd been through together. He tried not to make noise when he breathed his relief.

Respecting her effort, he said nothing as he crawled up onto the pungent, scrap-stuffed mattress behind her. Lifting her covers, he scooted himself into their old, usual position, lowered his head behind hers. She reached for his arm, pulled it around herself and hugged his hand to her chest. Coughing slightly, she tried to draw a deeper breath, relax again.

She felt him sigh against the back of her head, steady...and *there*. She shivered again.

When the hell did I get so needy? she asked herself, glad he'd come up and annoyed with herself at the same time. But she knew she'd gotten used to it--to him--and that wasn't necessarily a bad thing. It shouldn't have been all that humiliating, needing him by her, needing him to be the good guy he'd turned out to be, her friend...

"You need another blanket?" he asked, warm upon her hair.

If she'd been weaker...and a lot healthier... "I'm f-ine."

He nodded slightly. "If you need to talk about it, I'll listen."

"I know," she whispered. She did know that he had always been a good ear--whether or not she'd asked for one. "It's...c-lose."

"Okay."

"Th-ank y-ou, though," she added. "For e-verything."

She felt him grin slightly. "I'm just glad you're okay."

"I don't kn-ow if I am or n-ot. It's a...l-ot to deal with."

"Yeah." He hugged her warmly, seriously, wishing--as usual--he could do more. "I'd have taken it instead any day."

She paused at that, letting her eyes fall a bit. "I w-ouldn't have l-et you have it," she finally told him.

Again he offered a small breath of a laugh. "True. But I would've tried."

"You did try." With that, she closed her eyes. Minutes later, she sighed; her muscles loosened. Her breath slowed as his warmth matched hers, his breathing, too. Still and silent, she finally began to drift off again.

Likewise, Tom's eyes finally began to close, fluttering a bit when he realized that they were no longer dressed like bears in winter, but draped in loose, airy bedclothes. He could feel her body perfectly.

He fell to sleep trying desperately to ignore that.

It really wasn't much, she knew as she pulled herself out of the bunk.

Their "quarters" was just a plastered roof space with a slanted ceiling, three vents and a small shuttered window at the end. The corner of the chimney acted as the foot of the bed, which was tucked into a two by one and a half meter alcove-like space. Always warm, the soapstone blocks radiated a peculiar odor, a sweet sort of mustiness that wasn't unpleasant, but noticeable.

At the end of the room was a flap in the floor, which opened to go down the ladder into Bala and Bakali's flat. Not two meters across from the bed sat two small trunks with a few shelves above that, sparsely populated with tending items, as they were called. Below the shuttered window, beside the head of the bed, an old, rectangular bench that opened into a crude, cubby-like desk sat.

It wasn't much, but it was a lot more than they had before, and more than most people in that city had. She'd been told a few times how most families there--entire families--slept in a single room with no privacy but what they could make from their bedrolls.

After Tom had politely left her for a while, making the excuse of continuing to bend to Desalian ways and collect her breakfast, she carefully moved to the trunk and opened it. Sashana'i had told her she'd found some "proper" clothing for her. Again, it wasn't much: A couple of typical Desalian outfits and a second nightgown, two pairs of "wrap" shoes--soles with wide cloth ribbons which were wrapped around the feet and tied at the ankles--a shin-length tailored coat, bronze-colored and silky to the touch, a dark but lightweight cloak and an embroidered blue gown she knew she wouldn't wear. Gazing at the last article, she wondered what in the world Sashana'i was thinking in getting something so formal.

Having heard all of the stories about short supplies, there, it almost seemed like too much. It was too much. But of course, it was Sashana'i who'd done the "procuring." B'Elanna didn't want to know what she'd done to get them.

Sighing to herself, she chose a beige, calf-length gown with blue embroidery on the skirt and long sleeves, and then a pair of loose, brownish leggings. (She wondered briefly who died that she would get them, but then she pushed the thought away.) On the other side of the trunk, she found a couple of stiff halters with sheer straps and flat front clasps that B'Elanna deduced were brassieres. Shrugging to herself, she picked the lighter-colored one, noticing there were no other undergarments. She shrugged again.

Carefully, she pulled off her nightgown. Her neck and upper back were still aching, even when she was lying down, so she was careful when she slid the halter on, fastening the ties and clasps in the way she guessed was right. She blinked at the effect. *So much for leaving things to nature*, she thought with a small smirk. It really did hold *everything* upright and in place. That would take some getting used to.

Of course, she knew everything there would, though she had little complaint about the soft leggings and the airy, long-sleeved gown. Even the shoes--when she figured them out--were like walking barefoot on crisp sheets. They weren't *her* clothes, but they were clean, they were comfortable and easy to move in. She would get used to it. All of it.

She knew she had to.

She'd be damned if she let those bastards win. She knew she'd heal, she knew she and Tom would eventually get themselves to work, do something...

Tom knocked and lifted the flap to find her carefully brushing her hair, and he had to steady himself to look at her. *She's healing*, was his first silly thought, followed by a few more that might well have earned a few smacks. Scars, grafted skull, bruises and all--she was a sight for his sore eyes in those clean, graceful clothes and straightening herself up as she was.

It was good in itself to see her caring for herself, especially after what she'd had to look at in the mirror. He'd expected her to take longer to deal with that. At the same time, he knew she still was. But the look she gave him, the tiny grin...

"Bakali got some antibiotics," he told her and he climbed all the way up. "She wants you to have a dose. You up for a walk?"

"If I thought I could," she said, slowly lest she stammer, "I'd run laps around this whole place."

He grinned. "Not even a week and you're getting cabin fever," he teased; then he nodded. "I know the feeling. You sleep okay?"

"Better," she said, putting the brush back on the shelf.

Slipping her comb into a generous pocket on the leg of her "new" gown, she glanced back to Tom, who upon being noticed, grinned again and went to busy himself with straightening the bed. "Thank you, by the way, for coming up in-to the bunk with me."

"Thanks for asking me," he said, without any pretense and still fiddling with the blankets. "I guess I've gotten used to being with you. We've been sleeping together a while and..." He snorted softly. "Well, you know what I mean."

"Yes."

Turning, he saw her eyes dart back down to the floor. Her face had flushed. Her lips pressed together, parted, looking for something else to say.

He drew a smooth breath. "How about those shots, then? Maybe breakfast after?"

"I could eat," she said, relieved that he'd ended it first.

As he eased her down the steep ladder, she felt his long, firm hands on her waist, not gripping, but ready to secure her. She barely even thought about the effort she was making in remembering the feel of him behind her the night before, after that dream. She'd fallen straight to sleep holding his arm close to her...

But she didn't have time for that, for those kinds of imaginings. It was no time or place to start

lusting...even if she had come to expect having someone to talk to at night, expect to have him him nearby--something she'd never really had time to enjoy with previous boyfriends.

Not that he was her boyfriend, but a good friend, a close friend.

That alone was an irony to her, much more the question of how long could it would stay platonic without them either losing each other or having a complete falling out. At the same time, she still couldn't believe he could even look at her. Or maybe he was already used to it?

Or maybe he was just crazy.

Maybe she was just thinking too much about it. That was probably it.

"Zharab'o llar!" From her work within a small line of children, Bakali smiled as the two, one squinting, entered the front room of the clinic. She patted a rake of a girl into the next room before reaching for another to inoculate. "I greet your morning in peace--and what lovely colors you have chosen to grace this sun."

"Th-anks," B'Elanna said, not feeling it, but letting it go to see the children there. Small and sickly, with big eyes and wet clothes, they each took their shots silently and moved to the next room at the elder lady's kind command. Despite the sight--or relieved by the distraction--she managed a grin when she noticed Sashana'i was already darting to the windows to draw the shutters. B'Elanna hadn't even thought to complain. Her head throbbed and eyes stung, but even the hazy grey light had been nice to see.

As Sashana'i closed the last one, Tom moved to peek through the first, though he was careful not to open it too far. "Where is everyone?" he asked.

"Procuring bread from Rahna, whose cart ails," Bakali answered, finishing the last of the children.

"What happened to it?"

"The solar unit on his cart suffers during the rain season, for less power gained and for shorted connections. He often is tardy, yet today is detained." Walking to the other room, she giggled at the commotion going on in there, said a few words to Cali then drew the curtain. She then returned to the wall table, where she prepared two more vials. "Toma, you shall be inoculated as well. Seat yourself."

"I'm fine. Get B'Elanna first."

The old woman sighed. "Sashana'i, bring your stubborn brother to me."

Sashana'i shook her head. "Gy'a aw-hutach Toma whuh."

"Nevertheless, infection is a danger for him and his lady needs him."

B'Elanna's brow rose. "It is?"

"I'm fine," Tom said, waving a dismissive hand behind him.

"Past my sealing your internal organs into their present patchwork, you bore wellness," Bakali corrected. "Bring yourself, Child. The sun yet grows in our sky."

B'Elanna just shook her head, frowning at him. "L-et her get it o-ver with, Tom."

Glancing back to the three women's similar stares--knowing he was beat without even fighting it--he gave the window up and went with smirking obedience to Bakali's side. "Yes ma'am."

As Bakali gave him his injection then loaded the second, B'Elanna's mind suddenly started working elsewhere. The glint of the hypospray caught her eyes just as "ma'am" caught her ear and...She could practically feel steam running through her long-neglected mechanical expertise. Thankfully, it all came back like instinct, the piecing and conversions and calculations.

Her eyes went to the table, where she spotted something that looked like a regenerator. Her hand rested on her pocket and her brain turned again, more quickly. Starfleet power casings were usually duranium based...

As the old woman came to inoculate her, she asked quietly, "Bakali, y-ou or Bala said that the la-ridium corrupts the com-ponents in your e-quipment. It's not du-ranium, is it?"

"We both may have mentioned the corruption," she said with a sigh then pressed the injection into her neck and wiped the spot with a treated cloth. "They are laskeb equipment, which is composed of dichromide ores. --Va, the injection site must remain untouched for a quarter, Child, to allow its healing."

B'Elanna barely heard her, though she did obey. "L-et me see the tissue re-generator," she ordered, her stare darting across an unseen pattern on the floor.

Tom looked at her. It seemed like a hundred years ago, the last time he'd heard that tone in her voice. "What's going on, Chief?" he asked.

She held her fingers up to him--meaning, "don't interrupt my train of thought." He obeyed, settling on moving to her side. When she had the squarish object in her hand, she turned to the surgical bed and set it down.

"Sasha-na'i, open the w-indows," she said. "I'll take the headache for n-ow. I n-eed to see. Bakali, I n-eed a small mag-netic probe and any tools you m-ight have for maintaining your e-quipment."

The elder considered it for a moment then went into the other room. A minute later, B'Elanna had chosen from a small pile of them. Once light filled the room--and she had adjusted to what came with it--she opened the back of the regenerator.

"Tom, check that ex-tractor, see if it w-orks."

With that, she pulled her commbadge out of her pocket--and Tom knew where she was going with it. "B'Elanna..."

"It'll only kill the l-ong-range comm and the beacon," she told him. "Not like it w-orks all that w-ell anymore. The la-ridium charges the cell, but it's ea-ting it up. It n-eds a n-ew crystal." Making a couple more adjustments, squinting hard to see, she nodded. "This'll only give it a f-ew minutes, but it'll be better than n-othing. I'll see w-hat I can't do w-ith some of the other parts a-round here."

Sashana'i returned to the table to see what B'Elanna was doing. Though she didn't understand it from her own experience, the memories of such work were still fresh within her; the impression alone was enough to make her smile. But before praising her friend, she moved around to finish B'Elanna's gown properly, yanking decisively on the ties before pulling them together.

B'Elanna coughed. "You don't qu-it," she said, picking into the front components of the communicator as she felt her gown meet the halter she was still getting used to. "I thought y-our people liked the f-low of n-ature."

Bakali laughed. "And the flow of a woman's frame would be a pleasing example of nature's gift as well, Be'i."

"Score one for Desalia," Tom chuckled and did so again at the narrowed glance B'Elanna popped up to him.

But then she was back to work, setting the tiny dichromide ring into the regenerator's degraded power cell. When she reconnected the laridium chip, the device whirred to life. "It'll on-ly be a few minutes w-orth, Bakali. I hope you don't n-eed much time."

Bakali smiled, shook her head. "It shall be used efficiently. You must now seat yourself on the table, however."

Done with the ties, Sashana'i hugged B'Elanna from behind. "Ye'i kawh-szha Be'i moko'ow. Ak yewhan buszh wi han."

B'Elanna stilled to feel those warm, thin arms embrace her, though, closing her eyes as she felt Sashana'i's excitement. She didn't get all of it, she pieced out enough: "I bear anxiousness, Be'i, deserved, again, pretty, being." *Me--deserved of getting back a face I never liked that much to begin with, when all these people have had a hundred times worse than I ever did in my selfish little life...*

The memory of her nightmare flashed into her head again: The submission, Sashana'i's bloodied leg, then the disgrace put upon herself. Her heart shrank only to recall it.

Opening her eyes, B'Elanna stared up at Tom. Still, she spoke behind her. "N-o, Bakali. U-use it on S-ashana'i."

Tom's brow rose. The other women stilled, too.

B'Elanna shrugged. "A tissue re-generator w-on't fix my cranial ridges," she said truthfully, "which is wh-at I r-eally n-eed. I'm sick of n-ot being able to under-stand her, and she's been m-ute longer than I've been ug-ly."

"You're not ugly," Tom said, his eyes still bound to hers.

B'Elanna broke it to look behind her at Bakali's shocked sigh. "U-use it on S-ashana'i," she repeated without a trace of doubt.

The woman in question, realizing what was being said, could only stare up at her in shock. Looking to Tom then her elder hostess and finally back to her friend's grudging smile, she suddenly flung her arms around B'Elanna. "Be'i!" she cried.

B'Elanna squeezed her back. She'd expected her friend's emotion as much as she'd decided so quickly, and she fought back her natural impulse to change her mind. She knew what was the right choice. "Just so l-ong as you stop p-pulling my hair and d-doing too m-uch. This m-akes us even. Okay?"

Sashana'i, of course, did not promise anything, only hugged her harder until Bakali gently eased her away.

"Little time remains with this cell, Child."

B'Elanna gave her friend another nod. "Th-is is wh-at I w-ant."

Sashana'i almost looked as if she'd protest, her eyes darting over B'Elanna's expression. With a more insistent look on the engineer's part, the young Desalian woman quickly moved to another raised pallet and reclined. She asked B'Elanna with her stare one more time before Bakali arrived by her.

B'Elanna was sure to return her bravest grin. It faltered, though, as soon as the elder moved between their view. Slowly, she let out her breath. She felt Tom's arm move around her, give her shoulders a hug.

"That's one hell of a generous thing you just did," he whispered to her.

She reached up and touched his hand. "Like with the U-nar," she said quietly, "w-e'll take care of it s-ome other time." She blinked when she heard the regenerator activate. With a glance to him, she drew a minute breath, sighed it out noiselessly.

He nodded, understanding. As Bakali began her work, B'Elanna turned to put the remnants of her commbadge back together.

But before she could survey the pieces, Tom touched her cheek. She looked up again, annoyed that time. She really wanted to just get her badge back together and the tools sorted out. She wanted to see if anything there might be of some use of later, and to keep busy for a while, while she had the strength.

Without even blinking but to let his eyes naturally close, Tom leaned down and kissed her forehead. "You're a good person, B'Elanna Torres," he told her and let her go.

She turned back to the components, feeling her cheeks warm with a blush that time. Worse, as she pulled the small parts back together, snapped them back into place with unnaturally clumsy fingers, the pain in her head had worsened for the light and she knew she was already getting tired. The regenerator's hum and Bakali's quiet talking was a little distracting, but she managed to put her communicator together and back into her pocket. She also managed, during that time, to convince herself that Tom's gesture was just a friendly one. He really did like to touch...too much sometimes, even while she knew she hadn't backed away.

"Want to help me with th-ese before the others come f-or breakfast?" she asked.

He smiled at her--at all of her that time, she noticed. But his regard was just as respectful, so she knew she didn't have to address it. He was just being a friend.

"You bet," he said.

Good enough, she decided.

"I am a word painter, and suns have set upon my life for eighty revolutions. Ka, many rallkle have passed me, yet I bear youth. My spirit, pure, has lived forever, yet shall live forever. The spirit is eternal. Nothing preceded it but the wish if the joy of bodily life. It is but the body that bears nature's

turnings.

"Here it is seen, in our people, around us always. It is seen in each crevice and every light, the truth of Desal...and my past as well. As a girl, I danced in clothes of the sky with silver scarves around my lithe body, full of the joys of living in jewels and scents so enticing, one should truly believe the stars created our living world. Every pleasure of the body was mine, every fulfillment of the mind; I carried myself with the air and water, always moving, sweet in scent and rippling over the pebbles of my girlish experience. This would entice my lover, No'yfra, who like the earth drank my water and bloomed for my gentle breezes in his ear.

"Yet the waves of fate and the Unar swept over Desalia and my pure white hands were set into the stone of labor, bloodied with humility and knotted with strain it had never known. My sky gown quickly clouded and tattered with the storms of that sea change; the wind that carried me shackled me with oppressive heat. And in a short turret, for pride remaining and in illness, No'yfra was taken to meet again our ancestors. Bound to him in word alone, I took lovers in bodily desire, but joined to none. Within my spirit, flight could only be to him.

"Yet I danced within myself on the days we celebrated our spirits and our ongoing redemption. I danced to never forget, to always live purely, to someday see my true mate once again..."

"In neighborhoods in Azlre as it had been upon Desalia since ancient times, they gathered all--elders, children, parents, youths and all else of name. All brought themselves around the fire, and as one in spirit, they spoke of lands or times or histories. Some among us had heard the words painted many times, some were just that time blessed--yet all would hear the words gladly. At times, the evening's portraits bore complexity and required much time. Some claimed simplicity. All were responsible for binding us, retaining the knit of our cloth.

"As it came to be known in the echoes of Azlre, Be'i and Toma were more...reserved--or better, I should think, reserving."

Tom bent his head, nearly touching B'Elanna's shoulder; B'Elanna shook her head slightly.

He was holding her in front of himself, as they often had sat at Uillar. It was an old habit that they'd easily gravitated back into the first time they were invited by their hosts and friends to come into the square one misty night and listen to the stories being told in its center. Dozens of people in their close neighborhood came to sit around the low, coaly fires and speak of their lives and the stories of their families. Dozens more came to merely share the company and listen. It was a universal Desalian tradition, they learned, particularly on Tsi'omad, the last day of the Desalian week.

A few rows away from the fire, Tseshydi still spoke, her dark, wrinkled eyes shining in the flickering light, alive with memory, her lips turned up in both contentment and hope, satisfaction with her spirit, a dream to see her lover again soon. She spoke for nearly an hour, with gentle gestures made with bone-thin hands and a soft, yearning voice, entrancing all around her, even the two who in the past du'ave had grown restless in their recoveries--and ready to start taking advantage of their relative safety.

Bakali jumped at the crash.

"Who the hell do you think you are to tell me what I can and can't do?!" echoed a fierce snarl from the rodent's nest the elders had so gladly pooled above their living space.

Sashana'i, Aratra--plus half the remainder of the Uillaran survivors--had mentioned such temperaments about the two...

"What the hell's your problem, Torres?" the companion snapped back. "You sit there and *moan* about your skull coming apart and then *you* start screaming. You'll just use about anything for an excuse, won't you?!"

Bala could feel his intestinal track knotting up more with every lance and saw his bondmate's pale expression. Neither had ever heard a two on their own world bear themselves with such violence.

"What's that supposed to mean?!"

"I mean that I couldn't give a shit about your ridges, your scars or your headaches. So stop trying to pass off your hostility on me 'cause you can't take someone giving a damn about the rest of you!"

"Screw off, Paris! I never asked for your sympathy, and I'm sorry you've got to be everybody's *hero*--"

"Yeah, that's right, B'Elanna--push it right back on me since you can't handle yourself."

"Leave me alone!"

Bala could bear no more, feeling with certainty he would not relieve his bowels until he met the ancestors should he permit them to continue as such. Setting down his cooking, he stood for the steps.

Bakali hurried to his side and took his arm. "I should not think you would wish to place yourself in this storm."

He patted her hand. "This is our house, and they bear much youth. Youths require guidance to know a correct path, as is known." Turning a firmer stare to the ladder, he rolled his robe sleeves up on his bony arms and made his way up.

"Guess nothing's changed after all, then! You said you always made yourself alone--congratulations! You've done it again, 'cause I'd rather sleep on the street than deal with this shit every other day."

"Don't forget to take your crap with you, too, Paris!"

"Oh, I won't! Consider it--like me--no longer in your majesty's way!"

"You son of a--"

"Oarrgask asri'im!" announced the elder, his turtle eyes buried in both the fire-eyed children as he popped his head through the flap in their floor. "War shall not be brought into my house!"

"We're just finishing!" B'Elanna snarled.

"Be'i grrikal shast yo'i!" Bala returned, coming up the rest of the way and moving in close to her. "Nor shall my person be disrespected in my house, which from my truth and as my gift became yours. Your dishonor tears my spirit and blackens your own, already at the mercy of Unar."

B'Elanna reared her head, blinking at his insult. Hearing a Desalian elder raise his voice was...effective. "I wasn't disrespecting *you*," she said shortly, though quieter.

"Gye. You have," Bala told her. "It is this behavior which has borne upon us the debt we live, our present contrition. More suns shall not be given to our suffering--nor my or Bakali's ears. It is not wished your own healing suffer for your hostile behavior, as well." His plain, heartfelt words seemed to take the proper effect. The shoulders above her tightly crossed arms fell with her chin; her parted lips pressed together. Bala turned to the other man there. "Toma, your shame for your treatment of your lady should flood you now. For her pain and frustration, she speaks."

"Plus some," Tom muttered, gnawing the inside of his frown. "And she's obviously not my lady."

"Then perhaps she should be, so that your energies under this once peaceful roof would be directed more effectively." Turning back, he saw B'Elanna still staring at him. "Unar enough beyond our worlds would wage such aversion to peace. Should you require war between yourselves, you shall remove it from this place. It shall not be heard here again."

"Yeah right," B'Elanna hissed below her breath. "Like Bakali's ever going to let me out of here."

"I shall speak to her, Child," Bala replied. "It is plain your people should not be still for long. I have been warned of this. This sun, I see the extent of its truth. Your scars speak of more than your misfortune at Uillar, however. Your pain had been well trained before Uillar's suns scorned you. You shall need to learn not to require it."

The elder saw how those points reflect upon their faces, pull them down another step from their tempers. Then, he knew better of the cause, and that it was not a matter of their latent genome, as they were bearing his correction. Just then, it was simply the two's frustration and unspent energy. His and Bakali's own care had encouraged the latter, he realized, which only added to the remainder. For nearly the entire rain season, they had been convalescing indoors.

"For all you have borne together, Toma, Be'i," Bala gently continued, "do not allow your inaction to make you weaken to the scourge and curses that our true enemy would have of you. So many searing suns have passed over you, and each was faced with such courage and resilience that the resolution has given you the freedom to feel what you dared not before." That time, the two's eyes met. The lady truly did look to think of that. The man, realizing, melted into unspoken regret. "It is known you fight not each other, but yourselves and your injured bodies and spirits in this. Your inactivity calls it forth, not your despise of each other."

"I don't despise her, Bala," Tom sighed. "We just sometimes need to let off steam. That's all. Right, Torres?"

She nodded, dropping her gaze. "I guess so," she replied quietly.

"This should mean you wish not he leaves you?" Bala asked.

B'Elanna let her breath go. "He's still here, isn't he?"

Tom snorted softly, shaking his head.

"You have not answered me, Be'i," Bala stated. "Wish you not to lose this companion, your friend who has stood by you in every dire moment? Remained by you in every danger?"

She closed her eyes, turning her head down as her tightly crossed arms fumbled with each other. "No," she finally told him. "I don't want him to go."

"Toma, you do not wish to sleep on the street like a hu'irra rat rather than bear your strength and be the man you appear to be? Run from the duty you assumed?"

"Is there a class for old people on guilt trips?" Tom complained, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

"Answer me, Child. This lady has been your friend and confidante, has stood for you as well, you have said. You need not hide from one who has placed her trust in you and has shown this grace. --Answer me, Toma."

Tom drew a deep breath, holding it. "I'm not going anywhere. --No, I won't leave her."

Bala gave a nod, satisfied that their ire had nicely dissolved into mere embarrassment as he turned to leave them. They would tend the rest themselves.

"I shall speak to my bondmate on your required activity," he said, offering them a fatherly smile of approval. Sure they both had seen it, he descended the ladder, closing the flap quietly on his way.

Corrected and chagrined, the two "children" stared at each other, though grudgingly at first. Finally, in unison, they said, "Sorry," then quietly returned to what they'd been doing before they decided to rip into each other.

They said nothing more.

Returned to the main room, he first found Bakali's desperate attempt to keep from giggling, and he pressed down his own grin as well. Truly, it should not have been as satisfying as it was. Once he was far enough from the flap, she moved to take his face in her old hands and kiss him. "I find myself impressed, my spirit, for that we have never been required to discipline children until this sun."

Bala chuckled and took her hands. "We shall continue to be impressed, I should think. They yet require care and much guidance, though these spirited children should now be set free unto Azlre."

"May our blessed ancestors guide us," she replied archly, squeezing his fingers before returning to her floorcloth.

The dark hood B'Elanna was required to wear when the rains finally ebbed for good and the dry, white sun of Cezia reasserted itself did little to mask what she first saw when she slowly moved with Tom into the Azlre's square. People--a lot of people--dressed in clothes older than hers and Tom's, milled around

with little direction but in their soft chatter. Many watched after their children, wisps in stained clothing that was either too big or too small. Though certainly not as much as the prisoners of Uillar were, the majority of the city's citizens, both young and grown, were gaunt, dusty and listless.

They had survived, however, did something with themselves from day to day to earn their way, took their meals with their various hosts or outside among their neighbors, did what they could to maintain their families and their community.

For nearly a month after B'Elanna's release from the clinic, they spent their days walking among those people, slow and quiet at first but gaining more conversation as they saw nothing but the same sort of congregation in every street they wandered through. B'Elanna was surprised to find out there wasn't an unpleasant person among them. Every denizen they met welcomed her and Tom, bowed and embraced them as their own, invited service to their house and waved to them when they crossed paths again.

Though that was nice at first, it wore out its welcome rather quickly. Street after street of happy, hungry people was sometimes more than she wanted to deal with. As her strength continued to improve, B'Elanna asked Tom more often to take her to the scrap yards he'd mentioned. Not surprisingly, he was glad to hear her pester him. He put it off all the same, correctly suggesting they get more of their health back before making that journey. Grudgingly, she agreed and continued to go out with him not long after each morning meal.

The clinic, she learned when they first began their explorations, sat on the northeast end of the square. The square itself was a rounded rectangle about a kilometer long and a few hundred meters wide, more like a large mall with over-wide avenues exiting on the east, which led to an intersection of three main avenues, and the west, which stopped a couple blocks later at a set of large open gates. Outside of that stretched a rolling savannah that lead to foothills on the horizon.

Before the occupation and subsequent city crowding, Cezia had been a resort colony and the relatively rural home to about sixty thousand denizens in Azlre and about the same in the coastal capital, Sacezia. The planet had no other towns--and purposefully so. It had been carefully left to nature for vacationers, students and scientists. In Azlre, the square had been the main entry place for visitors and housed the "official" Desalian business. Thus, that neighborhood had been the most accommodating, with versatile, multi-roomed, white stone and sandstone buildings three to four stories high, generous meeting halls, the silag, now half-crumbled, and its own institute, likewise stripped and marked with disruptor blasts and also residence to about twenty families. Sashana'i and Aratra had taken up living in what was once a guest chamber in an ambassadorial building, between the former institute and the silag's ruins. Miztri and Dalra had made their home in a basement room a few buildings away, sharing a common space with several other couples on that half-underground floor.

The Adavill district occupied the northwest corner of the city. The square sat in the middle of it. They could only go south and east from there, they figured, so soon they journeyed in increasingly large circles, spending greater parts of their days exploring Azlre's other eight districts. Much of the city consisted of wide, two-floored houses, built usually in semi-circles with open terraces in the center. In their day, those "blocks" were family estates with gardens between them. More than a few of those prospective dwellings were unlivable now, with entire facades blasted away or sides crumbled from some other force. Without irrigation, the gardens had withered into long cakes of amber dirt.

The streets being built largely around those graceful circles, there were notably few straight paths in Azlre. Little wonder, they realized, the elders had been careful to explain the position of those districts in relation to the sun. It was indeed the best guide to finding anything there if one didn't know the buildings and its many residents. Regardless, they walked without thinking about direction too much until

one or both of them needed to rest. Finding a shady stoop, they took a seat, examining the neighborhood and the architecture--or what was left of the ornate stone facades after sixty years of occupation--before setting off again to find something different, even if that wasn't always a good thing.

B'Elanna's hand tightened on Tom's steadying arm as she started back at the approaching throng. "What the hell are those?"

When he looked, he grinned. "I'm guessing they're something like goats. Aratra calls them 'joth.'"

Her eyes squinted slightly as Tom easily led her toward the thick procession of leggy white creatures, who mewed loudly as they trundled past, through the crowded street at the direction of their herder.

"Goats," she said blankly--annoyed, even, that he was so cheerful about seeing livestock hopping through the middle of a city. Not that it *should* have taken her off guard.

"Well, what do you think you've been eating?" he asked her.

She shot a sickened stare up at him. "You don't mean--"

"The *cheese*, B'Elanna," he laughed, even if, friends or no, he knew he'd pay for making fun of her disgust. "If our predecessors could do it for a few millennia, I think we'll survive on milk curd."

"As long as there's no gahk involved, I guess it's all right," she conceded, only slightly ill with the knowledge that she'd been eating the product of those smelly creatures. And then, there was her cloak, the blankets and their shoes, among other things. She screwed her mouth downward. "And as long as we're not eating *them*."

"They're not nearly stupid enough to kill their food and cloth source," he told her.

"Well, that's a relief," she replied. "What else have they been feeding us?"

"Sometimes eggs from some kind of bird they keep on the east side of the city--you don't want to visit there, trust me. And the bread and crackers are ground from the grass fields outside the city walls--something like that, anyway. And then there's the gardens."

B'Elanna laughed ironically. "I feel like I'm in some twisted holodeck history lesson."

"Yeah, I know the feeling," Tom nodded. "They had to get back to basics when the Unar decided to 'borrow' their replicators and drop them on a planet without farms. Only a few people had been quick enough to grab seeds and roots. Dalra told me that the surviving elders called up their distant memories and taught people how to live off the earth again--literally. Those green sweet potatoes you like so much? Cali said the original Cezians passed them off as weeds until someone got hungry enough to dig a meter for the tubers."

B'Elanna put her teeth together at that. She really did like those potatoes, but... *This is my home now?*

Tom saw the change in her face as she considered it. "I think we're near the bazaar, if you're up to it."

"I wouldn't have come this far if I wasn't up to it, would I?" she responded, moving with him into the crowd again. Still, she groaned a little when she saw Tom's hand drift down and scratch one of the "goat's" heads. "Don't pet the food," she mewed, her eyes narrowed with disgust.

"Aw, come on, B'Elanna," he returned, grinning in just the way he knew riled her up. "They're friendly and actually pretty soft. You should try it."

She sighed, shaking her head and speeding their pace, if only to get some distance between them and the goats. "I don't think so, Paris."

Tom chuckled. "Have I told you yet how glad I am you're awake?"

She cracked a short laugh. "Not today, you haven't. Come on, let's get going before we're out past dinner again."

His lips pulled into another crooked grin. "Hungry, Torres?"

"Shut up."

He cheerfully relented, turning instead to stop one of the neighborhood people and ask which road they should take to get to the bazaar. Answering with a bow, the wiry young man pointed towards a crumbled, white facade with a smaller street wrapping around its side. Thanking him, Tom led B'Elanna across the avenue and into that next neighborhood.

"Pretty soon, we'll head out to the south wall," Tom told her as they wove through the dust-swept back street, tucking to the side to avoid an oncoming group of children and the women who followed them. "It's on the other side of the city, so we should both be ready by the time we can't resist going out to the scrap yard--which is a long hike in itself. Trust me, I know. I was idiot enough to sneak out myself one time."

B'Elanna nodded to another smiling, bowing native then looked back up at him. "I don't remember you leaving."

"Before you woke up, I had to get out for a while." He shrugged then added, "Aratra and Dalra had to carry me back."

She grinned. "Sounds like you." Deep in the shade of the street, B'Elanna looked up to see nothing but tall stone walls with windows on either side. "Where are we now?"

A few streets and two main avenues later, they entered the oft-mentioned bazaar. Not the difference she'd expected, it was just a busier version of the square, similarly surrounded by multi-floored, cracked stone houses, dirt-brushed streets and thin children followed by sickly looking parents. More than the square, the once popular resort market had chipped and weathered with age and weapons fire--and probably had no right to be standing at all. In the center of the wide avenue, too, those below the beaten facades were wandering about outside for plainly different reasons.

The vendors there, all of them alien, bargained for workers, labor being an acceptable form of payment from the Desalians. The Desalian merchants who claimed a space in the thick mall had only a few offerings. Those who traded cloth explained when asked that they had woven it in their flats with their family and brought it for trade. The stone and ceramic bowls and trays for offer seemed to have been made in the same way. Others traded plants, foodstuffs and medicines, for which they had traveled kilometers to harvest and drag back to the city on half-functioning, solar-powered carts and milled on the premises. Some people sat on grain flats, crushing tiny pods with large pins--making flour, B'Elanna guessed. For those unsanitary conditions, she wished she hadn't found out where her bread had come from. Then again, nothing could be worse than the germs she'd had at Uillar.

On the other side of the bazaar, some Azlrelians were applying for the lower trades--arranging to work for a day or a week to pay for their purchases. Their obvious poor health likely prevented them from doing much else. The alien dealers seemed to show some genuine pity and gave them work on their ship or in their temporary quarters at Azlre, cleaning, laundry or running errands. Both parties knew there was little other choice, as labor was the Unar would tolerate of the Desalians. Miztri had explained as much already.

Those Desalians just paid for their labor took most of their earnings to a neatly dressed vendor with a long, burgundy mane and deep-set cheek ridges--a Koba man, one young lady told them when Tom asked. Since the war's onset, many Koba had been black marketers, necessarily expensive but able to procure medicine and supplies. They did not purchase labor. That was the business of the Antral and Sureshan.

That fact was made evident when Tom and B'Elanna passed a water stand to see some other Desalians arranging their work leases through the Antral. According to Aratra, the Antral had worked most closely with the Unar--yet despised them the most openly, too, and disliked their roles as slave traders as much as they accepted their role. People did what they could to survive in Irliae.

To pay for their family's needs, Desalians often sold themselves to a year in an Unar household or base. Untrained workers sometimes sold themselves into a half-year of service in an Antral house, and then were traded to an Unar facility. Many of the prisoners at Uillar had served such leases. Usually the arranger of those deals was an Antral agent, who would keep the records of that worker and handle the worker's pay when the lease was served--either giving it to the individual or to the family if that worker remained in service--or died there.

In either case, their earnings usually ended up in the Koba's hands--or the Desalian merchant's, who likewise paid the Koba for supplies. So, whatever was earned by the Desalians did not stay with them. Worse, nobody seemed to mind the arrangement, but accepted the necessity. In the center of the bazaar, the Desalians removed their headscarves and held out their arms for inspection, turning when the agent asked, their pale, indigo-marked temples plain and pleasant in the white sunlight.

B'Elanna turned away, growling to herself.

Tom had grown silent at the sight, too, remembering their inspection at Uillar. Pulling a long breath through his nostrils, he turned them easily away only to see a procession of covered carts and rows of people following slowly but singing cheerfully.

"What's that?" Tom asked one of the vendors.

The man was not bothered in the least to tell them, "The burning procession, good man, the passing ceremony for our honored spirits."

"Honored spirits?" B'Elanna said then realized. "Those are dead people?"

"Our last sun's passed are collected," the man told them, looking over both their reactions. "Why should you pale at mere corpses? Our blessed ancestors have met their spirits in peace, friends."

Feeling B'Elanna's arm tense and shake, Tom eased her away. "Yeah, we know that much. Thanks...friend."

Stiff-faced, they found an exiting side street. Dirtier but thankfully emptier, the buildings were a few stories tall, too, with front doors open to the air save the hastily hung curtain. Some of the residences

had people sitting on those thresholds, usually unoccupied and notably less healthy, yet as generous in every greeting. Several blocks of the same pattern met them before the street opened onto a end row, which was bordered by a slightly crumbling white stone wall. Beyond that north wall, in the distance, the sharp rises of the Mecrisop mountain range stood out gloriously against the clear cobalt sky.

Just inside the walls, one of the few working irrigation wells sat in the center of a commune garden that stretched down several blocks that they could see--the north communes, which Bala, Dalra and Aratra spoke about gathering from when they went out. B'Elanna's eyes fell over the nearby vines and stalks, neatly kept together with what looked like scraps of ducting and shaft supports. Despite or because of such rigging, there was a good amount of fruits and vegetables growing, carefully tended by a flock of older people. It smelled wonderful even from several meters away, the soil combined with the products of it. She could imagine what it must have been like on a Desalian farm before the occupation.

Something besides the aroma touched B'Elanna, though, and even Tom set his hand on her shoulder to watch. It was oddly beautiful, the simplicity of that quiet edge of a crowded, cracked city with its greyed citizens keeping and collecting from a garden they made of need and came to treasure. Their weathered hands were so gentle on the stalks; their hunched backs and their pleasant faces proof of their dedication to their toil.

It was horrible, that their lives had been so consigned, but they were still endearing.

Beyond the wall, the singing continued; then smoke began rising in brownish white puffs somewhere in the field, staining the view of the mountains, obscuring the sky. Realizing what it was a few seconds after first noticing it, they turned to go back into the city.

Tom told her that the gathering of crops only meant that there would be the evening meal soon, and so they decided to head back for the day, even if they weren't hungry. She and Tom had picked up their own duties in that too--mainly, peeling, cutting and preparing the pans with gargu seed oil, which he had also learned to press. For that matter, the walk tended to wear them down and both of their moods suffered from overdoing it as much as they did from inaction, more so when Bakali saw the need to lecture them--gently, as always.

One night, they'd laughed about that. They felt like they were living with their grandparents.

Several days later, studiously avoiding the bird roosts, Tom led her as far as the southeast wall of Azlre. Down the increasingly narrow and plain weave of streets, between the thick tenement blocks and through a relatively dingy avenue, they found a gate far simpler by design than the west partitions. There, just outside the walls, at the edge of the tall grass, he pointed down to a rocky rise, slate grey against the silvery green savannah. "It's inside that range, in a gorge in those rocks," he told her.

She tried futilely to focus on something in the distance, but corrected herself before she could get frustrated with the attempt. Relaxing a little, she did manage to see a discernable rise beyond the fieldworkers and joth. There was no glint of metal, no dark hole of a gorge.

Just knowing it was there... She could feel herself stir with things to do. Already, she was putting together a tool kit from Bakali's spare pieces and making lists of what they might collect from those junkers. If anything, it was a way out of that depressing, overpopulated, crumbling city, and to do something beside remain yet another helpless witness to the Unar's successes.

On the contrary, she wanted to be anything but that.

"How much is out there?" she asked in a breath, itching to get her hands in one of those engines, pick it apart and put it back together, even if the systems were old and probably not much to look at. If she hadn't already tired herself with their walk that day, she'd have asked him to take her that minute.

"I was pretty out of it once I got there," Tom admitted, "but there were quite a few hulls that I saw; some of the ships were dumped there not too long ago. Mostly, it's just a lot of scraps lying around--a land-bound junkyard, really." He grinned down to her, happy to finally see her brightening with their shared idea. "So, what do you say, Chief? Tomorrow sound good?"

She smiled. "How could I say no, Lieutenant?"

Chuckling, he held out a hand with a little bow, gesturing back to the city. He broke into a full laugh when she pulled up her head and chin, and then turned to lead the way.

The hazel stare beneath Dalra's peppery brow was such that Miztri began observing the lovely sunset through the window's louvers, her fingers slowly stirring a maize tea that wasn't too hot to taste.

Bala and Bakali, meanwhile, remained propped back on their pillows, curiously impassive. Behind them, the freshly stoked fire popped, loud in the hazy gold room just then.

"I know what you're going to say," Tom started.

"You have been spared," Dalra said quietly. "Our shared fate has spared you to make use of your survival, yet you wish your passings served to you again?"

B'Elanna rolled her eyes. "Dalra, we've argued about this a hundred times."

"And we shall again, it would appear."

"Yeah, you're right about that," Tom said. "We're free, Dalra, and we can do something, now. Even you said the underground needs ships." He leaned forward, looked at their hosts as well, intending to make his point understood. "B'Elanna and I both know how undergrounds work, and, more, we're good technicians. She was the chief engineer on a starship that could've blown away half the Unar fleet in a few shots. And I flew it."

"Tom knows his systems, too," B'Elanna added, seeing Dalra's face screw up at the mention of violence. "We're good at improvising, making due with less. Not that we've worked with *this* much less, but we know how to get by."

"You may do so without your passings," Miztri said. "You yet recover from your injuries, Children, and shall for several du'ave."

"I *know* I'm not in peak condition," B'Elanna responded, "but we need to do more."

"Your *more* surpasses what we are able to maintain," Dalra pointed out. "It is known, your different ways. You were not born to Desalia's sins, the retribution borne for our ancestors."

"Oh, don't go into that again," Tom moaned. "Just because your grandparents screwed up doesn't mean

your people have to die of simple viruses and wear clothes ten other people died in when you had the technology to prevent it--and could get back with a little help. What kind of payback is it for you to suffer like they had to in the end when you shouldn't have to?"

"Toma, your being bears goodness, yet again, you reach too high, wish for action we do not yet deserve, will only bring us harm, nor may sustain."

"So does that mean that B'Elanna and I can't sustain *anything*?" Tom asked the elders, who properly and pleasantly had continued to watch the conversation. "We can *do* something now. We want--we *need*--to try."

Bakali was the one to smile at that. "You speak as one who has lived this life since birth, Toma."

"I'd might as well have," he countered, "'cause I'm not going anywhere now--and neither of us are doing what we were trained to do and love, like you have healing and Bala has teaching the kids. We consider *this* contrition for every last one of *our own* sins coming back to haunt us, as if Uillar wasn't enough punishment."

B'Elanna looked at Bala, knowing well by then to whom she should plea. Like Tom, she'd learned quickly on Uillar that the head of households, particularly elders, were the ones who would settle anything, were it to be settled at all. The older one was, the more weight they carried in their word. At eighty-four and eighty-three, respectively, Bala and Bakali were the oldest Desalians in the city--*the* elders of Azlre. To cross them would be to cross everyone else there.

Of course, if Bala said no, she and Tom had agreed they would sneak out anyway. But they'd agreed to be good "children" and try him first.

"Bala," she said, "please give us a chance. We need to feel like we're doing something that'll make a difference."

"What use shall you be in Unar prisons?" Dalra asked, his eyes begging them individually. "I would not see you taken again--nor bear your loss easily. Your dreams of resisting them in the way you wish seek only misfortune."

"Maybe," B'Elanna said. "But it'd be worth it rather than not have tried at all. Tom and I have both said it before--we'd rather die than let them control us for the rest of our lives, to let them just put us away when we can do so much. On Uillar, we knew we couldn't do anything. Now we have the chance. We will take it."

"What of those left behind?" Miztri asked. "And would your actions bring Unar to us again? Those who do not resist must be thought of as well, my friends. You shall incur their rage against us, when we have indeed been diligent in our desire to outwardly bear our purer spirits."

"You stole from them once, Miztri," B'Elanna pointed out.

"We stole in desperate times," she agreed, "yet we laid no waste, harmed nothing. For this crime as well, however, we bore grave punishment. Would you command as well a ship, what crimes shall you be punished for--and thus all Desal as you too would spring from our giving?"

Neither answered her at first, but turned their question to the elders again.

"I could lead them to believe we weren't from here," B'Elanna said.

"We know the tricks," Tom joined, confident in that thought, if anything. "We'd never let them believe you had anything to do with it."

"This often is not a matter with Unar," Miztri said sadly.

"Nor with our spirits," Dalra said, "which know and see all into eternity. Your crimes would bring our punishment regardless of what the Unar believe."

They would seek it in stealth should we deny them, Bala grinned to himself, seeing the bright, passionate stares of the children who had begged audience with them before their meditation with Dalra and Miztri that afternoon.

He and Bakali had seen them as both rather introverted, keeping much between each other or to themselves; at the same time they were forward-moving and indeed passionate, likely to counter their inner turmoil, their many losses and pains--and not only those earned in Irlae. Dalra had said as much, too.

Likely the two wished to return to their beloved trades both to feel more as their better known selves and for an escape of their present situation--not that the elder man would ever deny such diversions. He understood too well what it was to be denied one's talents, to feel one's potential go untested above great knowledge and skill. For several years after the Unar deposited them in Azlre, Bala had been forced to work in the fields, returning too exhausted to think of maintaining a second occupation, despite the mas of knowledge he possessed and dearly wished to share, as he was trained to do. So many others, scientists, writers, physicists, among so many others, were consigned to cloth weaving, cart hauling or joining Bala in the fields, with no hope of performing their trade again. All died in sadness and despair--some by their own hand.

It was certainly no curse to bestow on another. Also, Azlre needed technicians more desperately than any other trade, even with the wealth of the other surviving Uilaran prisoners working in various trades throughout the city. B'Elanna's brief work on the tissue regenerator alone had healed Sashana'i. Tom's idle time with a makeshift solar generator had repaired and improved the clinic's lighting, leaving the usually circumspect Bakali praying fate for more. What they both might do with the *pieces* at Dviglar might indeed procure far greater gifts. Useful as they were, there were too many needle workers and servants in Azlre.

Why add to that? More, perhaps their inner healing could come from a clearer sense of worth and progress, and they might enjoy sharing their skills with others....

Yet he also knew that they could reach too far, wish for too much. Even Miztri would concur with her bondmate on this trait. The ships had been brought to the Dviglar Gorge for a purpose: They had indeed been broken or used unto their collapses. To attempt their revival without use or success would likely only frustrate the children's dreams.

More, he too suspected that, were they successful, the young couple could commit far more sin than their own spirits could pay. Desal's retribution, served so mightily by Unar, could well be compounded by his allowing those youths the vengeful aggressions their impulses craved--though even that would be little in comparison to the risk to the two's spiritual and bodily health.

Still, a balance might be reached, he thought.

Bala closed his eyes slowly, opened them again. Glancing at his bondmate to see her nod, he patted

her hand and looked again at the children. "The ships shall not be rebuilt," he told them and held up his fingers to stave off their facial protests. "However, you shall endeavor in your chosen labor. Perhaps when the energy sources required for farther reaching goals blesses our sun, you shall be directed otherwise in Dviglar, and your good-spirited offerings to Desal and our neighbors of Irlae shall we welcomed. For this time, Be'i, Toma, you shall yet assist us. The knowledge you have been blessed with and hold rightfully dear is required at this time."

"How?" Tom asked, trying to will down his disappointment. Reminded of the power problem alone, he had to give in to Bala's sensible point. It wasn't as if there was a ready store of deuterium in Bakali's medicine cabinet. "What can we do?"

"You have traveled this city," Bala replied. "It is plainly seen and felt what has been stripped from us: replicators, water recyclers, proper sanitation, medical equipment, power links. Solar grids and buildings require much repair. Many of our people suffer a bodily life of illness without the blessing of meeting our ancestors. More to maintain this city in its health is required. Sacezia must be considered, as well, and all that is left of Desal. For this sun, Azlre shall be enough toil for you, I would believe. This is our compromise, Children. We ask humbly that you accept my offer to you."

Glancing to her nodding bondmate, Miztri's lips creased upwards. "To merely imagine fresh water and more healthful children is most pleasing," she said hopefully. "There would be so much to be procured from such giving work."

B'Elanna turned her eyes to Tom's steady gaze. Though both bit back their first responses to their curtailed ambitions, neither would have thought to turn down what they were offered in the interim. The elder man was definitely right about Azlre's needs, and it was something--it *would* be something.

Bala smiled when they simultaneously returned their attention to their elders. In return, he and Bakali touched their temples with a bow of sincere thanks.

"Yet we shall bring ourselves, Be'i. You and Toma bear more knowledge than we of these matters, which Aratra and I shall learn with great interest and dedication. --And matters are to be learned by you as well, as you are to work on the Desalian systems Aratra and I shall assist you with. Much is yet unknown to you."

If there was one thing B'Elanna was sorry about after Bakali healed Sashana'i's tongue, it would be for her discovery that though her friend possessed a lilting soprano that might have been called "sweet" on Earth, she could be unflinchingly single-minded and talkative. Worse, the woman was likewise so good-tempered in her streams of chatter, she could easily distract her listener from their train of thought while pressing whatever point she had to make.

That in particular annoyed B'Elanna. Sashana'i did know how to work on people when she chose to, and she chose to with B'Elanna a great deal, sometimes with a purpose, other times just to tease her. The freedom of going beyond the walls of Cezia had lifted the engineer's spirits, though, so she merely smirked and hiked the strap of her makeshift work bag onto her shoulder, gave Tom an incredulous look. "I have some things to learn? When was the last time you worked in a engine room, Sashana'i?"

"Perhaps you speak truth, good Be'i," she replied courteously.

Sashana'i shared a glance with Aratra, but rather than telling her friends presently what she was thinking about, she decided to enjoy the walk through the rolling savannah she remembered from her girlhood. Of course, she was brought up on the northern part of the main continent, in Sacezia. Twice the size of Azlre, the seaside city was also twice as crumbled from the initial invasions by which Desal so easily was devastated. That outer territory was much the same, though, even the field workers, toiling in the grasses that would become their bread. The joth passing nearby mewed with the same song as they were herded to the wastelands to feed. In other fields grew a popular supplement, nido'ev tubers--or 'sweet potatoes,' as Tom and B'Elanna's memories said resembled in all but color.

"Zha llast'o'a ye'o," said each laborer as they passed, bowing low.

To them all, she and Aratra bowed in return, their fingers to their temples as they accepted their deference. Though rank truly should not have given them any reason to pay homage, and though the story of her relinquishing it at Uillar had quickly spread through Azlre, Sashana'i was well aware of its potential, knew she would need to call upon it someday in order to rouse her people as her grandfather had planned so many years before. Thus, she reclaimed the influence her family name afforded her as willingly as she had sacrificed it to Hychar. Uillar was gone and that horrific time in her life had become but another step within her fate and the fate of her people. Gladly, she consigned that accursed place and the punishment she bore for her predecessors' poor practices to the past.

After all, there had been so much good to consider of late. The blessing of B'Elanna's generosity had restored her speech. She and Aratra had found themselves a recently vacated room on the west side of the square, near to the shamefully destroyed silag. She again had the freedom to move as she pleased. Her own nightly incubus, too, which she had shared with Aratra since her final acts on Uillar, had finally begun to settle into her far memory, allowing them both to heal.

So she thought not on those past horrors, the pain and shame, but on their home, on the temperate and thrillingly clean air, how beautiful her Aratra now looked, away from Uillar and dressed as finely as a Cezian might have been, his golden tan skin, his short, bronze-colored hair accentuated by his clean, light blue headdress. Then she noted also and again how pretty her adopted siblings were with some recovery, in their new clothing, how his flowing tunic and her gown and cloak turned together in the wind, how his hand instinctively went out to support her arm when she needed it.

It was much worth the week of labor she and Aratra served in the wells to clothe them properly and bring them new antibiotics, not to mention everything else she had done to preserve them. It would be even more worth her efforts as they continued at Cezia.

B'Elanna's incision marks had faded nicely into scars still being treated with balms. Though her "ridges" had been terribly "mutilated," as B'Elanna put it, and while the pain she bore had trained a particular tension into her features, her skin was growing fine again and her eyes had begun to clear. Tom, too, looked healthier as he gradually recovered from the loss of a kidney and the other internal damage he had suffered. The jagged scar on his cheek was too deep to be anything less than distinguishing, but his improved color made it less severe in good light.

In all, they were healing, regaining strength and reclaiming their passions and even their arrogance, which Sashana'i and Aratra were both thankful to see. Someday, they would utilize all of that and more. Not immediately, but someday, when they were all ready to make that fate a possible one.

The young woman knew, by their survival alone, that it was meant. Her prayers would continue to bear fruit. She need only be patient.

So pleased was Sashana'i to see their spark, though, she was likewise curious to see Tom and B'Elanna's reaction to the lesson she had been withholding. Through their interpretations of their adopted siblings' memories, she and Aratra had discovered that their birth people's numeric system was like the Antral's, a fact she reconfirmed during the less stressing parts of their journey with a few offhanded questions and calculations, which Tom easily corrected for her. Sashana'i knew she was correct, however--in Desal.

Mischievously, she retained that detail until they came upon the first ship, which sat just outside the mountain gorge, and when she was certain B'Elanna was not too drained or in pain from the sun.

"Base twelve?" B'Elanna snapped. "*Everything* is in duodecimal mode?!"

"Be'i ka."

"Damn," Tom muttered, turning an angry little glare to Aratra's chuckle. "Are you telling us we need to learn how to count--how to *think*--all over again?" He felt his stomach churn at the thought. He was naturally very adept at mental calculations in all the standard modes--could calculate a course in his head without much effort, translate trajectories, figure astrometric conversions and quantum figures, all in a blink...

Just in case I started thinking I'd stopped losing things I had. "Why couldn't it at least be hexadecimal? Damn, I could've handled that."

"You bear education," Aratra grinned. "Learning seems moderately quick among your birth--and reading and writing, as well, should be begun. Working with these systems shall be increasingly difficult without this. We and Bala shall teach you well, as you already begin to grasp the children's language."

"I hadn't even thought..." B'Elanna shook her head tersely. "Fine. Learn all that, too. Thanks."

Sashana'i skipped up to open the door for them. "Kle, eta, kle'eta, eta'a, eta'yt, kleta'a--"

"Ka'ekle, a'etak, yta'ete, yta'e, ytaklete, a'ave," B'Elanna finished shortly. "I know that much. But you never said..." She growled and shook her head. "Oh never mind. We'll figure it out as we go along."

Sashana'i's smile remained bright, even as Tom sighed and followed B'Elanna into the darkened hull, lighting a glowglobe as he walked. It was good even to see them angry, she snickered to herself.

That too, she knew, was a part of their true beings.

To B'Elanna's surprise, the old, battered Desalian ships were...excellent.

Or at least at one time. they had been. Years of rigging, Unar memory core confiscations and alternate power supplies had been their ruin. But looking at their basic components, she could tell those ships, from their version of a warp generator to their high-powered transporter buffers and slick data transfer systems, were once damned efficient--notably better than Federation technology in several aspects. Her sore brow rose and stayed that way throughout her stroll in the engine room and beyond to realize that.

Even Tom had praised the junkers as he ran his hand over the sleekly designed conn and operations terminal, peering down into its open base then nodding at the comfortable couches. Desalian ship

hierarchy began with the rank co-captain; one was in charge of operations, the other navigation. Four equivalent lieutenants reported to them from their flanking stations, and their consoles were as well-appointed. Examining those, he saw that the shields were also rather good once, the maneuverability likely enviable. The weapons were minimal--but people thinking that they would remain at peace wouldn't arm themselves heavily just to knock around the high population of asteroids in the region.

In fact, that was about all their weapons could probably do.

Through the memories given to her by her grandfather, Sashana'i explained that they were once presentation ships--comparable to ambassador-class, Tom guessed, just much more compact. The region Desalians called Irlae was relatively small, so its peoples had never needed large crafts. That first ship had once been clean-lined and extremely efficient. It had taken a lot to wear them down.

Obviously, the Unar had seen to that.

Looking at the ship, sighing over its smooth lines and former capabilities, Tom and B'Elanna silently knew each other's expressions when they met again. It would be a shame to scrap it, yank what was left of its components. It might yet be able to be fixed.

If they scrapped it any more than it was already, there would definitely be no way to fix it again. It had potential even at that point...

Peering over to Aratra and Sashana'i, who were still busy stacking some loose parts they would eventually take back to Azlre, Tom drew a silent breath, opened his mouth even as he thought up what to say. "Why don't we check out the next hull? See what all we have before collecting anything."

B'Elanna thanked him with a blink. "Good idea."

"Yet good components exist here," Aratra frowned. "Why take ourselves elsewhere for the same?"

Grinning, B'Elanna folded her satchel as quickly as she'd opened it. "You're our assistants this time, right?" she said. "First things first--inventory. Then we'll decide what's worth taking back."

Setting down what she'd picked up, Sashana'i shrugged. "I shall follow you," she told them. She offered her bondmate her hand as she lifted her robes to climb out of the rubble.

"Hzi'a ye'i," she said quietly. "Me'aje tol gyillr vets yosh."

To that, he nodded. The other couple certainly would have more difficulty in their venture if they wanted to save everything. Of course, he and Sashana'i certainly would not argue with them--and were gladder still that they hadn't included any others in their "tour" that day.

Unfortunately, though it looked worse on the outside--just a patchwork of hull with corroded landing gear sticking out--the next ship was even nicer and had more original capabilities, which drew silent sighs to both the pilot and engineer. Meanwhile, Aratra started ticking off the list Bala had given them and that B'Elanna had revised with him. Finally knowing that they couldn't skip every ship, that they should get it over with before they got too tired, Tom suggested they get to the main power relay, which Sashana'i told them was in engineering. Agreeing, B'Elanna finally pulled back her hood in the semi-shade.

"I still can't believe we have to go back to grammar school," she muttered as they left.

"Iv, Lli, Av, Rri, Tsi, Mi, Ish," Tom said, smirking. "Can't sing to it, though."

She snickered, shook her head as they started down the corridor together. She swerved at Tom's direction to avoid any of the smaller rubble there. "I don't know about you sometimes."

"Frankly, sometimes I don't know either," he replied and helped her around a fallen bulkhead.

"I was in my youth when Unar took us from Plekiza Ra'ezh, at the labor camp I found my first breaths of life. My parents were known to me only in memories; when I found breath, they found their blessed spirits. For my life, they gave theirs. It was my teshalla, M'lozha, a fine artist, who saw me nursed by kindly inmates, given warmth and protection. With his hand around mine, he led me and guided me."

Kra'alba laughed. "Teshalla appeared more like a tyrr cat, with a great mane of thick, golden hair, unshed with age, and golden skin on his wide-boned face and body. When I first saw a tyrr cat, this immediately became clear.

"It was he, in our travels between camps who taught my present mind and all its worth; I was given knowledge of our great ancestors, of the purity of our spirits in our struggle to bear life--yet not in words, as is our custom, but in images. His labor was to design their new structures, which he did with great respect. My work in that youth was to assist in building these blessings of his art. Yet in our few restful moments, I would be taken aside and taught a more beautiful trade, and he drew for me his memories of Desalia, lush and fragrant, clean, most glorious. Every house of every family, grand and simple, was a monument to their grace and spirit. 'It is the passion of an age which may never be again yet must be remembered for our future, when we are resurrected,' he would tell me. 'We yet must always know passion, Child.'

"I began to draw the memories and more.

"When I bore thirteen years, Unar came to bring us to our work; in our pallet, they found my etchings, the entirety of my imaginings and memories given me, the dreams of my spirit, my youthful exaltation. For this, M'lozha was taken away. Frightened and alone, I sat upon my pallet, upon all my doings, praying for my teshalla.

"The sun had grown to its peak when they came for me, too. I was put into a ship. I bore no wish, of course, to leave M'lozha. Querying after him, they suppressed my body and silenced me.

"I awoke upon Cezia to good Bakali's gentle hands and to the girl Samsi, who brought water to my quivering lips and food for my life-shrunken stomach. With time and her attendance, my strength grew, and in many passing suns, the spirit my teshalla had inspired in me recovered as well. His beautiful trade would not be lost; in time, it was rather discovered, again and again, and blessed in his name.

"And so passion remained mine, as well as memory--and Samsi." Smiling again, Kra'alba pulled Samsi closer to him; she rested a gentle hand and her head on his chest. Her eyes were dreamy with her own memories, staring deeply into the fire around which they all sat.

"M'lozha was never heard of again," Kra'alba continued. "Yet he is brought to life each time I close my eyes and dream of passion then let it flow onto a pallet all may see. I have been granted a blessed life, for all these gifts."

"I think what bugs me most is that that's all been there that long and nobody's done a damn thing with it." Finished with rubbing away her usual headache, B'Elanna slid under the covers and scooted near the wall. "They accept everything--which is nice when it comes to us, and maybe with the death rate...their spirituality helps them there, too. But it just goes to prove why those ships are out there rotting and nothing changes."

Tom closed the shutters, picked up the glowglobe to hang by the bunk. "Without anyone who *could* do something with it, why would they?"

"Hmm." Though it wasn't what she wanted to hear, it made sense.

"All the people who ever did have any technical ability were sold off to the Unar or killed long ago." Tom lowered himself down behind B'Elanna, pulling the blanket up onto his chest. Lying on his back, he watched the glowglobe patterns on the ceiling. Somehow, it always relaxed him, despite the memories it brought sometimes. "If there's one thing the Desalians don't do, it's waste their time on the impossible. If they know they can't change something, they don't try. You've got to give them that much."

"I guess. But it also shows how confident the Unar are--leaving all that here."

"It's a hell of a reminder, in case anyone here bothered to forget."

B'Elanna let out her breath slowly then turned onto her back, resting her head in her hand to watch him watch the ceiling. It made her head hurt again. She'd had a bad headache that morning and was still a little nauseated on top of her returning cough. Even so, she sometimes got sick of lying on her side.

"We've got some work ahead of us," she said, "if we're to have any help in this. Miztri is the most experienced around here--and even she doesn't know much more than maintenance and spot repair."

Tom grinned, cut his eyes over to her. "I think we've had tougher challenges."

She cracked a laugh at that. "I guess we have," she said. Clearing her throat, she shook her head. "I don't know Tom. When we're out there, I can't help but think how useless it is sometimes. I don't want to say I hate it here. I don't--not as if I'd choose this... I guess I care about the people here now. I want to do more than collect scraps so we can help them keep getting by. Good as replicators and medical equipment are, it won't change the real problem."

"Which we can't do much about until we're able to power those ships up anyway," Tom said. "I know. Now that we're in it, it does seem to be a lot more than it did at first."

Feeling a slice of sensation in her neck, she turned onto her side again. Sick of the position or not, she didn't feel like going to sleep with that kind of pain. "Either way--replicators or ships--we're going to need more help. Some trainees or something."

"Just say the word and I'll help do some enlisting. I still can't do much lifting, which is lousy. I've always at least had some strength. But it won't heal if I keep being stupid about it."

"Last thing you need is to rupture...whatever it is Bakali called it," she agreed. The patterns on the

slanted ceiling were just a bunch of greenish blobs to her, distorted at the angle, bobbing slightly when Tom readjusted himself against the pillow. She remembered what they looked like, the little diamonds, how they danced on the ceiling of the shack, on those cold nights, with the wind...

"I still think about it there, Tom...Uillar."

He nodded, his eyes moving down to the stone mantel. "Me too." Blinking slowly, he turned to her. "I have to remind myself sometimes that we're not there anymore."

Her lips had remained inclined to the ironic. "I have to remind myself I'm not in a lot of places-- especially there. I still wake up expecting to have to go to detail, hearing them calling us."

"I can still see Hychar in the line, waiting for us to do something," Tom mused. "When I think about it...God, if I could tell you everything I've imagined doing to that son of a bitch, we'd be up all night."

She paused to hear that, following the gentle sway of the globe light above them; then she tried not to look too much at it. "I dream about killing him," B'Elanna whispered. "I used to dream about him...killing me. Now I just think about...doing to him what he did to me, to Sashana'i--to all of us. I never used to think like that."

"I still wish I could've done more, that night," he confessed. "I had him there, but I was tired, coughing, my lungs felt like bricks." He paused, laughed humorlessly. "He didn't have that much competition, and I wasn't all that sorry for it. I thought he'd killed you, after everything else, everything we'd gotten through."

Hearing the crack in his voice, she could imagine how that must have affected him, especially as he'd never said so much about it. She recalled instantly how tired and relieved he'd looked when she woke up, after that infection that she still had twinges of to that day. He'd been so sweet and protective, only to see Hychar smash her face against a shack wall.

"Well, like you said, Tom, he didn't get what he wanted. We're still around."

"Still waiting, too."

"True," she conceded. "We've got Dviglar, though, so I guess it isn't all that useless. It could be worse. It *was* worse."

"It does make a difference, doesn't it?" he said softly. "Nice to feel like we have *some* purpose."

"Like not getting in trouble instead?" She looked at him, watching his fuzzy little grin, his chest bob slightly with a breath of agreement. "Things keep going like this--if it gets a little better at a time...I hate to say it, because I know I'll just end up regretting it somehow, but...I could get used to it here, if it keeps on like this. We might be able to make it work, Tom."

"Yeah. I think so, too...even if it's weird."

"How so?"

"Well, look at us, B'Elanna."

"Look at what? You said yourself we're surviving, getting by, right?"

He turned onto his side, propping himself up on his elbow. "We're stranded Starfleet officers. For the most part, anyway, it's still what we are. We're waiting for word on Bendera and Nicoletti, but we're settling in and trying to adjust, learning how to read and write--"

"And count," she added dourly.

--"We dress like them, eat their food with our fingers--we even go to the elders for permission."

B'Elanna grinned. "At least Bala doesn't peer up from a PADD like Janeway did--with that *stare*."

Tom laughed, seeing it again as soon as she'd said it. "You would remember! --Well, I remember it pretty well, too." Then, he thought about that and looked at her again. "I wonder if they think we're dead, or just missing in action. Or if they're okay and the Unar were just screwing with our heads when they sent us the shuttle. I hope so."

"I like to think they've moved on, too."

He drew another breath, deciding not to press her for the rest of that thought, regurgitate that old, grim topic, as it didn't really matter. One way or another, Voyager was long gone, and however that came about, they couldn't do anything about it. Even so, he couldn't help but muse, "I wonder if they held a memorial--what they might have said if they did."

B'Elanna's crooked brow rose. "That's an interesting thought. I don't know what they'd say."

Tom grinned. "Captain Janeway... What would she talk about?"

She was curious, too. "What do you *think* she'd say?"

"Hmm..." He squinted upwards with the thought, picturing the sad scene with a dispassion that oddly didn't bother him. "She'd probably talk about how she picked me up at Auckland, what a smartass I was. No, I guess she'd talk about how I tried to start over, make things right again...how much I loved being a pilot." He quieted again then said, "That seemed to be the only thing that gave me peace of mind sometimes, made me feel...alive."

She offered him an understanding shrug. "Well, I'm just as guilty. Engineering was the one place I felt at home."

"It was a nice security blanket wasn't it?" he commented. She nodded. "Hmm, Chakotay... He'd probably talk about how he met you."

"He'd better not," B'Elanna returned with a touch of threat. "Another time I'd gotten myself in more trouble than I could handle. That's the last thing I'd want the whole crew to know about."

"Don't feel so bad. How he came across me was much worse. Let's see...Carey would recall his broken nose." B'Elanna snorted. "...and the Doctor would remind everyone how much we always enjoyed getting on his nerves--during your exams and my stint as a medic."

"And Tuvok would call us irrational and impulsive," B'Elanna added. "And I think the Captain would remember how I told her off in her ready room, before she chose me for her chief engineer. Or maybe she wouldn't--but she'd probably think about it. God, I was so..." She shook her head.

"Young," Tom supplied and saw her still at that. "I know. I feel a lot older than... How long has it

been now? Nine months?"

"Something like that," B'Elanna sighed. She hadn't really thought about it yet--exactly how much time had gone by. With her bouts of unconsciousness here and there, she had trouble piecing it all together. The Desalian calendar, with nine days in each week, moon cycles instead of months and six seasons of differing lengths didn't make it any easier. "It does seem like it's been longer. We really were...young."

Tom paused, drew another breath. "I could see the captain knowing that. She seemed to, anyway, even when she said nothing--especially if she smiled."

"She probably did." Suddenly, another memory popped up, and B'Elanna couldn't help but giggle at it. "I'm willing to bet they all remembered the night I called you a pig at Sandrine's."

Tom's lips pressed at that. "Yeah," he said, trying to laugh but failing.

B'Elanna glanced up at his change of tone. "What?"

"Well, I guess I was being a pig. But I didn't want you telling me that in front of everyone there." With a shrug, he looked upwards again. "Of course, at the time, I was enjoying myself--being out of prison, getting my rank back, having privileges, all that. It'd been a while since I felt good about anything. I don't think I was that bad, but I was probably annoying as hell." His lips pursed as he paused with that memory. Then he continued, "You telling me that, getting ribbed for it.... I guess it stayed on my mind. You made me think about what I was doing. I still did stupid things, but every time, I could hear you saying, 'pig.' I didn't want to be like that, especially to myself."

She was surprised and didn't try to hide it. "I didn't know it'd bothered you that much."

He shrugged. "It was a good thing in a way. I was never angry at you for it."

"But maybe I was hard on you," she offered. "You made me nervous--and a little...I don't know. I just couldn't believe you got away with what you did--mostly on charm, I thought. I didn't trust that."

"No, you wouldn't, would you?" he said, his grin reappearing.

"But I think I misinterpreted you, because I tended to push issues even when they didn't need pushing. You always did what you needed to do--and with that damned smile on your face, making it look like it was nothing and things came out okay." She shook her head to herself. "I sometimes wished I could do that, just relax and not take it all so seriously. I admit I tried. But I guess I was just made to get through things the way I do, just going at it and getting it done and to hell with what people think. God, I must have been scary."

"I didn't think you were all that bad," Tom said sincerely, staring down to her. "Actually, I thought you were pretty cute when you were all worked up and ready to take on the universe with your pinkie finger."

"Thanks a lot," she returned with a snort.

"Well, I mean it. You seemed so unconquerable. Confident. I liked that."

"Well, I didn't think you were a hotshot pig for that long, either. And I didn't always mind that you joked around--you knew when to shut up, most of the time." He chuckled again, good-naturedly taking her point. She was glad he did. "You think they remembered that about us?"

"I think so. They probably laughed about it, too. I hope they did. --I even hope Chakotay told everyone what I pain in the ass I could be--on purpose, sometimes--and that Neelix nailed me about my bugging him about his rotten cooking--"

"--And Carey talked about how every time I started assigning new staff projects, he'd flinch," B'Elanna continued in her own right, "and that Kes told them how she practically had to sedate me to keep me in sickbay."

"The few times you ever let anyone get you in there," Tom noted. "Or the grudge match between Neelix and I over Kes. That was embarrassing."

Her eyes narrowed cleverly to hear him put that so casually. She remembered on the ship it had been a raging gossip--and was surprised to find that she was still curious about what really happened. Leaning up a little, she asked, "What was that all about, anyway? Did you go after her?"

"I tried to *avoid* her," he corrected with a chuckle. "We were good friends--she was so nice, totally non-judgmental and willing to know me, unlike a lot of other people at first." Feeling her silence at that, he decided not to address it or defend her. By her own admission, she'd been one of those other people. "Anyway, we were spending some time together--totally platonic--and as it turned out, I got a crush on her. I knew that was trouble as soon as I realized it--I mean, I knew she loved Neelix and I wouldn't have done anything to hurt that. Well, of course, Neelix sniffed me out like a hawk spots a limp. I can't believe I'm telling you this."

"I'm glad you are," B'Elanna said honestly, meanwhile suppressing the unexpected pick of jealousy that had met his explanation. Then again, she could see why any man would be attracted to Kes, pretty, sweet and intelligent as she always had been. "I asked, after all."

"Anyway," Tom continued, quickly moving through his explanation, "Neelix and I finally got it out of our systems and I told him I wouldn't do anything with her. We ended up friends in the end. We all did. But that was all that happened."

She believed him, and believed his embarrassment; she could easily see that vulnerability that she'd always wondered about. He'd been lonely too, looking for a way to move away from the past only to find more trouble. B'Elanna knew the feeling.

"Maybe that's what he talked about, then, how you became friends," she said then drew a cleansing breath. Knowing the truth, she didn't need to hear any more. In a way, she didn't want to. "So, what else did they remember?"

Tom hummed a bit to think what else there was and snorted behind a quick smile. "There was when I met Harry at Deep Space Nine, saving his ass from that snaky Ferengi. Harry had almost sold off his body parts by the time I decided to say hello..." Tom's voice faded off at that.

B'Elanna knew why as she watched his smile dissolve as hers did. She could see--probably as well as Tom could just then, their friend standing in the mess hall, trying to talk about losing them both... "Poor Harry."

"I hope he didn't take it too hard."

She nodded assuredly. "I'm sure everyone helped him out."

Tom nodded, too. "Yeah. I'm sure they have. Harry's a lot stronger than he appears. I hope he was able to get past it."

"I do too," B'Elanna said, drawing a slow, steady breath as her gaze floated askance. "It's so strange..." she whispered, putting the words she hadn't wanted to say together in her pause. But since he'd been good enough to confess as much as he had... "I sometimes have to think to remember what some of them look like. I can remember all the things that happened, images, but..." She cut off, shaking her head.

"I know," Tom said. "I sometimes do too. It hasn't even been that long--though we weren't on Voyager that long, either. But things are so immediate here, more so than there, that I guess we..." Pausing, he stared down into her dark eyes, a sad smile of acceptance crossing his lips. "Maybe we're letting go? Maybe we're getting over it?"

"Maybe that's it," she answered quietly.

They said little after that, their mutual memory fading quickly as they felt their blankets again, smelled the Cezian air. Once again, Voyager was gone, and they now lived in Azlre.

B'Elanna rolled over onto her right side, facing the wall as she always did. Tom usually woke up before she did, so it worked out well that he stayed on the outside of the bed. As she settled, Tom did a double check of their coverings then reached back to turn off the glowglobe, making his usual mental note to hang it in the window the next day to recharge. Then, he settled himself down behind her as usual, sighing out his day at last.

Breathing in again, he could smell her hair, not very clean but a scent he was well used to by then. He felt her small hand take his; he closed his eyes in the dark.

"I wouldn't have wished this on you if I had the power to, B'Elanna," he whispered, "but I'm glad you're here--that you're still here.... You know what I mean."

B'Elanna was sure her temperature rose at least a few degrees as he said it. Silently, she trapped down her breath to try to keep her pulse from reacting to that, too. "You say that as if it was your doing," she said softly, squeezing his fingers. "I'm glad you've stuck around, too."

"We'll make something out of this. Or at least we can try. Like you said--if things keep moving forward, we might be able to do more than just get by."

His gentle words confused her slightly, but she decided to take that in the most obvious way. "Yes," she said and pulled his hand close to her, feeling him adjust himself, get more comfortable. She could feel the outline of his strong, thin frame very clearly, but said nothing more. They had a long day ahead of them.

Or at least that was what she finally fell to sleep telling herself.

"Core breach?"

"No. Tachyon ionization. Look at the patterns in the core spikes. They used this one until it just dropped--way past its dilithium supply."

"Too bad. It was damn good ship."

"Ka."

Tom and B'Elanna both looked over at Sashana'i, whose eyes ghosted over every detail of the bridge they stood on.

"You know about this one?" Tom asked as B'Elanna plugged in a temporary laridium generator to get the panel working.

"This ship is property of my family," Sashana'i told them, staring around at the lush but stained, formerly white interior, lit by a large, clover-shaped ceiling port. "Its calling is the Azallis."

They had seen themselves through two weeks of blissfully exhausting scrap collection, and had brought Dalra, Miztri and several of their other friends from Uillar to help them with their project, having inventoried and set aside everything Tom and B'Elanna had carefully chosen to use.

As they dug farther into the gorge, however, they had come across another discarded ship, brutally overused, yet once even more beautiful and capable than the others were. Walking into an open port unaware, Sashana'i had paused, as did Aratra. Instantly, they knew where they were. She had tried to ignore it, though, leading B'Elanna and Tom through the darkened corridors and up the access staircases to the main bridge, where she would translate the complex controls there, teaching them more Desalian writing as she did. She and Aratra had been doing so from the beginning of their ventures at Dviglar. Having such quick students and objects that meant something to the two, Sashana'i looked forward to each opportunity to continue her siblings' education.

But when they stepped onto the bridge and the memories rose in her, circled between her and Aratra, stubbornly not letting go, she had to voice them, give them life...

"In the last suns of the Allanois, this ship carried my great-grandmother, Iserri...Yusi, as she is known in scholarship. This ship carried Yusi to her bonding ceremony, to be bonded to Troka. His life had brought corruption to his spirit, yet she resisted him. The bonding was desperately against her wishes; she had been forced to part with her intended mate. Nor bore she any desire to claim such a position of responsibility."

B'Elanna looked up from the panel. Having already set her mental schedule so efficiently she knew exactly when they would get back to Azlre without a timepiece, she had wanted Sashana'i to read her more of the panel, to get through the ship before she herself could get sentimental. Then, better, they could start designing those replicators and devising decent power sources.

She had been brainstorming with Tom over all of it since their first trip to Dviglar. It almost felt like old times--though that time, it was just them, sitting up together in their bunk after breakfast before they left, or later, at night, thinking and scribbling with red ink and cramping hands on paper bookpads, shooting off ideas, letting their brains work as they'd once been trained to.

The goal was simplistic by their standards, but effect was the same. It was exciting and creative, something both of them seemed always to have in common and desperately needed there, else go insane with boredom.

Still, she couldn't help but stop at the sadness in her friend's voice, and she found herself even more distracted by Sashana'i's admission. "I thought Desalians chose their own mates."

Sashana'i nodded. "Ka. These were corrupt suns, when spirits might be raped by the desires of blood continuance. Families consumed by greed sought to breed to each other, not share their blessed union. It is said for this alone Desal is punished, for abusing spirits and the eternal realm so. It was Yusi who was forced to share her spirit with one for whom she felt nothing, and recoiled from more when she discovered in full his disregard of Desal's proper way. She accepted her fate and made use of it, yet never again was he allowed to access her spirit again; in their thirty years joined, her despise for him never faded."

Sashana'i stepped around the console, down onto the center of the oval bridge. "Here she submitted to Unar. She and my blessed elder, Dulla, of whom they were ignorant by her design. Ka, they were told he was a servant, to protect him and all she knew he soon would bear. I bear sight of it here, of them.... She is beautiful, with stitched robes and a gown of silken thread. Her hair is like a moonless night. She suffers...bears great sadness..." Sashana'i blinked, jerked herself into the present then continued, "For her son, for Desalia, she submitted after months of evasion. Hearing of the terror she had left behind, only that way to redemption was left to them. At the drifts of Gozhor Jihap she let them take her and her only child. It was but three du'ave later, in Unar enslavement, where she passed in sickness and exhaustion, her hair desecrated by jealous Unar women... When Troka's passing was sensed, she took her son's hand and passed the Allanois legacy onto him. She met the ancestors but an hour past it. Dulla buried her...nearly insane himself for the storms of memories, all she gave onto him."

B'Elanna felt her body chill at the story and could only watch as Aratra enfolded Sashana'i in his arms. She touched his temples in that embrace, sighing shakily, warding off tears. "Your forgiveness," Sashana'i whispered. "I have not yet stood here. These histories within me, so close...."

B'Elanna unplugged the generator. "Maybe Tom and I should have a break?"

Aratra nodded for his bondmate, his own face haunted by the recollections. "Five decks of equipment are left to examine, I should believe."

Tom found the door before B'Elanna did, feeling equally intrusive and anxious to get out. "Maybe the next ship would be better for scraps?" he whispered as they left.

B'Elanna looked back at Sashana'i and Aratra. "We'll hunt around in the yard a little more, meet you out there?"

"Zhra'i ka," Sashana'i said, not looking.

With no further delay, B'Elanna followed Tom back out into the sunny, dry scrap yard, not minding the blowing sand they stepped into and trying not to think too much on Sashana'i and her family's story. Some of the Desalians' stories could be chilling even without meaning to be, but knowing Sashana'i was literally reliving it before their eyes made it doubly discomfoting.

Thankfully, the present tense at Dviglar easily changed the topic. In the distance, they could hear Miztri organizing with the others what they'd be bringing back that time. She was obviously relishing the work, as were the others they managed to bring out of the city. Working together without so much as an anti-grav platform, they had already managed to clear a wide path in between the rubble at the base of the gorge and were slowly but steadily plowing through its depths. At that rate, they'd work that path all the way through to the similarly littered slate plain on the opposite end of Dviglar in only a few months.

But that was later. There was plenty to do right there in the center.

Looking towards the south gorge wall, Tom touched B'Elanna's shoulder. "How about over there?"

Squinting across, she saw another haphazard collection of discarded components. "Sounds good. You want to eat something while we're here?"

"That sounds good, too," he answered, helping her down one rubble pile to the sandy ground then across to the heaps of junk. He whistled as they rounded it. "Compressor, relays...looks like a power junction--"

"We'll take those," B'Elanna said briskly, kneeling by the last to check it out with her own hands. It looked pretty clean. "Let's take this, too."

"It's definitely useable," Tom said, opening up his bag and spotting a shady place for them while he tucked a node into it.

Seeing her follow, he ducked under a long hull scrap and brushed off a space for her. She joined him, holding one of the relays in her gladly dirtied hand. She put the part aside when he handed her some cleaning rags. As she did, he rolled out a small floorcloth and then their morsels--two medium pieces of pressed bread that he rolled up with cheese, kabo grass and a sprinkling of orange berries that tasted more like green peas. Opening a small decanter of water mixed with mivllo root juice, which they would share, he finally relaxed onto a hip and picked up his portion. It didn't taste like much, but it was filling enough to get them to the evening meal, which wouldn't be much more.

But they were well used to their limited diet. They ate quietly and slowly, passing the decanter between each other from time to time without commenting on it. Instead, they stared out to the field of scraps, almost numbly as their friends' voices continued to echo in the distance, interrupted on occasion by overhead birds en route to the lakes beyond the grass plains, and the breeze brushed the sand in little turrets on the gorge floor. In that way, the little nook allowed them to relax for the duration of their meal.

Some time later, they returned to the compressor, agreeing it could come in some use for parts. The head casing alone would house a platform replicator nicely. Leaning halfway into the old unit, they passed tools back and forth as well as words, grinning from time to time at each other with one quip or reply, or a stray comment and response, passing the time.

His glances remained longer, though, caught on the thought that it was strangely familiar, but different. How many times, after all, had he found her on Voyager, head first into something or another? There on Cezia, they were sharing their work again, but that time, in such a greater way, a more important way. They'd come to share a hell of a lot. Seeing how things were going, it seemed pretty clear to him that they'd continue on that route.

He didn't have any problem with that, of course. She was broken, sure, but she was getting better. For that matter, so was he. During those respective healing processes, they'd put back on some of the weight they'd lost on Uillar and had likewise regained a good deal of their energy, not to mention some hope for the future, both day-to-day anticipation and longer range desires. Someday, they would also get back to what they'd agreed they'd wanted, to fight off the Unar, so unseen on that world but so much the cause of everything that they now worked to reverse, even then. They also still had to hear word of Nicoletti and Bendera, though they'd gotten pretty patient about that, knowing how things worked around there.

For the mean time, though...Tom looked again at B'Elanna, crouched down and venturing aloud for

another tool, which he placed in her hand a moment later. He knew months ago that he'd come to need her, to want her with him, to...

She put the wrench-like bar aside. "Hand me that demagnifyer," she said, quiet and intent on her task of removing the main power unit.

Feeling his fingers brush her palm as he placed the tool in her waiting hand, she drew a cooling breath as she continued working, not looking back. *Damnit, I know something's wrong with me if Tom gets to me that damned easily*, she thought, gnashing her teeth a bit. She did want to get that core emptied enough that they could get it back to Azlre, but never would if he kept distracting her as he was.

Problem was, she minded his distracting her less and less lately. Sometimes, she would catch him gazing at her from across the room, like one evening when she was helping Bakali spread their dining cloths. She'd brought up her head to tuck her hair behind her ear and caught Tom looking at her as if...as if he were doing a hell of a lot more than undressing her with his eyes.

Though that intent stare managed to make her blood rush from her head to her toes, B'Elanna flicked a quick smile before he drew a breath and turned back to the stove and the dinner he was helping to prepare. That time, B'Elanna was the one to stare at his lean body, handsomely draped in an earthy green knee-length tunic and beige pajama trousers; his soft blond hair cut short and curled against his tan skin. He was as dust-swept and dirt-stained as she was, but he was looking pretty good otherwise.

Something was going to happen there. They were together all the time, and though they did exchange some of their mind now and again, she knew they both were making an effort at accepting...what?

B'Elanna realized that her hand had dropped--that he'd distracted her once again. Grinning to herself, she unlocked the unit and turned it out of its bearings. "Set this aside for later," she said, handing the part back to him.

"I required her closeness as nothing I had known. Her being, her spirit, her body, all of her swimming in my mind like the fish in warm water, I took Suoti into our shack, warmed with fired stones that evening--a gift of our hosts. In the steamed air, the golden light, her eyes welled into my own, a beginning to the blending with my own, as is the way.

"I knelt to her and unlaced her beautiful gown, pulling it down from her blessed frame, then drinking the sweetness of her love and need of me. Finer nectar I had never tasted and never shall. And within me, her pleasure was felt..."

Sitting nearby, B'Elanna had been holding her breath, swallowing as Jabra gladly related the night of his bonding. The tales had turned rather...Desalian, that night, all those bondings--and they proved to have no compunctions about discussing the intimate aftermaths of "spirit joining." Rather, she would have accused them of bragging if she didn't know them better--if she couldn't admit, if only to herself, that they were starting to make her want to take Mister Thomas Eugene Paris up to their bunk and...

She shivered hard in her cloak, thinking of some reason to get up. Then again, she did want to hear the rest of it. Jabra did speak well...too well.

"She knelt to me, pushing away my robe and untying my other coverings. My love of her tasted, my

desire for her assured, I cried for her joy as for my own. Soon, rippling with wishing, she bid my earth join to her waters, so we made share completely the sanctity of our union. Our great spirits heard her call to them, in my arms as I put myself to her; I too called out to them and sought their calling further..."

B'Elanna shivered again and heard a shuffle behind her. Raising her arms slightly, she felt another strong, warm set reach around to hold her. She leaned back and Tom's scent filled her nostrils; his breath warmed her hair. A little relieved and a lot more frustrated, she closed her eyes, tried to breathe it off. And then she wondered why in the world she was bothering to.

She didn't know why at that point. Stubbornly, though, she didn't hold his arms, but willed herself to relax. It was just a story, after all.

Jabra patted Suoti's round belly. "We had truly become one in each other..."

"What does it matter?" B'Elanna asked. "You said it was a casual dinner."

"It would matter always how we present ourselves, Child," Bakali wisely told her. "Our meal is to be taken with the parents of Gyrrja, Ciala and Willgi this moon, to ease the premature celebration of their children's passings."

B'Elanna released a breath, nodded. "I'm sorry."

"For what purpose, Child? No power or prayer might have preserved their bodies. This is, and thus it was meant."

"It shouldn't be, Bakali," B'Elanna sighed. "Frankly, I don't know how your people have done this so long, lived like this--especially when you knew how it had been."

"Yet that one's life ending is not an utter destruction has long been accepted," the elder replied, turning an eye the girl's way. Politely, she had not pried into either of the children's personal matters, expecting she would learn them well enough without such efforts. But now the topic had been opened and B'Elanna seemed to need to express her feelings about it, rather than brood. "This is not so with your birthpeople? Claim you no belief in one's spirit?"

"A lot of people have some kind of belief in an afterlife. Most Federation races do, anyway."

"Yet *you* bear no belief?" Bakali asked.

B'Elanna shot her attention back to the elder, but shrugged it off a moment later. "I don't believe or not believe. Either way, I don't think it's cause to celebrate when children die from influenza or diarrhea because of bad wells."

"This is truth," Bakali conceded, satisfied enough with the other part of B'Elanna's answer. "Sorrow has borne my way as a healer these past sixty ralkle--and perhaps this has trained my acceptance of one's final fate despite my constant care. Yet it is truth that little may be done now but trust our blessed ancestors shall find these spirits well and embrace them. Ka, there is sadness, yet equal faith, so mourn them not too zealously, Be'i. They wait without pain and in peace, now." Patting the young woman's

shoulder as she came around, Bakali knelt beside her. Then she touched B'Elanna's temple. "We are all one in life and hereafter. Our life forces are bound in eternal continuance; my belief in this is unshakable. You may not believe this in spirit and proudly maintain yourself in this manner. I shall not press seeds into stones. Yet I would wish you understand the faith of Desal and bear some comfort."

B'Elanna flicked a smile and gave her a short nod. She wasn't about to argue religion when she didn't really have one.

Likewise, Bakali did not make further points. Instead, she bent a little to guide B'Elanna's hands with the old, faded cloth napkin. "The corners are taken here, then are folded as so...now turn."

Despite her mood, B'Elanna's lips pursed upwards. The lady's wrinkled hands were otherwise as soft and graceful as they might have been in her youth, as they showed her again how to build a pretty placement. No matter who came for evening meal, friends, mourners or scrap collectors, Bakali always made her welcome as beautiful as her meager life could afford. "A remaining trait of an opulent time," she often called it.

The napkin done, Bakali handed her another one. "Now you. I trust you may. --And this tale should be borne well, for all your native skill. It is but angles and abstractions."

"That's Tom's domain, Bakali," she replied lightly. "I'm an engineer--algorithms and reaction parameters."

"Then perhaps your hair and mouth shall be engineered as well. A certain male in this house bears observant eyes. Allow me..." She rose, gesturing for B'Elanna to continue as she went to the closet for a small jar. Returning, she smiled. "You have succeeded! Very pretty!"

B'Elanna put the napkin in place, snickering to herself as Bakali knelt by her again. She was opening the jar, then. "What's that?"

"Sibra nectar," the old woman answered, smearing the tip of her thin finger in the thick vermilion juice. "It is not common, yet not an indulgence. Grown upon the hills of Mecrisop, the fruit is refined and given as payment to me by Madrida. Allow me." To her pleasure, the young woman, seeming to consider the idea, did not move as she brushed the balm on her full mouth, which plied easily under her touch. Bakali, thinking more on that and before the girl could turn away, smeared a bit of color on the young woman's cheeks, blending it with an expert's simplicity in her strokes. "Without the glory of sun, your color is assisted by it."

B'Elanna rubbed her lips together then nodded with a small grin. "Thanks. It even tastes good."

"Take yourself to judge its work. It befits you, I should think."

B'Elanna turned back to the napkins. "I trust you."

Bakali turned her chin up to peer at her. "Be'i, you must not hide from yourself always. You have healed with excellent result. The very lines are nearly unseen."

B'Elanna shook her head. "Not yet." She looked at the elder, sighed. "You did more than enough to save my life, Bakali. I'm grateful for that."

"Yet you bear no gratitude for that which makes you feel shame, your markings, how they appear?"

"You don't understand," B'Elanna said quietly, considering how to put it. "There was a time where I used to be ashamed of what I looked like--and there was another time I'd lost it but had to get it back to survive. I mean, it wasn't just how I looked but...Oh damn, I don't know what I'm saying."

"Simply speak," Bakali advised. "You shall be heard with open ears."

B'Elanna eyed her for a moment then decided to get it done with, since she was the one to bring it up. "It wasn't just my forehead, but everything else that came with my Klingon side. --I won't get into all the reasons behind it. I went through some...experiences, that made me see more into that. So, I'd finally started accepting that I had to be what I was, how I was born. --I thought I was dealing with it, anyway. Then I had some madman come after me time and again to leave me looking like this." She shook her head.

Bakali nodded slowly. "You attempted to betray nature and thus discovered it repeatedly, until it proved itself worthy of you. Your nature is just that, Be'i; you are yet what nature intended of you, and you remain in a state of growth. Fate has given you numerous challenges, so that you might find your spirit's truth. Ka, its purpose is this, in our belief. Your struggle lies in what is truth in *your* eyes, however, your desire, as you struggle against all else in this present."

"Oh I accept it," B'Elanna responded. "But...I don't think I'm ready to look at it."

"Acceptance may not be achieved without willingness to see truth," Bakali countered gently. Touching her arm, she found the girl's dark gaze. "Be'i, readiness shall come, I would think. Do not be perverse with nature and claim acceptance when it is not so. Only unhappiness is discovered when you are reminded of your self-deception. Allow your unrest to walk alongside your healing; allow truth into your life and contentment eventually shall be borne. You need not be more nor less than what you truly are with us. You shall be adored and respected in your nature--whether or not this nature is desired."

B'Elanna grinned. "You mean no matter how lousy I feel about it, that's okay?"

"Tsid ka'e," Bakali said. "Unease is natural, Be'i. Your acceptance shall balance this present someday as well, should this be wished. Yet for this present, it is well, your feelings, your lack of acceptance and belief. It is a path in your youth which must be tread upon first in order to reach your spirit's ultimate destination, your truth."

"As long as I don't raise hell with Tom," B'Elanna added.

"Between feeling unease and driving Prihar through the floorboards, there is a fine difference, Child," the elder grinned.

B'Elanna laughed, nodded. "I guess you're right," she said. That time, she was the one to reach out, placing her hand on Bakali's soft, embroidered robe sleeve. "Thank you. Everything you've done for me and Tom, it means more than you know."

Bakali smiled back, caressed the girl's fingers briefly. "Shall the setting be completed now, Be'i?"

"I still don't see the point in all this folding if we're just going to take them apart again," B'Elanna teased, picking up another napkin. "But I will."

"Stubborn girl," Bakali replied, rising to her knees. She leaned over and planted a kiss on B'Elanna's head. "Yet a good girl. That fate has guided you and Toma to us, our thanks to the spirits are many. We

shall greet our guests in peace and community this moon."

B'Elanna grinned again, but didn't reply, instead concentrating on how she'd folded the silly cloth the other time.

"Be'i, Toma!"

B'Elanna reflexively steadied herself as the little girl bolted across the square. The child had taken--probably for the novelty alone--the habit of greeting them every afternoon when they came back from Dviglar. Spotting them from her perch behind the rickety door next to the clinic, she would spring out to "surprise" them despite her mother's protests.

Taking that same liberty that day, the three-year old dashed a circle around the tired pair and threw her skinny arms around B'Elanna's legs. "M'ves al Dviglar i'o aliche yi!" she announced, embracing B'Elanna's thighs tightly enough to trip her--while B'Elanna shot a smirk back at Tom's chuckle.

"Hi, Haviki," she said patiently, patting the girl's brown head as she tried to keep her balance. They'd had a long day in the gorge and despite her fighting it, she was tired and a little dizzy from the hours of close work. Unfortunately, the child--like most Desalian children--was just too cute to ward off. Then again... "Why don't you say hi to your teshalla?"

"Toma!"

But Tom was quicker than the girl was, plucking her up to his hip with only a slight wince. The waif wasn't nearly heavy enough to give him trouble--a fact he liked. Tapping her fair brow, he squinted at her dirt-brushed face. "I know grabbing Be'i's legs like that is fun, but it's not really good for her. What if she tripped and fell?"

"She shall not fall!" Haviki responded with a chirping laugh. "She is strong and stubborn! Bakali has said this."

B'Elanna rolled her eyes. "Don't worry about it, Tom. I don't mind that much." Looking back towards the clinic, B'Elanna waved a hand to Haviki's harried mother, who pulled her scarves into place around her coaly hair as she hurried across the square to them. "It's okay, Cali."

Cali sighed and bowed to both her neighbors, brushing her pale, calloused fingers over her equally fair temple. "For all your toil, good lady, I should think her morning greeting would be enough," she replied as she straightened. Looking down to her child, however, she had to work to retain a straight face. Tom and B'Elanna had quickly learned that Desalians were indulgent parents who delighted in a child's spiritedness and mischief. "Haviki, you shall bring yourself and remain," Cali told the girl, mustering as much firmness as she ever had. "Your tola would have it so. Too many tales of your misbehavior should not be borne upon his return to us."

The little girl slid willingly down Tom's legs to return dutifully to her mother's side. Seeing the comely woman tug at her child's simple braids, Tom suddenly remembered. "Cali, we brought something for you."

"That's right," B'Elanna said. She gave Cali a quick grin then nodded to Tom. "You go in with her and get the space settled. I'll go back to the lot and get it." She tipped her head to his quick stare, crossing

her arms at what she just *knew* he was thinking. "I *can* go get it without permission, I hope?"

Tom laughed, more at himself than her challenge. He really had a bad habit with her, he knew, and he could tell that it annoyed her when he followed through on it. Still, even on her good days, she could become dizzy and tired without as much cause, and the bench they'd brought back wasn't exactly a lawn chair. "Yeah, but at least get someone to help you."

She rolled her eyes. "Always the gentleman, Paris. I'll handle it."

"I didn't doubt that, Chief," he returned.

"You'd better not."

Turning, she hurried back across the square to the south Prevach street then into a thin and sharply twisting alley. Through the shady, cracked stone corridor, she hardly had to look as she turned onto another, and didn't think of her direction as the old, vine-coated buildings grew thicker, the air musty in the cool shade. Instead, she offered a grin and a casual, "Zh've," to a few of the people she met along the way, who replied in kind for seeing her and Tom almost daily by then. Several blocks and an underpass later, the alley opened to the oblong lot where they'd been putting the parts brought from Dviglar until they could build a better place to work.

Arriving, she grinned to see several of the denizens of that neighborhood had come out, as they often did, to peer about the scraps, easing their very curious children back lest they "injure" the pieces. It was both quaint and sad, B'Elanna thought.

"Further harm to these is impossible," B'Elanna told them lightly in their tongue as she swerved around one piece, then another chunk, and then returned more greetings as she made her way through another section. She had come to know many people in the Techam district personally by then.

She and Tom had looked through a few of the more beat-up buildings there to see about reinforcing them; consequently, they had been invited into the squalor that was the residents' living conditions. It made them know all over again how much better she and Tom had it. Several families lived in one-floor flats, crunched together with unstable plaster walls between them, if that. In many of these places, the walls had jagged blast holes from "Unar inspections." Others lived within moldy caverns of plaster and whitebrick, rooms leftover from past years' rains dripping through cracked roofs. The occupants had only pallets to sleep on that they rolled up in the day, their "kitchens" consisting of bowls stacked on short tables and supplies of water. Though they did make every attempt at keeping the spaces clean and livable, it was little wonder they meandered around outside all day and took their meals in public gatherings.

Crossing to the back of the lot, she left them to continue staring at the piles and turned her attention to Dalra, who rested on a wall at the end of the row. She gave him a little smile and nod as she approached. "Where's the bench we brought back?"

Though Dalra had likewise been working through the day--and that after a shift on the grain trailer--he pushed himself up without complaint and hopped down to his sandaled feet. "Ah, Be'i, my sorrow that I have forgotten. I shall bring it."

She shook her head. "That's okay, Dalra. You don't have to do anything. I am able to carry it, and I'm feeling--"

"Be'i, let one be good to another," he scolded affectionately. "My Miztri shall not arrive for another quarter and it is not for you to take such burdens onto your shoulder--even as you believe you have the strength for that. Life is not in your own universe; rather it lies in the company of ones who care for you."

"Where I come from, everyone pulls their own weight, does their own work and when it's needed. I'm used to that and you know it."

"You are not there and *your* labor has been well served--too well served, Bakali would believe. Yet your doings at Dvigliar shall not be broadcast by me, should you earn no further mention." He patted her arm with his hand. "Allow us the joy of assistance, good lady. You must learn to allow others to give without assuming it is for your failure."

She let out her breath. Arguing with them--especially Dalra--was pointless, even while she hated that she wasn't being permitted much physical work and hated even more the lectures. Still, she did know what she'd feel like if she did overdo it. Stubborn as she might have been, her memory certainly hadn't been imploded by Hychar. "Fine. Thank you."

A simple nod was his only reply, and he moved to find the object in question.

Despite her giving in, she still tensed to grab a side as Dalra lifted the short, padded bench onto his robed shoulder. Dalra might have survived Uillar for over a decade, but with his angular features, prematurely aged by the sun, poor diet and hard labor, he didn't look like he needed anything else to tire him. Nevertheless, she kept her mouth shut, crossed her arms and followed him back through the alley, watching him shift the bench in his arms so not to scrape it on the stone walls. Crossing the square in the same fashion, she moved ahead and rapped lightly on Cali's open door before walking in.

A minute later, little Haviki was bouncing on her knees on the generous bench as Cali breathed her humble thanks. With her lover sold to service for another revolution, she had come to enjoy sitting in the window of her tiny, one-room flat, waiting through her days when she was not working in the clinic. Her long, thin fingers descending from her temples, she covered her smile with them, shaking her head at her daughter. "It is too fine a piece for this house," she breathed and turned a shining smile up to her neighbors. "And yet my spirit is filled with gratitude, with much joy, for this gift, dear friends."

"Fits perfectly," Tom grinned, putting his hand on B'Elanna's shoulder as they watched Cali pull up her sewing and lower herself onto the short plush seat, softly telling Haviki not to ruin the cushion when it was new as she tucked her small, sandaled feet under a hip. "Not bad at all."

"Looks good," B'Elanna agreed, enjoying both the view and the distraction Tom was yet again providing. She felt the warmth of his hand radiate deep into her. She drew a smooth breath, taking in that sensation.

As if he'd sensed her reaction, his hand slid down, a little unsure of where to go. In the corner of her eye, she saw his head dip slightly. She thought suddenly that maybe she should lean closer, to let him know she didn't mind it, that she liked feeling his hand there.

But then it fell away, and Tom moved up to ask Cali if there were anything else she'd like them to look for, venturing for something else they might need.

"Maybe some better storage spaces?" B'Elanna suggested. Cali--of course--was sweet about it, bowing her head and shaking both her hands in a weak protest, but B'Elanna was already measuring the beaten up

shelves with her eyes, moving around Tom to get a better view. Then she stared back to him, her chin rising with her query. "The Nara'ill's mess had some decent shelves, right?" she said, matter-of-fact and holding his attention without a blink, as if to insure he wouldn't break away that time. "Very nice ones."

Tom was the one to blink at that, taken by the look she'd thrown at him without preamble. "Yeah. I remember them, too."

"Good. We'll get them when we go back."

"Sure, B'Elanna," he said, not yet recovered even after she turned away. He couldn't recall *ever* being appraised like that. For a moment, he tried to figure out what in the world brought it on, but put it aside to go thank Dalra, whom he heard talking outside. He couldn't divorce himself from the impression, though. That was quite a look.

They set themselves back to the lot for a last, brief visit after leaving Cali to her sewing and checking in with Bakali. In an hour, Tom would go with the other men to help collect food, prepare and cook it into whatever Bala wanted for the night. The elders had invited some people for the evening, they learned, including the regents, whom their other guests wished to personally meet, Cali and Haviki, and Dalra and Miztri. So, they would be bringing back more food than usual with their combined allotments and spending more time preparing it. Meanwhile, B'Elanna was asked to return early as well to help the other women set up the room--a duty B'Elanna claimed she didn't really enjoy but didn't complain about anymore.

"Tomorrow's a tsaborr," Tom said casually as they moved through the alley, slowing their pace to a stroll to enjoy the cool breeze pouring through and tossing his loose clothes, drying him off. Bowing to a few of the people they passed, he said more softly, "Since we're not really into the meditative thing, you want to go down to Dviglar and hunt around some more?"

B'Elanna lit up with the thought, chewed a lip in anticipation as she mentally jotted down the day. "We won't be able to bring much back without the help. --But yes, I think there's more we can do down there," she turned a smile up to him, "like check out those ships' capabilities?"

Tom snorted, turning a look of mock correction down to her. "Now you know we're not supposed be fixing up hopeless ventures."

Her posture and expression was as crisp as her tone. "We're not fixing, we're just looking."

His hand found her waist as they rounded the corner. "Nothing wrong with a little research," he replied.

"Glad to hear we're in agreement," she said, leaning into him that time while she had the chance, then straightening with a satisfied smile when his arm moved completely around her.

If something was going to happen, she decided, it would probably be a good idea to let him know it, too. *God knows I have the time*, she grinned to herself as they entered the lot, meeting every eye that found them upon entry, just in case they hadn't figured it out, either.

In another breath, she wondered what in the world had possessed her.

He has.

Tom squinted against the dim light he'd activated as he rolled away from B'Elanna's warm body, tucking the blanket in behind her when she stirred in protest. As she often did, she settled, absently grabbing a section of the cover and pulling it around herself as though it were his arm. Tom watched her and sighed.

As he leaned over to pour himself some water, wet a small cloth while he was at it, he thought, as he'd been thinking for a few months by then, that maybe it would just take one of them making a move.

Tom could tell B'Elanna had begun to change her way about him--or at least it seemed so. She was responding to him--never in words, but in her gestures and her tone. Even in her "busy" mood, when they were working all day and night on rebuilding or remaking one piece of machinery or another, and even during their meals or errands around the city, she seemed to encourage his proximity, return his glances with one of her own, which could be called...possessive.

No, it *was* possessive--and he liked it.

In his turn, his glances and touches had become familiar, casually suggestive, even teasing. He knew he couldn't help it or his imagining all the things he'd been wanting to do to that smart and lovely chief but just couldn't bring himself to.

He chuckled quietly to himself. There they were, two adults sleeping together for nearly a year and both of them were as shy as pre-teens. Countless mornings, she'd lain still and said nothing but a quiet, plain "good morning" when they awoke together, when he knew she could feel him hard as a rock against her. A few times, he could have sworn she'd moved into it, too. --But just in case it was accidental, he found himself catapulting out of the bunk with his cheeks on fire, and he'd wonder over and over why he kept doing that.

He wondered if they hadn't been stranded out there, if he'd ever have come to feel about her the way he had. They'd worked together before, come to get along pretty well for two people naturally prone to verbal whiplash. Would it have been more--or, more, would she have welcomed it? Probably not, he thought with a familiar stab of regret. Not the way he had been then, not with their lives as they had been.

Even so, that didn't really matter, since they *were* there together, he wasn't that same man, they did accept their predicament and she was his closest friend, his companion...and he really did think she was...

He knew he wasn't feeling what he was just for loneliness' sake. He knew without a doubt after his first look around Azlre. There was a good amount of attractive Desalian women there--underneath the dirt and hollow cheeks, at least. Maybe it was because, aside from always having liked her, B'Elanna knew him better than any of them would--and accepted him? It sure wasn't *her* natural trait, as it was with others on Cezia. That made him appreciate it even more. Maybe it was because he'd come to understand her pretty well, too? Because as possessive as she was becoming, he'd been as watchful for her, been as attentive to her as she would allow?

Tom swallowed his glass of water in a few gulps, washed his face with the rag, wondering how long he'd wake up needing to get away from her for a while, get his brain and his body in control again. Looking back to the small, unmoving form in the knotted blanket, he had a feeling he'd be the only one to know how long that would last.

Returning to the bed, he pulled the blanket aside and carefully lowered himself onto the mattress. She rolled onto her back, otherwise undisturbed, her small hand tucked up beside her ear. Unlike their first couple months there, B'Elanna had taken again to that deep, angelic sleep he so envied.

He touched her hair, ran a finger through a dark lock. It was dry but thick and sat nicely on her slim, untanned shoulders. She'd probably cut it soon. She never liked it to grow too long--and it grew quickly.

Tom grinned. It was a fight with Sashana'i he wouldn't want to miss.

Carefully, he touched her cheek, not knowing why he was doing what he was. If in the slightest negative mood, B'Elanna would take every bit of it the wrong way. He continued despite it, tracing the line of her face to her jaw, where he lifted another errant curl of hair.

Even in her sleep, B'Elanna could feel some sort of presence by her, feel a light breeze, it seemed, a slight tickling on her skin. She sighed a breath, felt the presence leave. She almost woke up. Taking another breath, she noted the scent and smiled slightly, relaxing. She faded off again.

Tom's lips turned up to see her grin like that, felt his heart beating a step faster. Again, he knew he shouldn't, wondered why he'd decided to torture himself all the sudden, but she was, to him, so...

Leaning down, very carefully, he pressed his lips to her cheek, softly enough she might not have felt it had she been awake. Closer, and then he kissed the corner of her full mouth, which, to his initial surprise, parted at the contact.

"Tom," she breathed, leaning slightly into him.

He backed away, not knowing if she was really asleep, much as it was frighteningly pleasing--not to mention exciting as hell--to hear her say his name like that. He settled on touching her cheek again, stroking it warmly, watching almost in fascination as her mouth moved, as she breathed deeply, as her eyes moved just slightly behind her lids. Even the most mundane detail he committed to memory just then.

"Look what you've done to me, B'Elanna," he heard himself whisper from deep in his throat. "In this place, of all things to happen to me..." He could suddenly feel his body and heart waging war with his mind and coming to a stalemate only to watch her like that and wonder...

Her eyelids fluttered, opened partly to squint against the newfound light. Seeing Tom above her, the clear shadows of his face outlining his very serious expression, she felt her warmth stir. More was the feeling, still present, where he'd touched her lips--or had he kissed her?

She didn't speak, but waited, wondering, steadily watching him. He looked as though he would speak again, but closed his mouth into a small, warm grin. Her lips briefly turned up, too; then below, her fingers caressed the blanket against her chest, pushing it down a little. Her stare did not waver.

That ceased the conflict in Tom, who leaned down and pressed his mouth to the place he had before, lingering when he felt her lips open. He parted only enough that she could turn her face to him. She drew a deep breath of relief as he kissed her again, pulling her lip slightly into his own. Once more, and he tasted it, tenderly, sighing.

B'Elanna's eyes opened and closed again as she felt every nerve in her body awaken to him. Moving a hand to his side, running it along his length to his chest, she could feel him tremble in their kiss. "Tom,"

she breathed again.

He reached down and found her other hand, taking it gently into his long, slim fingers. Reverently, he spread her fingers up with a thumb, kissed her palm. She moved it to his cheek as he found her eyes, slightly glazed and unmoving.

"We work together," he said, his throat caught on his sentiment, "every day, B'Elanna--live together. We sleep together, and I wonder how the hell I've resisted you this long. Maybe because I didn't know if...if you'd want me to or not...then."

"We've been busy and I've been sick," she whispered, almost dazed with the reality that he was actually doing it, that she was hearing that admission--finally. She caressed his lightly whiskered jaw, let her hand slide to his shoulder. "I'm not sick anymore, Tom. I do want you."

His hand returned to her cheek, tracing upwards to her temple as he shifted against her, leaning closer as he directed his touches around her face. He kissed her cheekbone, just under her eye, and then just above it. When he moved higher still, she almost turned away, but he gently held her still.

He pressed his mouth upon her brow ridge, breathed, "Let me."

She didn't want to, but shuddered as his mouth pressed against what was left of her forehead, warming each part he made contact with. The heat remained, and was oddly comforting. Maybe it was his acceptance of it--of both her heritage and the damage done to it? Or maybe it was the attention, the feeling of his warm mouth on that sensitive skin, or how long it'd been for them both.

"Tom, please..." She moved her head, both deflecting and encouraging.

He nuzzled the crown of her hair as he tasted her skin, moved down to her temple, down to her jaw, before slipping back to her mouth again. He felt his whole body pulse at her response, wanting her thrice as much as he had before he'd even begun, not knowing how to contain the joy he felt that she was there, accepting him, letting him. He wanted suddenly to touch every part of her, learn every curve and taste and sound she could make...

She pulled him closer, tasting him fully as he maneuvered her towards him on the small bunk. His hand slid up again, his thumb reaching to trace her breast through the thin, soft cloth gown.

She moaned aloud, grasping at his lean back as her leg moved over his. The feeling of his erection against her alone drew a low purr of anticipation from her. She'd felt it so many times pressed up against her as they woke, but she knew it wasn't for her, just a natural thing he was quick to pull away once he awoke.

That time, then, it was for her, his arousal, his kisses and touches...finally. Finally, in that lonely, difficult, alien place, her friend, Tom, her companion, did what she'd been only working up the nerve to do.

Yet now they were, kissing and tasting, touching each other, half for love and half in relief, then yet needier as their warmth met and grew. She rocked up against him and he rewarded her with his full attention to her mouth, pressing deeply as one hand held her hair; the other caressed her gown over her upward bent leg. She shuddered at the desire flaring in her, pulled him tightly against her. Then, her head bent back as he pulled gently at her hair, seeking her neck then nibbling it.

"Tom," she growled. "I need you."

"I know," he breathed and opened his mouth upon the strong muscle of her shoulder, grazing her with his teeth. He slid her gown over her hip, smoothing around the thin bone to her center. Brushing from behind the moist area there, he thanked whatever gods there were that she was letting him do it. Her response was to grind against him again. He groaned aloud and eased his touches deeper into her.

Her fingers threaded through his hair, holding them steady as her rocking and his explorations left them both gasping and seeking more, driving their bodies impossibly together.

Finally, Tom sat them up, discarding their blanket as he pulled her other leg around so she could straddle his thighs. Finding the hiked up hem of her gown, he pulled it up and off her thin arms then whisked his shirt away as well. They stared at each other for a moment, taking in each other's wiry yet strong bodies, catching their breath in the dim light. Her small, warm fingers drifted down his ribs to the knotted scar that ran across his midsection. Catching her wide, wondering eyes, his lips turned up. Her touches were tender, her eyes understanding as her fingers finally dropped away to caress his hip. Her other hand pressed against his chest, moving softly over the fair hair and lean muscles there. She smiled. He was beautiful.

Reaching out to her, he brushed his fingertips over her breasts, holding her gaze as she shivered. She moved herself instinctively against him, stroking both herself and his arousal, earning his throaty moan. Her nipples hardened as he teased them and gently pulled her closer to him so to capture her mouth again. The kiss was deep, searching, moving as their fingers traced each other's bodies, memorizing, increasing intent with every turn and gesture. Slipping a hand around her soft, bare back, his other hand drifted down to stroke her. Gasping loudly against his lips and nearly biting his tongue when she crushed against him again, her hands flew to his waist, seeking out the ties to the loose pajama-like pants he wore. She nearly ripped them once her fingers got what they wanted.

"Get these things off," she said breathlessly when she'd loosened the waist as much as she could and grasped him firmly, feeling his life pulse there. "No more waiting, Tom."

He groaned at her outspoken want--equal to his but for the fact he couldn't put together an intelligent word at that point. Instead, he eased her back, his stare not breaking an instant from her as he removed the garment and tossed it away from the bunk. That done, he moved his hands to her open thighs, sat on his knees while he stroked her soft skin, then found one of her nipples with his lips and tongue.

B'Elanna grabbed his head in both her hands in surprise. By then, she could feel her heart hammering, her legs trembling, as he caressed between her thighs, drifting his freshly trimmed nails around to trace her flexing buttocks and between her thighs again. She moaned, and might have turned them around and taken care of it herself if she wasn't savoring the treatment he was giving her. It was unlike anything she had had before...like *he* was doing the savoring of *her*.

When she accepted his advance only minutes--*How many?*--before, she'd expected them to have sex, relieve the tension that had been growing between them since they'd gotten to Cezia. They'd been getting steadily closer since they'd gradually recovered from their injuries and the rest of Uillar, found a purpose and some work, adjusting to that dusty, crowded city, starting thinking in other directions. She knew someday it would come down to them making love. But not...

B'Elanna almost fell back against the plaster wall. His fingers had taken on a will of their own between her as his lips tightened, his tongue quickened. She held on, running her nails down his back, arching into him only to feel him tug at her breast, humming contentedly.

"Ohhh...Tom...wha--"

"I've waited a while for this," he whispered, brushing his lips, his cheek, his tongue and teeth again over her painfully erect flesh. "All these months...everything. I want more...than just to be with you. I want *you*."

She did not mistake his tone, sifted her fingers through his soft, wavy hair. "You do have me." For that, she saw him grin against her. She smiled, too, tenderly. "You do, Tom."

Taking her hip in a hand, he guided her down, just enough that she could place her hands on his cheeks and lower herself to his waiting mouth.

His fingers became busier. In her own turn, she reached down and found his penis, which thrummed at her first touch, surged when she grasped it. Devouring his mouth, she sucked his hard gasp as she felt herself begin to twinge and shudder with the orgasm his hand was expertly teasing along. She even felt her head begin to hurt and didn't care, totally ignored it for the more powerful feelings overtaking it, building and tensing and building again...

Her hand clutched his side as it hit her, washing through her core and outwards. Tom groaned only to see and feel it overcome her, her head fall back while her body bucked and her nails dug into his ribs.

Just as she began to ebb, he removed his hand and guided himself into her. He felt tears in his eyes as he pulled her down, released a slow, pining moan as he filled her completely. Her cry echoed in his ears as she grabbed him close to her. Her parted lips crushed against his collarbone, cringing in either pain or pleasure, or both. For a moment, he felt dizzy with the feeling, the relief. His breath was coming in labored gasps, and he could feel and smell and taste nothing but her. It was unreal and yet incredibly real, that completion.

Her legs clamped him on either side. She ground herself against him, rubbing away the last of her previous orgasm while inspiring them anew. Then she felt his hands clutch her hips. Smiling with that promise, she crushed her breasts against him, wrapped her arms around his shoulders as he guided her up, just enough. Directing her hips to grind him, they fell naturally into a slow, undulating rhythm. B'Elanna almost laughed aloud at the delicious friction inside and outside of herself. She'd never felt so much--and so much less since they'd found themselves in that region. Arching hard against him as Tom began to strengthen his momentum, she wove her fingers into his hair to hold on to the back of his neck.

Then she caught his eyes.

Her parted lips were slightly upturned as she breathed in gasps and half-voiced moans. Her dark gaze was misted, blinking slowly. Her head rocked, her mouth trembled with each breath. If he hadn't recently taken care of his need, Tom might have lost it, might have come right then for the pleasure they were giving each other, finally allowing themselves in that place where they'd known so much pain.

She no longer needed direction, but rocked her hips into his own, drawing him out before taking him in again, hearing her own moans mixing with his and growing into growls and pleas. He filled her again, whispering hoarsely into her skin words she barely heard, but felt. Her head fell against his collar, her fingers pressing into his flexing shoulders, breathing and tasting his scent, nibbling his skin blindly as the pressure built between them. She heard herself whispering, "Tom, I'm..." She sucked a shaking breath, her head tilting up. She tasted the underside of his jaw as his pelvis crushed against hers, rocking there, tightening the knots inside her, tensing her entire body. "Oh God, I'm almost there...I'm almost...ohh..."

"Let me have you," he said through his clenched teeth. He could feel her muscles quivering, still holding on. He ground against her, almost crying for it. He wanted to take her over more than anything he thought he ever wanted at that moment. "Let yourself go... Let me take you..."

"I am...God, I am," she wept, feeling herself teeter at that edge with every stroke, nearly insane for his keeping her there so long, her legs shaking, her skin slick from their heat. "Harder! Please, Tom...please, harder, take me over...make me--Ahh!"

Crushing her hips in his hands, he shifted them backwards, pushing her up against the wall. There, he thrust into her with all he had left, driving a keening cry from her throat. Her legs clutched around him, her feet braced on his waist. Her nails dug into him, holding on as he bucked into her small body. His head dropped, gape-mouthed as he dragged each breath against her cheek, moaned aloud...

"Let me have you, oh God, B'Elanna, I can't hold on--"

"You have me... Oh god--"

"I'm--"

"Just... Ah!"

B'Elanna tensed and convulsively grasped at him as her head fell back against the wall, rubbing against it as he pushed even further. She cried aloud, tightening reflexively around his surging erection. Finally, she felt him let go, felt his release mix with hers as he groaned, heaving, shuddering and pulling her tightly against him. Of their own will, his hips pumped against her a few more times, but then he and B'Elanna slid down the wall, whimpering incoherently, clutching to each other in shock.

Tom felt his tears, but he couldn't think but to taste her wet skin as he gulped for his breath in sore lungs and willfully ignored the steady ache in his side. He kissed her blindly, ran his palms and fingers over her trembling muscles, whispering to her as her own murmurs and relieved kisses met the hollow of his throat, his collar and shoulder. He felt himself gradually soften within her still quaking muscles, and he pulled himself slowly away from her, silencing her quiet moan with his lips and then, "Lie down with me, B'Elanna," in a hoarse breath.

She nodded. He carried her back down to their blankets, still kissing her as he pulled their cover over them. At last, he released his breath. In his embrace again, she closed her eyes, nestled in his neck as he rubbed his cheek upon her crown and entwined their legs. Her temples thrummed as her own euphoria drifted down into a pleasant sleepiness. Again, she didn't mind the pain in it, and she definitely didn't mind her strained legs or the warm, sated throbbing between them, his steadily beating heart echoing in her ear. There was nothing but that, nothing but them, just then. The rest, for the moment, was very far away.

They had each other, and for the first time, it was more than just enough.

"What in the world have you done to me?" she whispered after several minutes, tracing his back with her soft fingers.

"I loved you," was his reply, breathed upon her temple. "Still do, and will." His thumb stroked into the moist curls above her ear. "I have a long while, B'Elanna."

If she'd ever doubted that Tom had already captured her heart, B'Elanna was certain he'd won it

outright with that tender admission.

"I love you, too," she whispered, her own words rising from the very place he'd touched her.

Tom stumbled through the cabinet, grabbing a tray and the cups and barely thinking about what he was doing. Twice he grabbed the lichida leaves instead of the pahjar, and he had to turn back and go through the shelves of bagged herbs again after belatedly reading the characters written on the labels.

"This dragging and clinking," Bala commented, tying his robe high on his thin waist as he came through his bedroom doors.

Tom sighed, grinned. "Zharab llar. --Hope I didn't wake you up."

"I have risen with the sun, as always, Child," Bala told him, furrowing his heavily wrinkled brow almost as soon as Tom spoke, taken by what he thought he detected. He shook the thought aside for the moment, however, so to prepare his own tray. Joining Tom by the mantel, Bala saw that the water had already been set to heat, and he found himself impressed at how adept the younger man had become at the morning duty. Tom had stocked the fire and set the sustaining plates back correctly, a tactic of conservation that took some practice.

Pleased as he was to see Tom adjusting, however, he couldn't ignore his observation, now confirmed--nor resist comment. He took another breath and pursed his mouth.

"Toma," he stated, "you bear the scent of your lady on your lips."

Tom nearly dropped the tray, cups and all. He felt a mortal blush drown his face.

Bala suppressed his grin to see that. "You have spent this past moon copulating with your good lady Be'i?"

"Uh, well--"

"Have you?"

Tom cleared his throat. Never that shy about sex since he was a teenager, he suddenly felt like an adolescent again to be confronted by Desalian frankness about it. "Well...yeah. I have."

"Good," Bala returned with a curt nod. "When your morning tea has been taken, you should make love to her yet again. In first joinings, there is much release yet less relishing--though it pleases to know you have already practiced variations."

"Huh?"

"I would believe you should take more pleasure, discover each other's preferences. Having grown to know you both, it should be expected you would both enjoy a multitude of desires and arousals, methods." He nodded again, that time to himself. "Our friends shall be informed to leave you undisturbed this sun so that you may experience each other more thoroughly. Food shall be left for you, as to partake her passion's food should yet leave you both hungrier for exertions following."

Tom might well have been discussing the same with his father, Captain Janeway, Dr. Grisham and his Grandmother Helen all in the same briefing room. He found himself unusually speechless before the plain old man, who crouched in his dressing robe and tapped at the kettle as if he'd been discussing weaving joth fur.

"We have been anxious for you and Be'i to embrace this part of your natures. You have shown great patience. Yet now, you must reassure yourself of this, fill yourself with her taste and pay worship to her body so to remember it completely--as should she with you. At present, your other matters shall remain."

"Uh, well, we thought we'd start working on the new replicator casings we've been building."

Bala squinched up his nose. "There is much strangeness in your sort. The casings may wait another sun should your lady bear your pleasure again. It is shocking to me that you have brought yourself here, as you may yet taste her far more than I detect her womanly scent with this elder's nostrils." He sighed quietly, turned the kettle on the plates. "In the quarter, I shall leave food on your top step. Take your tea, yet remain with your lover, Toma. It is natural you should wish to be inside her again, ka?"

Tom licked his lips, popped them as he desperately found something else to look at. "I'll ask her what she wants to do."

Satisfied that he had again been a good guide for the young man--and barely hiding the curl stuck to the corner of his lips--Bala bent to pour the tea for Tom's service.

She was asleep again when Tom, still feeling a crawling sensation inside him, carried the tray across and set it on the bench. Despite the cultural naturalness of it, and as much as he might have agreed with Bala, discussing sex with a man he considered a long lost grandfather wasn't anything less than awkward.

At least he didn't go into the finer points of Sa'alli and Bihla doing it on the beach, he thought, not discounting the possibility.

His unease easily faded, however, when he dropped his robe to the floor and crawled back into the bed with B'Elanna, warmed as his skin slid against hers once again. He felt a deep smile well within him as she turned and took him into her embrace, snuggling her sleep tangled head into his chest like a little bear--even growling like one. His hands on her back, he kneaded her smooth muscles in big, slow circles.

"How early is it?" she both breathed and moaned--an intoxicating sound, Tom decided.

"About carash past sunrise," he told her quietly. He felt her grin against his skin. "Want some tea?"

"In a bit," she said. Looking up to him, her smile grew. "Good morning."

Leaning down, turning her onto her back, he brushed his lips against hers. "Sleep well?"

She blinked slowly. "You could say that."

"Your head okay?"

She nodded. "The usual. Nothing I can't handle." She laughed softly when his hand immediately slid up to rub her neck, loosening it. "You sleep all right?"

"Better than I remember sleeping in longer than you'd think." He continued to rub at her neck until she rolled her head around, gave a nod. Reaching down and taking her hand, he pressed a kiss to it, smelling

her deeply. He then regarded her fingers against his own. "How did you ever manage such tiny hands?" he whispered, almost in awe.

B'Elanna breathed deeply when he kissed her hand again, watched as his lips gradually found the soft of her wrist, still holding her fingers. *I wonder if he has any idea what that can do to a Klingon woman--or if he read that somewhere*, she thought, her blood thrumming as he continued to lave the tender spot. *Well, of course, he does seem pretty...instinctive, too...* "Aren't we expected at breakfast, Tom?" she whispered. "We'll never get there if you keep doing that, you know."

Tom's mouth turned wryly to the side. His stomach wasn't the only thing to shrink a little at the reminder. "Bala is a very wise man, you know," he said, forcing a shrug from his shoulder as he looked down to her. "He said we should stay here, not worry about work, just enjoy ourselves today."

Though the thought that their hosts had been listening--she knew Tom wouldn't have told him, so they must have heard them--was a bit embarrassing, she accepted it with a sigh and a shake of her head. She recovered when she looked up at him again, however. He did, after all, feel very nice, soft and naked and lying halfway on top of her equally nude body; his sleepy eyes and wandering hands were doing quite a bit for her, too.

A day in bed was sounding less and less boring as her mind played with that.

"I see," she said softly, stroking the back of his knee with the ball of her foot. "So, shall we obey our elders, my good man?"

His brow rose. That reply was a pleasant surprise. "Only should you prefer it, good lady," he replied in Desalian, kissing her wrist again, sucking at the fair skin a bit to savor it.

Closing her fingers over both his hands then stretching them above her head languorously, her smile returned. "I might," she breathed, "should you wish it, too."

He groaned low in his throat at her chosen posture. *Well, if we're going to acclimate ourselves to our many preferences...* Kneeing apart her legs as he moved on top of her, giving her fingers a squeeze, bearing his weight down there, he looked her over with an appraising grin, caught her gaze again.

"Far be it from me to neglect such a sacred tradition."

"It was at the silag, offering prayers to the spirits of the Schi'achku, my bloodline, that I met my bondmate. We had brought ourselves to the north of the city from the west partitions when my mother was offered to give her skills to the upkeep of the silag, presided over by Watsha, a prichava of guarded acumen, as we might say in these times. When first I entered what he had both protected and restored, I bore but five years, too much life for my diet and a head hardly large enough to hold a crown of scarves. Yet when first those earthen eyes found me, I forgot the fine altars and halls and the prichava's regal robes and informed my parents with most devout seriousness that the little girl should give me her name.

"I bore knowledge of her lines. My family had been ministers to hers long before Unar were more than interesting pedagogical debates. As is yet the way, several took their higher place among her family as bondmates. To think I should wish the same, to give my name, my house, for hers, was pleasing though we lived in great poverty. Of course, so did we all.

"When prayers were ended that sun, I took myself to our flat, shared by my parents and I, my five uncles and their families. At midgate of Sacezia, she took herself to be as well with her parents and elders. We did this for many revolutions, with little more than social meetings as reminder of my initial statements. I yet courted her, with my eyes, with my smiles and bitten lips. She was beautiful to me and impossible to misplace in my mind. In truth, I believe I attempted to make myself less forgettable to her, as well, in gestures, manners and other outward shows of my person I never attempted elsewhere. Our families found great amusement in this, I would think.

"Yet when my age was proper for first courtship, I bore none of my own to present my claim for her. All of my blood was taken to the ancestors but the youngest for a fever that had flooded the city. I yet thought it was for her I was meant, for in years she had grown into such loveliness and cleverness, she became all the more desired by myself. How I prayed to all the spirits of my blood and memory that I should be completed by her. Her closeness became so needed by me as much as I bore so little else. To feel her spirit in mine became my most blessed desire. I felt arrogant, passionate, yet I, without regret, wished her as my own, and stared deeply into her eyes as though to bond through that alone. I saw her in my prayers, in my gathering, in my trade, in my sleep. Within my spirit, I saw her by me.

"A blessing, then: Fate answered. My call was heard and under the setting moon, we met, and again on another, and then more over the du've until there was not an evening we did not find one another. We spoke, we laughed and played, spoke through the moons both complimenting and challenging--found ourselves indeed meant for each other as we took our association into the sun. Then, another blessing! Again, I was accepted--now by her astute elder-parents, who brought my cousin and me into their house. Our good tola quickly set us to our present education, I in particular to spiritual training, as though I were a pre-novitiate. Blessings, indeed! --And I learned well and served him as would his son of birth. Yet how difficult to resist his grandchild in our schooling time, honoring his goodness with my spirit but a reach away! My only joy then was to learn that the challenge was hers, as well.

"When our finest elder passed, giving forth in desperation the legacy onto her, I, witness to the passing and transferal, sat on their pillows and held her trembling body against my own, brought soothing caresses to her day lit nightmares following. She spoke from the spirits in her torment to me; great humility found me in listening and in knowing that were I to bear my wish, the same torrent would follow me. Ah, little surprise our elder had taught me well, to assure our future bond.

"Yet this responsibility was not a difficult choice. When she begged my spirit, I promised it without hesitation. When the sun next rose, I brought myself to the silag where I first saw her to bequest the city's elders for her further examination. They knew of my family, my strength and dedication to her house and well being, as had been the way of the ministers in the age of the Allanois Regency. It was the way to be continued in us, as her entire being had captured mine and mine hers. Had this not been seen by them, I made it so.

"In the succeeding ralkle, our intention was publicized intended. Two more and we were bonded upon Uillar against the setting sun, never to be separate, her house my own, our lives to be lived and passed as one, in hope for Desal's future." Aratra embraced Sashana'i in an arm when she leaned up to kiss his cheek. "As is the way."

"I have to *what*?"

"Are you serious?"

"It is the way, and this way must be followed to attain what you wish."

B'Elanna was buried to her waist in disassembled parts. Tom was covered with perspiration for being the disassembler. Nothing was unusual about this arrangement except that both now dumbly stared at Sashana'i, who only shrugged and nodded. Miztri reactivated her laser and put it back to the juncture notch, thinking nothing was out of the ordinary. Dalra hadn't stopped in the first place. Aratra hopped up onto a wall of discards, chuckling to himself at their reactions.

"It is the way," Sashana'i reiterated.

"By ancient tradition," Aratra finally explained, "all requests of your sort--demands, complaints and suggestions, as well--are in public fashion put forth. Your break from Dalra's care and adoption into the Allanois house was made through my own call for hearing, at Uillar. This way is your only acceptable method."

Tom grimaced, squinting at him. "You just couldn't wait to tell us that."

"Your home remains among us and you require a favor of our citizens," Aratra smiled. "The request must be made properly."

They couldn't argue with that. Cezia being their adopted home, the Desalians now their adopted people, it was about time they started accepting more of those traditions they'd previously been able to bend--or avoid altogether. Sighing to each other, they shrugged then nodded.

Some time later and like grudging lambs for the sacrifice, Tom and B'Elanna stepped into the square of Azlre and moved through the usual denizens milling about in their usual way.

"Who here would want to, anyway?" B'Elanna hedged. "They've known about the lot for ages and never said anything about it. Maybe this is a bad idea."

Tom forced his posture straight and took B'Elanna's hand. "Guess we'll have to find out. We need help, B'Elanna. Even you said it--more than once. We've got a whole lot of junk, no place else to put it and a lot of close work that neither of us can do right now. Gihetra, Bolmra, Latsari and the others who want to help are already committed to day labor for another season. We have to at least ask."

She growled. "But what if no one says anything?"

"Then I guess we're going to feel really stupid."

"Oh, well that helps," she returned, rolling her eyes. "I'm serious. What am I going to say?"

"I'll be there, too, Chief."

"Damn right, you will."

Just off the center of the square was a familiar sight they'd never paid much attention to before that day, an oblong dais, fashioned ages ago with white and grey carved stones and about two and a half meters high. One side hosted a wide flight of steps that went up to the flagstoned platform. It was still solid, despite the cracks in the binding cement and an old blast hole in the opposite corner, but to their memory, few people ever went up there. They personally understood why that could be.

They did need the extra hands on a daily basis, though, which seemed like it should be an easy enough thing to find, considering the usual opportunities open to Desalians and the lack of occupation among them otherwise. With that in mind, and lifting the side of her cloak as she slowly but surely approached the steps, she outstretched her free hand to let Tom help her up then slowed in mid-step as he passed her.

Suddenly and much to her surprise, she recalled the first day she stepped into Voyager's engineering as the chief of that department, freshly promoted and nervous as hell--even if she wasn't about to show or admit it. She wasn't even used to that uniform yet and Chakotay was there to greet her, so proud, even vindicated, to show her "her staff." Taking a deep, unseen breath, she thrust herself into the engine room, her head held high and ready for the challenges bound to happen...

How long ago was that? she wondered, briefly calculating a year on Voyager, about a half year on Uillar, around three quarters of a year on Cezia, maybe a little more... *Another life ago*, she answered herself, knowing she'd worked the math before. She still thought about it sometimes, even while she'd accepted that they were remaining on Cezia, accepted that Voyager was long gone....

"Ready?"

B'Elanna blinked, looked up.

Her lover was gazing down to her, stroking her hand and grinning, understanding the nervous determination they shared, which could either screw it all up or make the outcome that much better. They'd both been there several times already. At the tail end of that unexpected remembrance, it seemed suddenly ironic that his smile filled her heart as it did then. Still, their months together, finally sharing more than the space and the blankets--plus having more than enough time and encouragement to do so--had given them plenty of opportunity to improve upon their knowledge.

Smiling inwardly and then to him, B'Elanna took the final step up, replaying her friends' directions over in her mind. She knew damn well she couldn't treat those pure-spirited people like Starfleet officers--and certainly not like Maquis. But she and Tom were up there and people were slowing as they noticed. They couldn't get down now.

Tom, meanwhile, was thinking quickly. Glancing down to B'Elanna's attempt to hide her nervousness with a proudly raised chin, he stuffed his own queasiness and took a step forward, his hand still clasped to hers. *Oh well, here it goes...*

"Zha'ibrille!" he announced, consciously making himself pronounce it correctly, not be lazy with the trilling. He knew too well by then that even minor errors of the tongue in Desal could be cause for downright humiliation--or at least a good deal of laughter that would persist in many a fireside tale. With that in mind, he decided not to submit to either possibility--not there. "Please forgive us. We are still poor speakers of Desal, so please be patient with our translators today. This is all new to us and... My companion, B'Elan...Be'i and I need to make a request of anyone who is willing." Aside, he pressed, "My good lady Be'i might join me now?"

"Sorry," she said quickly, licked her lips to speak to the smiling, curious people who had gathered and hushed their children to give their full and loyal attention. At that point, B'Elanna would rather have found a nice corner to throw up in. "Well, as you probably already know, we've been working on the recovered parts from Dviglar and..." *Humble. Sashana'i said be humble...* "We require assistance, from any who are willing to learn and to help. I suppose what we're asking for--requiring--are trainees."

"Apprentices," Tom prompted.

"Apprentices," B'Elanna said aloud then looked up to Tom. "I'm no teacher."

"We're both going to have to be, considering what we've got to work with."

Closing her eyes for a moment, B'Elanna turned back to the onlookers, still gathering, peering up to them through their headscarves and hoods. They seemed glad for the mere diversion. Their curious expressions helped a little, though, B'Elanna had to admit to herself. Their disinterest would have made her angry for bothering. "We're willing to teach anyone who is willing to help us how to make and maintain the replicators, sanitation systems and power conduits we're designing or repairing now--plus whatever else we need to build. There's a lot we need to do and six people just won't do it."

"I beg a question," said one man, who instantly got B'Elanna's stare. "What is the sale for our labor?"

"Ka," said a woman. "And for what period are we sold into a venture?"

B'Elanna stared at them. "This isn't service," she told them flatly, forgotten of her humility at the very idea of her being some sort of...employer, "this is school--like your ancient novitiate, but a lot more basic. It's like...technical training--apprenticing."

"In other words," Tom told them, finally getting his wits about him, thinking up more even as he spoke, "we have only our knowledge, our experience, to use here in Azlre,, and now to give to you, which you can pass on, too. In the end, if we're lucky and find the energy supply we're still working on, you'll *all* gain reliable power, safer food and supplies you won't have to bribe for, a lot of the medicines our elder Bakali misses and plentiful water for washing and drinking. Had we any bread, we'd give it for payment. But that *is* what we're working for--for all of us and for the children here, who have nothing but what their elders can give them. What we need, as Be'i has already said, is apprentices to learn our trade and help bring about the...blessings we want to build, for Cezia's future."

B'Elanna had to push down the smile that might have preceded a laugh in any other situation. "Where'd you get *that*, Tom?" she asked under her breath.

"Helps to have a long-winded Admiral for a father sometimes," he grinned. "I didn't ignore him *all* the time, you know."

The woman who queried before was nodding slowly as she took in the artificially translated words and reorganized them to herself. "Ahh, students," she said. "It is understood, my friends." Then she turned to explain it to the others.

From what Tom and B'Elanna could understand of the more complex Desalian tongue, her recounts of their request made sense enough, though they both noticed Sashana'i and Aratra snickering at the side as they listened along.

Not two hours later, Tom and B'Elanna were buried again in their original work, having said good afternoon to their still amused friends and now wondered to each other exactly they'd gotten themselves into *that* time.

They found out.

A young man, hardly sixteen, stood staring placidly down at them--and for some time without moving until they noticed him there. When they did, they looked beyond him to see two girls--likely sisters by

their dress and appearance, maybe a year or two younger than the first. Several other boys and girls were looking around at the scraps, asking each other curiously what they might do with such items. All of them were scraggly, as though only their hair and scarves had been tended. A few of them bore sunken cheeks and eyes for lack of food. Eventually, all of them turned expectantly to her and Tom.

B'Elanna felt her temples begin to pound. It had already been a long day.

Like an angel, Cali skipped into the lot, little Haviki's hand in hers. "Toma, Be'i, words of your duty have reached me. I shall endeavor to assist with these children."

B'Elanna let out her breath, moving to bring the lady closer to her and Tom as she gestured for the others to wait with a palm and a frown. "Cali, why are all these kids here?" she whispered.

The lady blinked at the question, but was otherwise unfazed. "You did request, Be'i, for students, ka? As for the novitiate. Our elders have taught us that children guided by their placement for the novitiate must enter a school of preparation at sixteen years."

B'Elanna sighed a tight breath, shook her head. "Damnit."

Haviki below her giggled and tugged B'Elanna's gown skirt. "I shall be your student, too."

Though cute as ever, that was the last thing B'Elanna needed. Slumping as she felt Tom's hand rub her back, she brought her head up again. "Cali, we got ourselves into this. You've been ill, and you still have your clinic hours."

"My suns bear little occupation outside my duties there and my health is increased in the air," Cali insisted. "More, I would believe it a blessing of our ancient ways that my Haviki would be brought to awareness among a place of learning. I humbly ask I assist, good lady, good man."

They are just too nice, B'Elanna thought for the umpteenth time. "Okay. You're in." With a look up at Tom, she took a step closer to the curious teenagers. "Zha llastnya'o," she said formally, bowing slightly and brushing her temples with her fingers, and then waiting for them to return the gesture before straightening herself. "Well, first things first. What do any of you know about this technology?"

Were there a Cezian cricket, Tom would have sworn he'd heard one loud and clear. "Well, at least they don't have anything to relearn."

She turned a scowl back at him for that one. "Excuse me, Professor Paris, but you're in this, too, you know."

"Sorry, Chief," he chuckled; then he addressed the 'class.' "You've all seen a spaceship, right?"

"Ka," answered most of them, some just returning a short bow. "The transport ships," one said, "take and return laborers."

"You ever wonder how they work?" Tom asked them. "How they have enough power to break through the atmosphere and cruise through the stars?"

That time, the nods were more reverent--and Tom suddenly realized that his translation turned a bit religious for them. "The stars" was the place of their spirits' creation and return, he knew--but also knew that theology was not exactly his strength. He switched gears as smoothly as he could. "Well, we've passed through space a lot in our lifetimes and know how to live there--in ships, I mean. That means

replicators and reclamators and power assemblies of all sorts. All that and more, not to mention our personal favorite: Propulsion. But we...well, we can't have that right now, so we'll teach you the rest. I'll warn you, though, it won't be easy."

"We shall endeavor to study with great diligence," said one straight-backed young woman. "It is our preparation in a trade of our choosing."

"When we were queried by our elders and parents," the young man beside her added, "your knowledge inspired us for its benefits to all Desal. It is for our future."

Despite her initial disappointment, B'Elanna felt a deep relief to hear those words. She almost didn't believe it at first, but it was undoubtedly confirmed in their bright and hopeful faces. That kind of hope was almost alien to her. Unlike how the adults seemed much of the time, those nine kids out of a city of a hundred eighty thousand wanted something different, were willing to make their future better.

She wasn't about to let that opportunity get away from her. The Desalians got it right in one respect at least: Even if it was a small blessing, it was still a blessing.

Crushing a grin that wanted to be bigger than she would show, she gave them all a nod. "Well, then, we'll get started. Though, I admit, I've never really trained anyone *this* fresh."

"We shall learn together, then, good lady Be'i." One rather dirty but pretty, brown-haired girl came forward and bowed deeply. By the wrap of her scarves and the nature of her bow, B'Elanna could tell her family was once a proud one. "I am called Mazji, daughter in Frohada's house. I greet you and yours in peace, Be'i, Toma. My intended, Yorlla." She gestured, and the dark-skinned young man who had spoken of the future bent deeply before his instructors. Following suit, each of the other "trainees" introduced themselves.

Tom gave them all a short bow then offered B'Elanna an encouraging grin. "What do you think we should start with?" he asked quietly.

B'Elanna shook her head even as she looked around at what they had. Sighing resolutely, she grabbed the first thing she could pick up and displayed it to the curious group with a solid stare and a firm jaw. "This is a laser drill...relatively. Let's take it apart and I'll show you how it works."

Piles of pulp paper coated the floor; all of it was marked with deep red ink. Naturally, their supply of such items had been procured by Aratra and Sashana'i, who, though faithfully amused, promised to assist when they could, help with the basics they already knew and also to begin teaching Tom and B'Elanna the intricate and mechanically untranslatable advanced Desalian dialect, for their own sakes and so they could teach their new students more efficiently.

On the bench under the window sat a tea tray and a few bread crusts, mostly neglected as the unwilling teachers began scribbling their lesson plans--as best they could, anyway. It was more like remembering on paper their own educations in physics and engineering, which would be accelerated exponentially in their students and set side-by-side with practical work so they could still get some of the physical labor done. They had become distracted from that work, however--work which in itself was a distraction from everything else in the city. They didn't mind so much neglecting the less familiar one for the while.

Having some unspent energy, as was often their case, they retired to each other for a time, pleasuring away their nerves and long day. Some time after that, they found themselves side by side, he by the wall, she on her back, stretched out without needing a cover. Nights in that attic room were still comfortably warm enough, warmer still with the rain season approaching.

Both glanced over at the work they would awaken to. Their "class" would begin a quarter before high sun and end at ninth quarter, approximately five hours later. Despite what they knew they needed to do, though, they didn't feel like sleeping just yet, nor wanted to return to their writing. Though it was nice to know they could get *something* written down, with cramping, ink-smudged hands they'd added "PADDs" to their list of items to build before putting it all aside for the while.

As the first moon of evening began to crawl past the building next door and throw its white shadow across the length of the small loft, Tom caressed B'Elanna's bare skin, from her womb and around her ribs, sometimes delving a little farther, casually, familiarly. She responded with a little breath, a little smile. Both their eyes became heavy with the view of their mess.

"I don't think it went all that badly," he told her when she mentioned their day again.

"I guess not," she sighed, finally pulling her eyes back to a far more pleasant sight, scars and all. "But it should take years to train them."

"Maybe not *years*, but I know what you mean."

"I guess I was thinking I'd get some people like Miztri, who knew at least a little about...something. Guess they're all in the black market or in an Unar prison somewhere, or in day labor like Bolmra and Latsari. Least of all, I didn't expect children to come crawling out of the woodwork."

"They're smart," Tom said, "and you're smarter." His warm hand traveled slowly over her again, and then dangerously downward. "You always had a knack of knowing what you were doing, Chief," he murmured, low and teasing.

She instinctively arched into his hand a bit, purring contentedly as her eyes narrowed possessively into his. He returned the look, along with that jaunty, seductive grin that suited him so nicely. She laughed, shaking her head at both their responses.

"If somebody told me two years ago I'd have nights like this..." she started and didn't need to complete it but with a satisfied sigh. "What you can do to me, and when you look at me like that. Sometimes it's like..." She let her breath go again. His fingers stroked her lightly, dipping in just enough to entice.

"Like?" he whispered.

A little rumble emanated from her throat, and her lips turned up wickedly. "Like I can feel your teeth and tongue all over me," she said softly, running her hand softly over the length of his arm, "under my clothes, where no one else can see."

His brow flicked upwards in regard of her frankness, that aside from the rush those words and her tone had sent through him. He had to admit, though it was sort of strange at first, that brand of openness hadn't been all that difficult to get used to--especially when it was coming from B'Elanna.

"Like this?" Bending to her neck, he raked his teeth and tongue over her pulse, which jumped at the attention.

"Mmm." Her nails stroked softly over his shoulders, driving a shiver up his long frame as he nibbled at her, still toying with her below. Opening his jaw at the soft corner of her collar, he closed his mouth again, then his teeth, pulling slightly at the muscle before increasing the pressure.

She gasped and held his head there for a moment, shuddering through the wash of arousal his attentions caused; then she turned her head to kiss his jaw. "I never thought about it so much until recently," she said against his skin. "I probably tried to avoid the idea...but I love it when you bite me like that."

He inhaled slowly, still at work on her shoulder, tasting the slight mark he left there. "That is rather Klingon of you, B'Elanna. I like it."

"You do, don't you?" she smiled, not complaining as he paused his ministrations, letting them ebb for the mean time. He liked to take his time when they weren't tired and they had the whole night to themselves. She stroked his hair, soft tufts she'd recently cut for him, felt his erection fade off slowly as her own body relaxed.

Her thoughts still turned on their mention. "It's strange," she whispered. "Being so far away from people who even know what a Klingon is, I don't think about it as much anymore, dwell on it, you know? I sometimes wonder if that's right of me or not."

"Maybe you don't have to think about it," Tom said. He had risen enough to prop his head back on his hand, his other hand warmly resting on her ribs, his thumb stroking one distractedly. "If it means anything, B'Elanna, I don't think you've changed in a lot of ways--your strength, your determination, in your clear-mindedness, your sense of honor, honesty." He nodded to her gaze. "I don't know if it's necessarily Klingon or not, but yeah, it's all there--you. Maybe it's a good thing you don't dwell on it."

"Well," she admitted, "I do sometimes, just not like I used to." She grinned ironically. "Sometimes I think I'm just going to burst. Things can be so ridiculous here. Nothing is done the way we were used to and they're peaceful to a fault. On the other hand, I've never felt so accepted--as long as I don't show my teeth around Bala, anyway."

Tom chuckled. "It is nice that way, isn't it? Having nobody know what you came from, letting them make up their own minds."

"What we are?" B'Elanna queried. "Do you really think we're the same people who landed here?"

"You have a point," he agreed. "But at the same time, we haven't forgotten it--or that they really don't know."

"True. But it does help to not have to prove it to everyone else."

"No kidding. Still have to prove it to ourselves, though."

She shrugged. "I think we've been doing okay."

"Yeah," Tom smiled, "me too." But a moment later, his smile twisted slightly then faded. "I still don't like that we can't hit the Unar where it counts, though. I keep feeling like we're letting it go by--even if they need so much here. Bala and the others are right about that much."

"Yes. Still, if I hear one more time about how retribution has to fade through the generations for a natural solution--tso'ach nibrli'o sab ralbrreda--I know I'll scream."

"The idea that they'd pass this crap on to their children..." Tom shook his head. "Every time I look at Haviki or Dygala or Brymare'i... No, we have to do something."

Thinking on that a step further, she peered askance up to him. "When I didn't know you so well, I had always thought you let everything slide off. But you really are involved here."

"Trust me, the Unar earned it," Tom told her, "and on the other side of things, so did the Desalians. Seeing how they live, then how they welcomed us when they had every reason not to, I'll never let it go. This is our home now. I want to make it better for all of us." His eyes turned down inwardly, and then found hers again. "Maybe I finally found something I really want to be loyal to, take care of. --I know, I'm saving my own ass, too, but it's more than that. They talk about how things used to be, and I'd like to see them have the good parts of that back someday."

B'Elanna drew a full breath, feeling her smile in her eyes to hear him then. It wasn't the first time he'd said something like that, but it was no less gratifying. "Well, if this means anything to *you*, I think you always had it in you."

He chuckled. "Yeah, I just had to grow up and see it, right?" Touching her cheek, he sighed deeply. "What's really crazy is that sometimes I don't regret it. Even if we really have nowhere to go, I'm not sorry for being here."

She returned his smile. "Sometimes, neither am I. It is crazy, isn't it?"

Stroking her full lip with a finger, feeling its warmth, his grin turned aside. "It's worth it."

"I think so, too," she whispered, reaching into his hair to guide him down to her again.

The air had become perhaps too dry and the warmth too steady by the time talk of the upcoming Desalian new year--properly, the Ancestors' Moon--became a diversion in Azlre. Like most of the Desalian holidays, there was some certain spiritual significance behind it. Ancestors' Moon was a celebration of the spirits' desire to continue the living world, the decision against, as some interpretations had it, ending the need for bodily experience--deciding not to end the world, as it were. Though they had come to appreciate the meaning of the holidays to some degree, Tom and B'Elanna politely ignored the spiritual aspects, rather focusing on the idea of enjoying the music, some different food, all their friends around them and a little excitement for a change.

If anything, the anticipation broke up the long, hot, post-harvest days; it inspired people to talk increasingly about the rain season, yet to come to that central part of the continent. Azlre was known for its temperate weather, mostly dry but for two moons of mostly rain, which filled the ground wells and lakes and fed the savannah for the year. *Sa'alli's milk*, they called it, and it was still another season away.

For the mean time, their work at Dviglar had come to a stop--their scavenging had finally found its limit when it was decided there shouldn't be any more brought into the lot. It was crammed full.

Naturally, B'Elanna immediately took it upon herself to begin moving it. Tom did, too. Both knew well they shouldn't with their various and still troublesome injuries, but with only a few people aside from their four closest friends and apprentices available, they had little choice. Not that they minded such a

good excuse.

B'Elanna still hoped that sometime very soon they'd be able to build a box over it all or find a secure shelter. The coming rains would necessitate both a storehouse and an indoor area to continue the lessons to which she and Tom were devoting the better part of their daytimes. They were at least glad to know that the Desalian teenagers were indeed dedicated students who lived vicariously through their lessons--as if they had anything else to do.

"This is a trait of our young," Aratra told them. "Information is devoured by hungry minds. Our ancestors were once most learned, as is known. This is bred into us. Diligence must be used, however, in giving the correct information *initially*. For us to relearn once taught is quite difficult."

That wasn't surprising, when they thought about it.

She and Tom were also working their days away without another even more necessary component--a viable power source. Ferranide, photonic energy, plasma, iogenic particle matter, even dilithium and deuterium were all plentiful sources commonly used in ships and space-bound stations until the Unar sought to control it all, along with the technology and information to create and maintain it all, and thus control the populations they dominated. Laridium, a permitted substance, was both unstable and short lasting. Worse was they didn't even have much of that.

Over the months, though, she and Tom had come up with ways to maintain the few alternatives. With the help of their "staff" and with the public encouragements of the city's elders to welcome the improvements, they repaired and upgraded solar arrays from the ships they rummaged through to service or rebuild the near-ancient units and solar storage facilities throughout the city, long degraded with neglect or poor repair. They replaced old power conduits, planned, built and installed new generators, revamped some environmental relays to collect the scant humidity and supply a few small irrigation systems for the public gardens, and then began thinking about practical uses for Cezia's geothermal energy.

The problem was, still, how to power the rest. Solar energy could maintain lights and heat, help cook food and boil water, and the sparse laridium could run higher-end equipment like translators and medical equipment for a while. But all their efforts weren't nearly enough to repair the whole city, much less help them to their more ambitious goals. Tom and B'Elanna still planned, however, much to some people's doubt, which was in turn doubly frustrating.

"Why can you not use what is at Dviglar?" Dalra asked them--not for the first time--as he maneuvered the last of the relay grids onto a cart they had built. "Why must the soil and rock now be torn into? There yet exists sparse power far better lasting with the lessened functions."

"What the hell are you saying, Dalra?" B'Elanna demanded from her own pile of junk, punctuating her disgust by throwing a fried power node into the mess. "You're just as bad as Migla and Chorsa--and they don't know a plasma relay from a seed plow. Now you--and you *do* work here."

"And yet I see the need as well as you to see this labor become a blessing," Dalra told her.

"I am *not* dragging an unstable, seventy-five year-old impulse matrix up here to flush a toilet!"

Nine Desalian heads bent straight down to their separate tasks as Tom leaned back on a power assembly shell.

Dalra visibly slumped. "Be'i, the duct sanitation recycle system you have designed bears much potential--"

"It has more than potential," B'Elanna countered, squinting not only for the noon sun. "It's a standard and sanitary reclamation device that would work just fine with some everyday planetary thermal plasma, which one of the word painters did say is down there. For now, we have the solar arrays to at least generate some reserve energy and get it started."

"Yet to continue it shall take more," Dalra reminded her. "This is known, Be'i. And it is known that you hesitate to remove essential components from the ships."

She rose instantly to that challenge. "You're damned right I won't. Bala said he might change his mind about fixing those ships someday and Tom and I aren't about to forget that. But that still has nothing to do with the fact that a starship's engine has no place in a planet-bound reclamation unit." Prowling around to another pile of components that didn't work, she shot the man another stare. "What is it with you people that always want to go about things backwards? No wonder you sit around like sheep waiting for the Unar to pick you off. You'd rather shoot your waste to their homeworld--along with half of your ass--rather than do something the right way."

Dalra breathed through her insult, knowing well she had not intended a personal affront, but was as without answers as he. And in her territory--the lot--she did have dominion, even when his point had weight. "Be'i, there are few alternatives to procure. The remaining laridium would need to be used, or you must reclaim the remaining dilithium particles from the ships. These produce power, which is what is required."

Throwing up her hands, B'Elanna looked at Tom with unbound frustration. "Why do we bother?"

"Because we know better," Tom replied, crossing his arms as he regarded Dalra again. "One way or another, we're not going to radiate the whole of Azlre for shit, much as I wouldn't mind shooting it in Unar's direction. We'll leave our asses here, though."

Dalra snorted, breaking the mood between the three as B'Elanna too cracked a grin. "Perhaps this would be preferable," he chuckled.

"We're getting nowhere arguing about this," Tom added. "I think we can do more than settle for what's already lying around if we really tried."

"Toma ka. Yet I would only be able to procure more laridium. It is not desired; this is known, and yet this is all I can do."

B'Elanna sighed through her nostrils. "I can't use it with the replicators. I wish there were just one other option."

"By your nature, you would always wish more, Be'i, yet find disappointment eventually."

"Better than nothing," she replied and turned back to her work. "Just tell us what it costs before you get it. No weeklong labor. We need you here."

Dalra's eyes crinkled with his grin as he bowed and touched his temple respectfully. "Toma rehaj ce'i: 'Yas, ma'em."

"Kin Toma lerr a'a brris," she snickered then shook her head as she regarded the older man. "I might

disagree with you--a lot--but I appreciate your help and your point of view."

"This is known, good Be'i," he replied warmly, his fingers waving around his temple again before he turned to leave.

Passing her bondmate as he went back to help Tom with another case of parts, Sashana'i stole up to B'Elanna, who determinedly resumed her organizing upon accepting the compromise. Her eyes were nearly shut for squinting, her was hood pulled nearly to her nose as she separated and put aside pieces then pulled up another crate to start all over again.

"Be'i," she said quietly, so not to pain B'Elanna's head further, nor surprise her, "perhaps a solution shall yet be found. I would ask of those in Sacezia were transportation not a burden. Yet our answer shall come in time."

B'Elanna nodded, releasing a bundle of wire to touch Sashana'i's hand. "We've been planning this for a long time--over half the year. I knew we'd come to this, but..." She sighed, looking longingly out to the lot of junk. Junk intended to become more than what it was designated to be because of the Unar, the only fight she could have at that point. "I need this to work, Sashana'i. I need something positive in all this mess to work."

"You have provided regular power to housing which had borne little or none," Sashana'i corrected her, "reinforced buildings when many might have been left homeless by the time of rain. Water has been brought to soil once struggling to grow food. Children who may never have known have been taught great things by you and Toma; their minds hunger more for knowledge and change and others see and feel your influence. This so pleases, I sleep with such joy. This might not bear greatness in your view, yet to those whose lives are benefited by it, who have borne so little and suffered in their acceptance of our plight, you and Toma are blessed to them." Smiling gently, she added, "We are a people of simple wishes, Be'i. And yet we wish and are thankful to find truth in blessings."

"You can't tell me you don't want more than that, too, though. You were the one to tell me you wanted Desal's contrition to end."

Sashana'i laughed--a quiet, thoughtful laugh, almost not her own. "Tsid ka'e, I wish of the very stars for change," she promised. "Yet empowered by experience belongs to you in these tasks. On Uillar, I bore such power to procure and tend. --Terrible things I accepted, ka; yet my conscience is at peace, Be'i. Here, I am freed of that burden for my present inability to employ the knowledge I bear but in legacy. Here, but a young regent gains a trade with the hope she might influence others, as is the way. Here, I must and gladly follow."

B'Elanna grinned. "Give me some time. I'll change that."

"This already has been," Sashana'i confessed, more honestly than she meant to at first. Quickly, she continued, "Yet I would gladly bear your wisdom. My dream in life and my predecessors' passing desires are to see Desal returned to its nature--and not only that preceding the Unar's occupation, but preceding the sloth which degraded our society, poisoned our spirits and sent us into the contrition you now live, too."

"Tell me about it."

"One desire is shared between us, Be'i," Sashana'i said, more quietly, then. "I shall not be well in my spirit until I bear assurance that the balance of our nature has been returned to us--when Desal bears its

freedom and all which joins this once again." Her stare turned briefly away. "To see behind these eyes all that our people and our worlds once bore... To smell the daknal, all but touch the clean, soft cloth, hear the door chimes as I enter buildings fine and full with nature and joy, feel Desal's contentment and also their dreams...Ka, I have desired of the stars a great deal, to see these memories become truth once more. Then, I shall bear contentment as once my ancestors had.

"For this, my good sister, I bear full willingness to sacrifice my purity, my body's cleanliness, my history and all others I bear within me to guide this fate to my people." She shook her head to B'Elanna's repeated reaction. "Uillar is past, Be'i. Only on the possibilities in our fate resulting from our suffering there fill me now. Thus, what small regent's pride I carry is sacrificed to the learning of your trade in truth and shall share the hope you and Toma have inspired in more manners than yet is realized." Placing her small, dry hands atop B'Elanna's, she added, "My faith is borne in you."

Feeling the weight of that oath, B'Elanna accepted Sashana'i's warm touch, her supportive smile. "Thank you. That means more than you know."

"I should think I do. We are not too dissimilar spirits."

"Maybe." B'Elanna looked down to the ball of isolinear wires beneath her fingers and grinned despite her mood. "Even so, you'll still rip my hair out of my head whenever you get the chance."

Sashana'i laughed. "And tomorrow sunrise shall be my next opportunity should you bring yourself to the tsaborr in knots! You shall bear much beauty at our celebration of our blessed ancestors' moon, my sister, in your fine gown and leggings--and perhaps a fine cloth for your pretty hair?"

B'Elanna didn't answer her, but snickered to herself as she began pulling the wires apart.

Moving away, Sashana'i gave Aratra a satisfied nod before returning to her own sun's duties.

"You're not up?" Tom asked as he came up the ladder with a tray of tea and leftover bread. "I got us something to eat already and--"

"I'm not going," B'Elanna said curtly, her back to him and curling away from the light coming in the window.

Tom grimaced. He knew exactly what that tone and position meant. *So much for the tsaborr.* "Another headache?"

"What do you mean 'another?'" she growled. "I always have a headache, Paris. I can't see for shit, I'm tired all the time, and my brains feel like they'll explode all over these goddamn walls that are too bright. Who the hell was thinking when they plastered this damned place, anyway?"

He drew a long breath, set down the tray.

"Damn it, don't make any more noise! Just get the hell out of here!"

His eyes narrowed. "You're the one making the noise," he said quietly. "But I'll go. Sure you don't want me to--"

"Just leave. Okay? I don't want anyone up here."

Must be a killer, he thought correctly, seeing her trembling with the stress. She still got bad migraines from time to time, and aside from incapacitating her, they erased her patience--not that he blamed her that. But he knew she was refusing the sedatives, too. Though she hated them, they did help.

--And don't even think you're going to get Bakali to knock me out," she added, knowing his train of thought all too well. "You keep that woman and everyone else away from me."

Tom sighed. "Anything else, *ma'am*?"

"Yes," B'Elanna snapped, pulling the blanket over her head. "Close the goddamn window. You know I'm supposed to live like a ghouel the rest of my life and you open it every morning. --This is your fault!"

"I'll make sure to remind you of my forty lashes next time you're up to it," he replied, crawling up the rest of the way to close the shutters.

"Don't tempt me," she snarled then groaned as she curled up on the bunk. "Now get out."

Tom opened his mouth, but pressed it shut before he only made things worse and said something even more useless. He knew damn well she liked the window open in the morning and that was why he cracked it--but never enough to let the sun shine in her face. She knew that. She just didn't--couldn't--take those migraines with the strength of a Klingon, by her own admission. She did take them with the bad *mood* of one, however, which he was more than willing to avoid when she started on him.

"Fine. See you later."

He left even as he spoke, trying hard not to let her mood kill his own, though he knew it already had. For that matter, he'd left his tea up there. Deciding against making her more miserable by returning, he crossed the second floor to the staircase. He descended into the clinic's main room, where he found the public flask on the front table and took a couple long swigs from it. The water was warm and tasted a little of soil, but he didn't think much more about it.

Outside, he could hear the first songs for the Desalian new year beginning. Mostly children, probably all dressed in the best they had. *B'Elanna would've looked great in that gown*, he mused with a sigh, feeling the water roll into his empty stomach. He'd been anxious to try out that full robe Aratra had brought him the week before, walk with B'Elanna into the square, relax for a day with their friends...

Odd as the very thought of him wanting it so much was, he also knew there'd be another year for that. Hopefully, she'd be well that time.

As he wiped his mouth, Sashana'i came into the clinic, already prepared for the day. Parts of her thigh-length hair were braided meticulously in strings or with light yellow scarves that were pinned around the top of her head like a crown or draped around her heart-shaped face; her long, formal gown and full coat and robe were crisp with pressing. The handed down regalia looked good on her, Tom thought idly. She seemed as relaxed in that array as her day gowns. In more ways than one, it was good to know.

"Toma, zharab llar!" she said cheerily. "Have Bakali and Bala made their presence? They would be expected to pay for us soon. And where has Be'i taken herself?"

"I guess Bala and Bakali are still getting dressed," Tom told her, his mouth pressing down to answer the second question. "And B'Elanna is having one of those *days*."

Sashana'i's eyes widened. "Dovk'lla--this is now known. Then you shall sit with her."

"Oh no. I'm not going back up there." Tom gave his friend's first response a stare and a wave of his hand. "Sashana'i, I know you always mean well, but when B'Elanna wants to be left alone, I'm going to leave her be, let her deal with it. It's how we've always done it before."

"Then she shall be neglected," the lady replied. Gathering up her robe's sleeves, she took Tom's arm then took it more firmly when he turned out of her guiding. "Toma, this has pained our good Be'i so many moons. Shall we not assist her when her needs are greatest?"

"Have you ever thought that what she needs is solitude?" Tom countered. "Since I met her, I always knew her to need her space, especially when she's not feeling well."

"That was a time past," she responded. "She is changed--and so are you. You are her lover, part of her existence and spirit, as is she to you. Now bring yourself. I believe you bear enough closeness with her now to help her with my assistance. Ab, Toma. Bear trust, please."

Against his better judgment--and mainly because he knew Sashana'i would only become more insistent--he followed her back up. If B'Elanna wanted to yell at something, he could always say it was their friend's idea--which it was.

"I thought I said I wanted to be alone," B'Elanna snapped as soon as she heard the flaps creak open, which successfully ground another searing pain through both her temples. She groaned as a result, but more for the added tension of realizing Tom hadn't listened to her.

Sashana'i entered despite the growl that met her, steering around the tea tray on the floor with her long gown and robes and sitting upon the edge of the bed. "Be'i," she whispered.

"You! Shit, did he send you up here!?"

Sashana'i removed the blanket from the other woman's head. "Nivni ye'i gye. I have brought him back to you."

B'Elanna glared up to the blur above her. "Listen, I'm not exactly in the mood for socializing or being comforted and I damn well don't need anyone right now."

Sashana'i sighed as B'Elanna's dark-circled eyes turned away with the rest of her and she yanked the blanket back up. "Shall you always wish for pain," she whispered soothingly, "for the lack of better for you to procure by your own hand? Permit me to assist you."

"I am *not* getting sedated," B'Elanna growled.

"I would not suggest this." Licking her lip, she tried again. "Be'i, in the memories given to me, I bear knowledge of a way you may help yourself, with Toma's assistance. I must officiate its beginning and it is a method without medicine. Or shall you choose this suffering instead? Lose your day and night yet again? Be'i, zhras ye'e."

B'Elanna seethed in a breath, formulating her own second try, but feeling Sashana'i's gentle hands around her shoulders, a kiss on the back of her head, she froze. "What the hell do you have up your sleeve this time?"

"Zherr lya'i, Be'i," she whispered soothingly, "it does bring us pain as well to know you suffer. --Toma,

ab. Feel no disdain for her hurtful words. She speaks in torment."

As she felt herself sitting up--the last damn thing she wanted to do--she turned her glare out to Tom, who didn't look happy to be "assisting." She had to give him that. He did respect her enough to listen to her...most of the time. As for Sashana'i, B'Elanna figured she wouldn't listen. But of course, the sooner she just let her "sibling" do what she wanted, the sooner she'd go away and let Tom go, too.

Sashana'i moved aside, holding B'Elanna upright. "Toma, you shall sit behind her." After considering it one last time, he did, and with her gesture, he moved his farther leg around, too, straddling her from behind. Sashana'i then took his hands and directed them to B'Elanna's temples. "Within your minds, create in your memory, a lake."

B'Elanna's head was bent forward, ice cold blood shooting even more easily into her skull much as she cringed against it, and more so when she felt herself bending more forward still. "A *what?*" she ground through clenched teeth.

The other woman's eyes closed as she felt with Tom's fingers beyond B'Elanna's sore, swollen eyes. "A crystal lake...ice in blues and teals, reaching as far as the eye's path..." she said softly. "Cool, clear water, peaceful, blue..."

"This isn't doing any--"

"Oarr," Sashana'i commanded then drew another breath. "You are joined but in body, so it is required you think in unison. I should hope you bear memory of water lakes. This has been recalled, a crystal lake of deep blue...shining as it ripples in a breeze, which may not be felt by the body, though its air lifts you..." Her voice became even softer as she gave Tom a small nod. "Close your eyes, Toma, and feel most that place you touch her, feel the clear water in your sight. See it moving, dancing with the breeze. Be'i, find it in your memory, the cool, deep water, like blue ice..."

She continued to describe the water in a steady whisper as she probed B'Elanna's alien nerves, calling up her own memories of home, many years past. Then, she found it, their memory and the nerve, pressing Tom's fingertips at the spot a moment later as she combined it all, blending their images into an expanse of blue and a faraway rise of fair orange, misty on the horizon...

"See the lake, floating, smooth, casting itself onto the horizon, and you are moving over it, gliding, drifting. Its surface lies just below you; you fly without noise...without fear...without pain...over the water...."

B'Elanna wanted to move but suddenly realized she couldn't, not even to open her eyes--and then she didn't want to. Speech was gone as well, but she didn't wish for that, either. She found herself indeed over that water, 'hearing' Sashana'i's voice showing them, escorting them into that other realm. It was a strange daze, weightless, like a dream, though she knew she was awake; perfectly conscious and yet not thinking.

She felt Tom behind her, warm and strong, his own presence half-entwined with hers. His fingers, soft, molding without pressure to her skin, were absorbing the pain, pulling it out and away from her. She could feel the pressure lifting, lightening in waves, left behind in their wake....

She then felt Sashana'i leave them. Yet they were still there...gliding together over the water.

Tom was completely still as he curled around B'Elanna's bent over body, while also, within himself,

flying over the smooth lake as he held her near, the ripples passing under them...passing quickly with the pain that streamed through his fingers then away from them both.

So strange, especially when he felt Sashana'i go... They became even lighter. He felt B'Elanna's body practically lifting him.

More, he felt B'Elanna's wonder and her clearing mind, her love and thankfulness, and.... No, he somehow knew he wasn't close enough to feel the rest of what was within her, only knew it was there: memories, emotions, all the pieces of her being.

She could sense his curiosity, his concern and his love for her, his wanting to be there. But she couldn't get beyond that, though she wanted to, being curious herself. So many little mysteries inside of that hidden place... But the lake was so clear, and their feeling...their passing over it all...it was...liberating...

Aratra glanced up as Sashana'i came out of the clinic doors, adjusting her scarves and bowing deeply to Bala and Bakali before moving her arm onto her bondmate's. "Your forgiveness, my good elders. I was taken away a moment in need."

"Your presence blesses us now," Bala smiled. "Have Be'i and Toma not dressed yet?"

"As Be'i recovers from her usual duress, they celebrate our holiday differently--in lying together, my tola," Sashana'i answered, choosing not to elaborate how for the time being.

Bakali was pleased despite the lack of reason. Her unwilling patient was usually more prone to demand seclusion during those times, a fact that had worried the elder. "We shall allow them their convalescence, then."

Following the elders into the festivities, where the music was being prepared and the foods were being cut, Aratra leaned down to his bondmate. "What have you devised this sun, my good lady?" She explained quietly to him and he stared at her. "They bear no preparation for the bonding. This has not been their intention."

"No affect shall touch them, but cure her pain with his assistance." Sashana'i looked up to him. "Bear no doubt, my spirit. They have not seen beyond their required task, which was healing. It appeared successful as I left them. There shall not be any permanent consequence."

Aratra smirked. "Ka, my spirit. You have always spoken the voice of *personal* experience," he teased then spotted Miztri and Dalra approaching them.

"Our own needs as well are spoken for," she added just before their friends could hear her. "Left to nature, they shall continue to grow in Cezia's dear sun and find their being among us all."

"Sashana'i ka," Aratra whispered, his secret smile still upon his lips as he touched his temple and bowed to their elder friends.

Hours later--he could only tell by the way the light was hitting the shutters--Tom awoke entwined in B'Elanna's limbs. They had remained on their sides after they had drifted down from that precarious position of earlier, when Sashana'i had...

*What *did* she do to us?* he wondered, feeling B'Elanna breathing normally within his arms.

"I might have known she'd sedate me somehow," she said quietly, though not with the hostility of earlier.

"I'm sorry," Tom said. "I had no idea what she was doing."

"I know," B'Elanna breathed, still a bit in awe as she remembered what happened. She didn't move a muscle, almost afraid to for the thought that the pain might return. At the same time, she could still feel him in her, around her and holding her all at the same time. She was almost dizzy with the otherwise pleasant...awareness. "She...joined us somehow, didn't she?"

"She may not be a scholar, but she does have some telepathy," Tom said. "I wouldn't be surprised. Did it work? Are you...No, you are better, aren't you? I felt it going away, when we were in that...trance."

She nodded slightly. "I do feel better. Thanks." Taking another breath, she tempted fate and opened her eyes. To her great relief, pain didn't greet her; her eyes adjusted to the room's dim glow with relative speed. Suddenly, the world--the real world--came back to her, the dizziness faded, and she then felt only his physical presence, curled up beside her.

Then she remembered more.

"Tom..." She sighed. "I'm sorry for before. I blamed you. It was...stupid."

"I understand, B'Elanna," he said, hugging her. "It's hard at the time to deal with, but I always know you're really hurting. I hate it."

"I know," she said.

Outside, she heard an old familiar song, a lilting waltz with Eastern overtones played with a melodic percussion and singing translating into something vaguely passionate... Suoti and Jabra's bonding ceremony, she recalled and grinned mirthlessly at the memory of her and Tom's witnessing it. Beat up, angry as hell and still holding onto the string of hope that Voyager would come for them. Frustrated and scared.

"Maybe I've been thinking too much about that power source," she said quietly, feeling for Tom's hand and taking it. "Maybe I have been doing this to myself."

"You get them no matter what you're thinking," Tom said. "It's not your fault."

"I shouldn't take it out on you."

"True. But I try not to take it personally. In any case, it's no one's fault."

"We need a solution, though. If I could just get past this damn power problem, then maybe I wouldn't have to hate the sedation Bakali's forced to use. She would be able to replicate better, among everything else we could make."

He'd thought of that before. Then again, they'd both thought of quite a few things--too much, he sometimes believed. They had both agreed under no circumstances would they sell themselves for term labor for what they needed, but that was before they had rebuilt or redesigned several replicators, two communication assemblies, several consoles and power generator arrays, some medical tricorders Bakali had let them have, a selection of hand-held scanning and maintenance equipment. They had almost everything they'd originally planned to rebuild upon Bala's request--and no power to run any of it.

Not to mention the little surprise for her he'd been working on when B'Elanna was out with the other women, which likewise wouldn't get done without the components he knew he needed.

That time, *he* was getting the headache. Then, it hit him...

"What about the black market?" he asked, caressing her rubric-stained hand with his fingers as his mind began to turn with his idea. By the time she spoke again, he'd already refitted half of Azlre.

"What about it?" she replied with a sigh. "We have nothing that we can trade off to them. They don't take workers; they take capital. Even so, Bakali can't even trade her beads with them. You know that."

Tom smiled crookedly, bent to kiss her neck. "But we might have something, with their help. The Koba likes to trade for practical items, too, right?"

"Oh?" She couldn't help but smile, too, if only at that jaunty tone of his. "You are just determined to get in some trouble sooner or later aren't you? Trying to make an ally of that Koba marketer? Okay, then, tell me. I'm in on it too, you know."

"You sure?" Tom asked teasingly, nuzzling her neck again. "I would not wish to corrupt your innocent kini'isitsa, after all, mes va'i."

"I was a Maquis for a year and I am your mesvli now," she snickered, feeling better just to hear him alive with an idea. "I think I'm pretty broken in, mes va'a. Tell me--and then let's see about that tea over there. Maybe get dressed, go out and see what all that singing is about?"

Tom pulled himself to sit, watched her eyes follow his as she rolled onto her back. "Already? Are you sure?"

She smiled, nodded. "I feel pretty good, actually." Her hand reached down and stroked his thigh. "But first, tell me what is in that wicked brain of yours before I force it out of you."

His grin grew properly seductive. "My pleasure, Chief."

When they stepped down from the front of the clinic step, just after sunset, not a few people stopped to bow graciously to the couple that approached, but also to gaze upon them.

Her embroidered blue gown, old, oft mended but elegant, was simply accented by the sheer gold cloth she'd finally let Tom tie around her curly brown hair. It flowed around her head, draped over one of her shoulders and drifted to the ground. Revealed beneath the gown's calf-length hem was a pair of sheer yellowish leggings, which partially covered a pair of dark wrap boots. They didn't match and were a little too big on her, but they'd wrapped them tightly enough that she wouldn't trip and thought nothing about the rest.

On her arm was her chosen, draped in a russet robe, which partially covered his long, gold tunic, sash belt and dark pajama trousers. Below that, his simple shoe wraps were a bit too *snug*. He'd even let B'Elanna convince him two was company by making him wear the traditional men's headdress, which Aratra had wrapped for him the evening before. It was a series of scarves turned and wrapped above the brow then braided down the back left side to form a squareish hat, the tail ends of the cloth and bead

ties hanging long over his shoulder. She liked it. He felt silly. They left it at that.

Not bad for a couple of dead people's clothes, B'Elanna couldn't help but think as she caught the many stares turning their way. She didn't even think to be self-conscious at their appreciative looks. She had already admitted to Tom that it was nice to celebrate something, look nice for change instead of dusty and tired. He had agreed, his eyes never leaving her complimented frame.

Gladly, they embraced their friends from Uillar, then the respected elders who had cared for them, taken them into their home, then their neighbors and their apprentices and their parents, others from Uillar and Azlre whom they'd come to know. They took some sweetened water and tasted some of the pretty breads made for that night. They even let Aratra and Sashana'i take them aside and speed them though the finer points of the 'dancing' that would come later. After a couple minutes of that, they decided they could wing it if that all failed.

Meanwhile, the music poured through the square, and the sounds, ancient and pure, began to emanate from each celebrant's throat:

"Ivl'err dys keyed, mas cost on ha'itsa
So'ell kar tull la, brrai siid bralla
Tsa'ik ye'o yavnnya, zhall ye'o mirr la'o
La'aivye, zhall ya'o..."

Even the alien couple could understand some of it, having become a little familiar with the advanced dialect. Nevertheless, Aratra happily translated it into the children's tongue for them, "Peace of the world meets the sky at ascension, as our lives reach out to the heavens, sharing the gifts which only our spirits may grasp for a time, bear fruit of our promise and grow old in the sun. This song, given life, shall bear it with gratitude among us all."

Hearing it a few times, encouraged by their friends, Tom quietly joined in, less willingly joined by B'Elanna, who rolled her eyes when Tom smiled at her efforts. Yet they did manage, and then gravitated with the others to hear their elders, who had climbed onto the dais, dignified yet smiling, hand in hand. When the song finished, the proud elders bowed deeply to all their "children."

When all had come around them, they solemnly blessed the passed year and prayed for the new one. They prayed for their peoples' togetherness, the maintenance of their traditions, their continued purity and community. They blessed the additions made at Azlre and the hope for their future to be one of health and peace.

"We, one in this life, shall move and grow as the sun from and to each horizon. Here, in our ascendance, in our truest beings, let us recall our blessings. Let us be thankful to our ancestors for bringing us to what joys we bear and pray for our perseverance and humility through our lives' challenges. Let us take our lessons of the past unto our future, and let us live today. Zha hevrra'o mi al!"

With grin and a shrug, and utilizing their birth people's traditions, Tom and B'Elanna kissed as the response echoed back happily throughout the square. The singing rose again, accentuated by claps and laughter and lit by more wood on the fires. They did not notice until the song had reached the third chorus that their friends had come to welcome them personally into the seedling moon.

The hope of finding a certain Koba black marketer the next day was gladly forgotten...for the while.

Tom had dressed in the pre-dawn light, into his usual beige kneeshirt and pajama trousers, his sandals and the dusty green robe that really could stand for a washing. He barely bothered with his hair but to run his fingers cursorily through the short tufts as he pocketed a slip of paper.

Leaning over the bed, he kissed B'Elanna, half awake and watching him. "Be back soon."

"Be careful," she told him. "And take your commbadge, just in case."

"The RF transmitter doesn't work anymore, B'Elanna."

"I know. I took it out when I put the new crystal in." Her stare was sober. "Just indulge me, okay? You might not be able to understand him. Take it with you."

"Be'i ka," he grinned. "The tea is right there when you're ready for it." Kissing her once more, he straightened, pocketed his communicator and wrapped up his cloak on an arm so to go down the ladder. "Should I meet you at the lot later?"

"See you then." Turning onto her side, still looking at the place where he'd disappeared, B'Elanna rubbed at her temples, her eyes naturally closing as she prayed it would work.

Tom had quietly descended the ladder, was about to grab a piece of stale bread to stave himself off for the time being, when he turned and saw Bala slipping through his bedroom doors as well.

As usual, the old man greeted him with a kind smile and greeting of morning. "Where do you take yourself to be at this sun's birth, Toma?"

Tom straightened his robe, adjusted the shoulders. "Have some errands to do. Nothing much."

Noting Tom's fumbling, Bala moved closer to the youth. "Which errands, good man?" he queried. "Why does Be'i remain in your bed during this work?"

Tom rolled his eyes. "Bala, can't I go out in the morning without--"

The elder held a hand to Tom's evasion, feeling all too well the guilt preceding the act itself. "Confess your plans, Child. Your actions are ever to reflect on this house. No crime is planned, I should think, and yet my awareness would be undermined. Speak truth and it shall be heard fairly."

Tom sighed a hard breath, not liking being treated, indeed, like a child, but also knowing the elder would have to know eventually if it worked. "I am going to talk to the Koba marketer, try to get something of a trade going with him, maybe...do some repair work for him in trade for plasma and some ferranide battery cells...maybe more."

"For a mutual benefit, you shall trade with him, hmm?" Bala asked.

"You could say that."

The young man's worldly tone silenced Bala for the moment. He was not ignorant of the children's ultimate goals--which were not alien to any Desalian's. Not one of his people truly wished the Unar to have dominion over Desal and the other races in Irlae. They all wished for peace, even while they suffered with purpose. Bala agreed that someday the Unar should be overcome. In the ultimate balance

of nature, it should be meant.

There were some who wished to speed that balance. Though such voices thrived only in the shadows, Bala was well aware that Be'i and Toma were not the only ones among Desal who desired Unar to be returned to their natural place as soon as could be done. It was only that Be'i and Toma *could* affect a change, with their fresh educations in technology and experience with resistance--this aside from their passion for just action and loyalty to Desal, which they had begun to call their own.

He and Bakali spoke nothing of their feelings on the matter for good reason. Affliction had taught them great reserve, loss had taught them how to sacrifice their desires without complaint, but in truth the elders favored a quicker completion of their contrition, had not changed their view on that particular matter since being exiled to Azlre in their twenties; they desired greatly to see Desal's restoration before their passings. Yet their charges' radical methods...could perhaps be supervised?

"All B'Elanna and I really want is to start powering up these systems," Tom promised. "We're not looking for trouble or trying to undermine you. I mean that, Bala. I would never break my word to you or Bakali."

"This is known, Child," the elder nodded, and then decided. "Allow me to dress, Toma. I shall accompany you. I bear acquaintance with Padan. He may not be trusted, yet he shall deal equitably should benefit be apparent in the trade."

Tom bit his lip. "Well, okay. But let me deal with him when it comes to the trade itself. B'Elanna and I sort of have this planned--and I dealt with people like him before I came here."

Bala smiled. "This is not a surprise, Toma," he said. "And yet now, such dealings need not be committed to alone. We are of the same house, a Desalian house. We shall work together, as is proper. Take yourself to the closet and bring a six-portion of kiksja tea to share with our host. I shall inform Bakali of our duty."

Padan was by birth and careful presentation Koba. His long, burgundy hair was pulled back from a low hairline and neatly braided down his back. He wore but a long, brown robe laced to his slim neck. His narrow feet were dressed with soft slippers. His ruddy face, full lips, dark, oval eyes and thick eyelashes could have been considered feminine were it not for the well-tended goatee that seemed to stop the flow of his deeply set cheek ridges.

Each of his moves were carefully concerted: He met Bala's respectful bow with a flourish and invited the old man to his grate hearth with a slow swoop of his long hand when Bala offered to make tea. This left the marketer to greet and examine young Toma, who by word alone was little secret in Azlre.

To finally see him, Padan quickly noted that the man's watery, squint-lined eyes and tan, dry skin were not the only aspects apparently steeled by his imprisonment at Uillar. The deep, hook-shaped scar along his cheekbone--a trademark Unar glove swipe--also leant a certain severity to his otherwise youthful facade. Entering the flat, his gait alone showed he was equal to an Antral in posture. That young man also bowed, not as deeply as the elder, but with a quiet simplicity that could belong to none but a Desalian were it not for his lack of kraja markings. The trader understood all the curiosity and talk with but his first look.

"Yes," Padan said, his smile more a purse of his mouth, "indeed, it is for your desire Bala is here. Or Bala has offered to come, so you would not stand alone to ask whatever it is you wish."

Tom's lips crooked to the side. "I would think being in your business makes you rather perceptive," he said, choosing basic Desalian for their conversation. All but fluent in that simpler dialect, he and B'Elanna had come to speak their adopted language often in public and always with their students, so to be clear with them. Similarly, he wanted the Koba man to understand him perfectly.

"Experience, Toma of Allanois. --Yes, I know you are of a noble's house, while not born to Desal. Please, sit."

Tom did, taking a stool at the plain stone table and glancing to Bala, who kept himself busy--though attentive, Tom could tell. He looked at Padan again. "Should you be so aware of my business, then you should know my purpose for coming here."

"You seek plasma," Padan said, not a guess.

"Plasma and ferranide cells, or the ferranide to make them ourselves."

"You and your mate--a small lady, yet possessed of much strength and worth, as is told around the market. Be'i, is it?"

Nice, Tom thought, *feeling me out*. "Yes."

"You and your own should be commended for surviving Uillar--and the Commander Hychar. The pride of your birth must have been an impediment to you among Unar."

"The adaptability of our birth assisted us, however," Tom returned.

Padan leaned back in his chair, saying nothing at first. The water had brewed and the old man Bala prepared their tea, dipping the long leaves expertly in the steaming water, stirring them back and forth until the perfect steep was attained. Finished with that, Bala set the cups on a tray and served the other men. Then he sat, giving Padan a small smile.

"It would be cool enough to drink, friend," he said.

Padan gladly did so, sipping at the edge of the cup. He hummed at the taste. "Your tea has always been a welcome refreshment, Bala."

"This pleases," Bala replied.

Tom forced himself not to tap his foot, but to sip his tea with his most casual mask in place. Idly, he thought perhaps he'd gotten rusty at the con game after dealing so long with Desalian kindness. He'd gotten used to expressing himself, knowing that he could. In another moment, he wondered if B'Elanna was up yet, if she and Bakali were taking breakfast with Cali and Sashana'i that day. Aratra was probably serving them, hearing B'Elanna tell them what was happening that day. Sashana'i and Aratra would enjoy the news...

"Plasma and ferranide are precious commodities," Padan finally stated between sips.

Tom pressed down a smirk. "Yes, they are."

"You bear little to give."

"We would bear more to trade should you assist us," Tom said.

Padan's brow twitched to the side. "Hmm."

Tom leaned back in his seat, mirroring Padan's posture. "What rather shall you gain with functioning replicators, designed not but for food or medicine?"

Padan thought about that for a full minute. Interestingly, the other man said nothing, flicked his brow carelessly then sniffed the tea, blew on it. Then, Padan decided to explore the possibility the young man had offered. "I might find interest in such equipment--as would a number of my acquaintances."

"Communications, sensors..." Tom took another sip.

"Shielding?"

"Deflection devices could find repair, among other matters aboard ships."

Padan smiled at this. "I would think you would like to see the effect of such repairs as well?"

"The Unar have made no friend of us," Tom told him honestly. "For respect of Bala and Bakali, we tend the necessary within Azlre at present--and shall continue to. Yet to see some effect of our dealings would be pleasing."

Bala peered up at that point. "Toma, I would bid you caution."

Tom grinned. "We say nothing but that it would be pleasing to see some ships not Unar able to function well."

"You would wish me to believe such," Bala said wisely then sighed and gestured for Tom to continue. It was the child's dealing, after all, and he had only wished to be a monitor. He did trust the youth, who had not yet disobeyed him or Bakali.

Tom set down his cup. "My mate and I wish to trade with you. We possess technical ability and more than adequate experience to perform tasks wished by you. You possess the ability to procure the power required by us to make our technology functional. The advantage is likewise yours, and you shall bear much gain should you allow us to assist each other."

Padan was almost amused--and knew better than to be truly. The adopted Allanois had the inflection and the politeness of a native Cezian and he was deferent to his elder. Toma had stood back properly, even, when they entered, and he let Bala speak with great patience. Yet the man was indeed educated--according to what he had heard about the west Jihnfrad lot. This would make the fair man's assertion not a boast.

Toma and his mate were also survivors of Uillar, had survived Hychar's particular scorn and taunting, so had been reported by their fellow Uillar refugees. They had strength and character--and Padan saw a healthy despise of Unar flickering in the young man's eyes with but the mention. No adoption of Desalian standards would rationalize inaction, it seemed.

Indeed, Padan liked that.

"I would see what you have built," the Koba said.

"There would be little use in seeing a replicator which does not function."

"The power you require might be brought."

Tom reached into his pocket and pulled out a slip of paper. "These materials are required."

Padan looked at the paper handed to him, the extremely neat Desal characters. "For each replicator I receive, two would be powered by you." He turned a look to Tom. "This is not an even trade."

"It should be more pleasing when you consider what you may procure with the industrial model we could build for you. The two for Azlre are food and medicine replicators, simple compounds in comparison."

"With what would mine be programmed?"

"Bring your requirements to us," Tom said simply.

"You bear this much ability?" Padan said skeptically.

"Yes." There was no doubt in Tom's reply.

Padan looked at Bala, who still did not interfere. He would regulate that extension of his household only where necessary. This thought made Padan turn his examination. To Tom, he said, "You should be more satisfied in the Antral resistance."

Tom stuffed his initial reaction, tried hard not to look at Bala, who he knew had straightened at the suggestion. "Our debts reside here, as do our friends and family, and as Desal is claimed as home. Perhaps when Cezia is cared for, my lady and I would consider such a course. Yet that is another time."

"I understand," Padan said quietly, pleasantly. It was not a lie. He would not have made his own living among those people were gain his only concern. He had come to appreciate the Desalians, too. But like all his people--like most people in Irlae--he had a higher objective.

Toma of the Allanois house did too--and wanted to act on it. Even Bala had not fought the word of resistance, seemed only slightly uncomfortable. This was interesting to the Koba. Certainly, the elders had always been liberal, had been among the exiled well-born of Desalia-Four and publicly blessed the fate that had made Unar leave Cezia to its own care several years ago, but there was a time when even they balked at the mention of resisting their people's contrition.

Perhaps the adopted ones had spread their seeds of advancement into the minds of the pacifists somehow. Perhaps the Allanois house itself, those well-regarded young regents and those in their circle, were more progressive than he and his associates had known. This had potential.

"I shall bring myself to your place of building, friend, meet your mate. There, we shall speak."

"We bear students until three quarters past mid-sun," Tom said. "Yet we remain until a quarter before sunset."

Padan bowed his head, smiling thinly; then he sipped his tea again. The young man, he knew, must have had much pride, long ago. He had nicely controlled the conversation, the entire deal, offered

something much of the underground had been waiting for years to acquire.

The tea was certainly delicious that day. Padan savored it.

Noticing Tom's subtle signs of relief, Bala thought back on the possible consequences of helping the Koba. He knew well that if they gained strength, the Koba would someday find a way to strike back at the Unar. They were not a very intelligent or advanced race before the occupation; they bore no binding responsibility to their spirits as Desal did. More, they had once been somewhat xenophobic until the Unar implanted themselves on their world and sold many of their women to servitude for their prettiness. Dark Koba women were much sought after, like rare gems.

Bala also knew that Padan's wife was a dark Koba woman.

He did not know if relating these things to Toma before the meeting had been wise or not, though the young man had used the knowledge well.

He shuddered slightly within his robes. He knew he had assured Tom he would not interfere, would let him make his deal with Padan. With it done and accepted, he could see what peace that brought to the young man. It had brought Tom hope on his terms. There was good and bad in that, Bala knew.

For the time being, however, he decided to say nothing. Tom would have come alone, after all. The deal would have been made one way or another, with or without the guidance of an elder. Yet as it had happened, it was apparently fated. What was meant in result, of course, was yet to be seen.

In a fleeting rush of desire as youthful and arrogant as his charges', Bala hoped dearly that it would be what he likewise wished.

"My friend Toma!"

Tom gave B'Elanna a look, rolled his eyes with a shrug when she peered out from her organized mess. "At least he brought the plasma," he said.

Through the crooked rows of equipment, the Koba man strutted and hopped, his clothes catching the air as he lifted two handfuls of glowing canisters. His smile was generous, though his eyes found every bolt and bracket in the lot as he passed through.

"Good thing I didn't go," B'Elanna said, letting Tom help her out of the nest within the piles. "I would have screwed the whole thing up."

Tom chuckled.

"This must be Be'i," Padan said, bowing graciously.

B'Elanna gave him a nod. "A pleasant sun."

Her plain Desalian greeting met him unaffected. He looked at Tom. "A beautiful lady of good business sense--it is little wonder you mated with her."

"There would be more to our joining, of course," Tom said, likewise in their adopted tongue. "Should you like to see our trade?"

"I have arranged for the ferranide and sarium. I have brought you two dishes of plasma particles, in good faith."

"Might I take them?" B'Elanna asked and gave him a more polite nod when he handed one of the canisters to her. "You shall excuse me."

Tom grinned as she went back to one of the infuser systems. "Would you take a tour?"

"I would watch your lady work. Yet I would walk a time should you insist."

"Permit her a minute to prepare the raw stock and consider the power transfer," Tom suggested. "It is her preference to think alone."

Padan nodded, peering back to the young woman, buried under her hooded cloak and carefully removing a panel on one of their pieces with small, dust stained hands. "She bears caution with me. I displease her, though we have only met this sun."

"She bears caution with all new persons. It is not unkindness."

Padan looked around while Tom walked him around the rows. He was surprised to find himself so impressed. They had taken a good deal of equipment and built some rather efficient looking devices. What could be done with such pieces and more... "The storms shall bring themselves soon, Toma. You might wish to shelter this."

"It is planned."

"I could find a place for your items in the Trisjorr District."

Toma shook his head. "Trisjorr lies across the city. B'Elanna--Be'i--carries reminders of her injuries, as do I. We would prefer it remain in this neighborhood. A shelter here is planned; it shall be built in that area."

Padan looked where Tom pointed, the skeleton of an otherwise wrecked two-story building, probably once a markethouse. "Your work should begin soon. The rain would slow your work, if not harm it."

"This is known. We shall settle it."

They came around to where B'Elanna was buried in her immediate task, making the necessary modifications to the port injector column so she could directly transfer the plasma. Jerking her head towards Tom, she nodded as he took the canister for her.

"It'll take a minute," she told him, glancing at Padan as she moved around to another panel. "It would have been preferred," she said in Desalian, "were a ferranide cell brought. I would use our laridium composite for the present."

"As a temporary measure, it would not be harmful," Padan said.

"A man ignorant of true engineering matters would speak as such," B'Elanna replied.

Padan crushed his grin at her arrogance--another valuable commodity--wondering what they were powering in the first place. The configuration was foreign to him. Still, he did not ask. Whatever it was, Padan knew, it was likely much better than anything his own people had, and with help, it would be superior to any of the undergrounds' technology. They would indeed be useful.

Unfortunately, they were also under the debt of Bala and Bakali--which was perfectly understandable. They were well worthy of the couple's deference and respect. Padan would truthfully admit he much respected all of Desal--aside from their stubborn pacifism, which had helped the entire region, not just their own, remain in the trap the Unar had slapped shut too long ago. Desalia had been a leading power, by far the most advanced and enlightened race, in the days before their incredible defeat. Without their assistance, their fine, latent learning abilities and superior numbers, Padan knew, there would be little hope.

They were kind and very patient, which was certainly no crime. But they all needed more than kindness there....

Without warning, the device being powered whirred to life, snapping Padan from his thoughts. His new contractors were smiling, too, in relief to see their creation working. But instead of celebrating immediately, they instantly began to check its systems, making certain everything was running correctly.

After several minutes, B'Elanna's smile turned to the smarmy man who had brought her the refined plasma she'd so desired. Though her instincts leaned against him, his supply made the machine work. It was enough for her.

"Would you care to view the result?" she asked and gestured to the other side of the unit.

"Yes, thank you, Be'i," Padan said and moved around the device.

"Additional programming is required," Tom told him, "yet some elder files have been preserved."

B'Elanna drew up her robe and knelt before the front panel to tap in a few commands. "This unit may be considered our initial payment," she told him and placed her hand on the keypad. "Bring us the specified parts, raw material and ferranide to us and the remainder shall be programmed. Then we shall begin work on the larger model."

It was a replicator, after all, Padan saw, as an open space in the front of the unit (an odd place for it, he thought) lit and materialized another piece of machinery--a relay chip, ready for input.

Looking at them in turns, he smiled and handed them the other and larger plasma container. "This trade is well served, my friends. Well served, indeed. Again I mourn you may not work more completely with our movement."

B'Elanna's eyes returned to the replicator to check something else upon it, solid and sure. "We shall not break our honor."

"For the present," Tom added, "we would do this much for those we claim as our own."

Padan grinned and bowed. "Yes, Be'i, Toma, you are honorable members of a most respected house and belong to a regent's house as well. I would respect your duty and love for them. Another time then, perhaps? For the present, shall we care for Azlre?"

B'Elanna's glassy stare found him. "We shall," she said then turned back to the more pleasant business

there.

"We'll still need the ferranide cells and the sarium bromide to make all of it work. But for now, we have enough plasma to power the reclamator."

Bala served the tray around the floorcloth. "How many replicators shall be procured for Padan before our needs are met?"

Tom and B'Elanna exchanged a shrug. "We aren't certain--yet," Tom told him.

"Once we see how pure the ferranide is," B'Elanna said, leaning forward to choose a piece of bread, "we will try to get what else he has. But it won't be everything. We went to Triachra at the trading bins, and he told us that no matter how much Padan seems to look like he has everything, that is not always the case. The other vendors say about the same."

"He has his own people to work through, as you know," Tom joined.

"And even then, it won't be as if we can replicate anything we want. Some of the chemical compounds we need can only be mined or collected in space. But it will help supply the things most needed--clothes, antibiotics and water--and run some of the systems we've fixed..." she pointedly grinned at Dalra, "including the waste units Dalra has been so anxious to try out."

Dalra took it in good humor. "Be'i, tsid ka'e. This is labor much required and befits you well. We shall bear joy for every child who eats and feels warmth for this blessing."

"They will get everything first, of course," Tom said.

"This is much agreed upon," said Miztri as she handed Dalra his portion, peered to a brightened Sashana'i, then to B'Elanna. "Yet I would not believe you should sell your spirits to this blessing, good Be'i."

"We won't," B'Elanna assured her. She leaned back into her pillows as she folded her bread around a morsel of cheese. "We know Padan should not be trusted."

Tom nodded. "He's audacious and clever. B'Elanna and I have both known the type."

Aratra chuckled at that. "In consideration of how you procured the arrangement, it would be known by Padan that you *were* once of such a breed."

Tom looked at the tray to decide on a starter. "You could say that."

B'Elanna detected instantly his tone. "Sashana'i," she said as casually as she could, "I do want to show you those new transfer procedures and get you all used to handling this kind of power. Miztri and Dalra remember a little of it, but I'd like us all to be understood on it. We cannot lose a gy'irapol of it because of poor handling."

Sashana'i nodded, also noticing how Tom was intent on the selections, then shooting a sharper glance at Aratra for his slip before addressing B'Elanna. "I shall wish to know, Be'i. There is much anxiousness in

us all to see the product of this grace. Yet do you see now your blessing upon us?"

She smiled. "You said we would find a solution. You were right."

"Yet I bid you bear caution, Children," Bakali warned. "Padan bears fairness in dealing, yet never acts without selfish purpose."

Tom nodded. "As I said, Bakali, we know the type. We'll be careful." His expression was still darkened, though he did smile when he felt B'Elanna's small hand touch his thigh supportively. Letting his breath go, finally relaxing, he reached out to a bread slice and continued his meal.

The hazy, white moonlight threw long shadows on the ground and softened the breeze that caught the light robes of the two who walked along the dirty street. A nightly walk, a habit they'd formed, their pace was slow and casual. For some months then, their wanderings had taken them to a common place, however.

In that light, the chipped mortar between the stones in the buildings were thrown into milky relief. The ruined corners, the deep cracks in the flagstone pavement, then the dust swept walls in the alley they treaded through, all seemed to have new lives in the night, though not a pebble of it was unfamiliar to them by then.

At the lot, they stopped for a moment, smiling to the place where a few lights were still active, blinking quietly, blue and violet. The sight brought quick breaths and slower, silent sighs. Their projects. They quietly moved through the rubble and pieces, glancing down at their trainees' unfinished assignments. Some of the pieces were missing. The teenagers liked to work on the smaller units at home.

Passing that, they found their few working units. Their smiles grew again--and seeing that in each other, they laughed.

"It is about time, huh?" Tom said, taking her into his arms, holding her close.

"Yes, it is," she grinned. "And by the way, you did it again."

"What?"

"Dropped your contraction."

Tom rolled his eyes, laughed at himself. Surrounded by nothing but Desalian, speaking it more often, too, they knew they were bound to pick up what their translators output. "Well, *it's* the truth. It finally seems to be working--all this time we've spent."

B'Elanna rested her head on his chest, still in his embrace, looking out to their creations, their first practical successes there. "It feels good," she said softly.

"Yeah. It does." Tipping her head up, he stared down to her deep, dark eyes, which shone with satisfaction. He felt it too, he knew, as he bent to kiss her, simply, quietly, there in the back of their lot.

The breeze picked up, dallying with their robes, but neither reacted but to deepen their kiss and press to each other more closely. Her hands moved of their own volition under his robes for warmth, but her lips didn't miss a beat. They countered his, took in his taste willingly, and she moaned softly as he approached again, and his touches found more precise direction.

"I think," he whispered between kisses, "we might go inside now."

She nodded, catching her breath. "I think so too," she responded, meeting his gaze. "We have walked enough."

"We have," he agreed, turning them around again as he pulled her warm against him. "And you dropped your contraction."

With a laugh and a gentle spank, she walked within his arm as they swerved back through the rows.

Just in time, it seemed, the Azlreian rains arrived.

The group of various technicians, both experienced and well into their training, were nearly finished hanging the shelves on which their nicely covered supplies were to sit. But as they moved to heft another plank up to the brackets, a crash of thunder rumbled the entire frame of the storage building. Though it did not so much as flicker their lighting, it made every head turn to the door, where the droplets could be seen starting, and then increasing.

Hot and sweaty with their work, the first pattering of the coming downpour simply could not be ignored. Rather, they all looked in awe of it at first. Rain.

Tom and B'Elanna followed the others out and down into the delicious, warm water, and they laughed to see the neighborhood's children scampering from their tenements to play and splash in the pools that quickly formed. Their parents and elders quickly followed.

Feeling the dust and grime rolling away from her aching hands, B'Elanna gladly pulled her hood off and let the water hit her face, then smiled up to Tom, who grabbed her up into his arms and kissed her, spinning her in a circle. Another quick kiss and he ran out to catch up with little Haviki, rocketing her up off the ground then catching her securely in his strong arms. The child squealed with delight.

B'Elanna laughed and tossed her cloak back onto the steps of the storage before joining them. She met Sashana'i immediately, giving her long, soaking braids a decisive tug. The lady squeaked and tossed a handful of water into her friend's face. From behind her, Miztri gave B'Elanna a quick embrace and peck on the cheek before joining Dalra in their play.

It was a blessing, that rain, and they all celebrated it as eagerly as every child. It was the way, every year in Azlre.

Later, as the rain barreled down over the roof, two of those celebrants finally found their warm attic room, soaked again when they decided to have a stroll after the evening meal. Again, they didn't mind the drenching one bit. The rain was lusciously tepid in the evening, too, welcome upon their dry skin. B'Elanna in particular loved the storm. Having the opportunity to enjoy it properly that year, she felt cleaner than she had since she left Voyager a year and a half ago.

Watching Tom sliding out of his rain-washed clothing in the dim light with the rumbling storm continuing outside, she felt her belly quiver. Completely naked, he was oblivious to the fact that he looked fantastic unclothed, his lean-muscular body glistening wet. Their improved diet, still sparse but healthy enough for them, had redefined the fine lines of his frame, the curves of his shoulders, his firm buttocks and strong legs.

Drawing a slow, full breath, hanging her leggings on a hook to dry, she slid sinuously onto her knees while Tom shook the water out of his hair, rubbed at his scalp vigorously.

"Come to me, Tom. Help this off me."

He looked around to her as she stretched herself near to the mantel stones, which crackled with heat. Seeing her bent over the side of the bunk, knees on the floor, her soaking wet gown plastered against her, her dripping curls hanging in her eyes, Tom licked his lips and complied. He knelt behind her, found the hem and pressed it upwards.

She mewed to feel his cool hands peeling the gown up her thighs and over her hips, his curious fingers trailing behind his palms. At her hips, he stopped to knead his touches against her pelvis. "You know what I want, hmm?" she teased.

His lips turned up as he reached up to yank her laces, playfully rough as he pressed himself against her. She coughed an animal laugh when his hand shot inside the top of her bodice to grab her breast.

"I think I might," he said, sultry in response to her throaty growls. Cold or tired, wet or hungry, that posture and mood in B'Elanna Torres could bring him back from the dead. Bending, he ran his teeth up her back, biting her gently through the fabric as he progressed with her unlacing.

She raised her arms; the gown came off. His hands moved down in front of her and unclasped her bodice with several hard tugs. Tossing aside the garment, he took her small, firm breasts in his hands as he pressed behind her. She arched into his grip, rubbed against his healthy erection.

"Show me I'm yours tonight," she purred, shuddering in time to another rumble outside, the pattering against the roof building momentum, echoing through the room. "I want you to take me like the rain is beating down and the thunder's shaking the house...I want you to claim me."

"This storm *is* inspiring," he grinned, teasing her erect nipples with his fingers. She pushed herself against his hands. He bent to nuzzle a kiss, a little bite, under her ear. "And how shall I claim you, lady?"

"Any way you like," she replied decidedly, her own smile parting with a delighted gasp when he decided.

The thunder crashed down again. The rain was falling in turrets around the roof, pouring off the eaves.

Another hard thud on the ceiling and another squall echoed down into the main room where two elderly Desalians fiddled with the sensor equipment the children had finally been able to repair. Bakali idly pointed the medical scanner up to where the sounds were coming from, making her bondmate laugh.

"Tales from Dalra," Bala said, "speak of how our lady Be'i has enjoyed the thunder and rain."

"I should believe him," she said dryly. "Were her physiology not of a complicated nature, I should think they would have been with child twelve times by the present."

"They are possessed of more youth and health than I suspected when I advised Toma first," Bala admitted without complaint. He shrugged, grinned to her. "We were as young once, my lady."

She smiled, showing her teeth. "We still may be, my spirit."

Chuckling, he moved near to her as another round of thumps and shuffles sounded above, coupling with the increased pattering outside. "By the ancestors, there is learning to be gained from the young."

"Or perhaps memory," Bakali returned, holding her bondmate's eyes as he inched closer. "Yet I should think this...reminder might be reciprocal."

"Dov?" He raised his hand once near enough to stroke the markings on her temples.

"It might be a right of ours to understand with better clarity what we have cavorting above us," she whispered, returning his soft touches with her slender fingers.

"Yes," Bala breathed. "I would wish to know of this...later."

"Then I shall speak of it la..."

"Shall you and Toma join us now?" Bala asked, kindly as ever, after Tom had cleared away their plate and cups to a tray to be taken outside later and B'Elanna had rolled the floorcloth and placed it in the wall chest.

B'Elanna looked back to the elders, who had already begun to prepare for their nightly meditation. "Oh no," she said, polite but quick. "We wouldn't want to disturb you."

Tom nodded. "We'll just go upstairs."

Bakali smiled at that. "Good Children, we pray not to be alone. You have never partaken in our practice. Please honor us this once, in faith of community. In our house, we have grown to adore you. The storm days breed loneliness. Let us be together a while longer."

The elders' sweet-faced requests drew guiltily unwilling looks between Tom and B'Elanna. With a few seconds of patient silence, however, their expressions eased, wordlessly reconsidered, and they slowly turned again to rejoin their hosts. It was the least they could do, their faces seemed to say as they knelt again in their usual places beside each other. Forming a square between the four, they offered two slighter grins to their well-pleased hosts.

"Little needs to be done," Bala said. "My bondmate and I have enjoyed this meditation since we were first season novitiates and have shared it with guests to our house."

"In the exaltation of our spirits and their progenitors, we have shared our bond with each other..." Bakali explained, but stopped to see their remaining nervousness, and more, B'Elanna's blank stare. The elder had come to know it well. Reaching across, she placed her hand on B'Elanna's cheek--and felt her jerk instinctively. "Why fear you yourself, Child? Nothing you do not believe would disturb you, should you believe only a life-force lies within you."

"My *life-force*," B'Elanna said, frowning, "might surprise you."

Bakali smiled, patted the girl's soft skin with her wrinkled hand. "You bear youth and much energy--and like Toma, bitterness--or is it yet this part of yourself you do not seek? Be'i, it is well known you bear goodness and conscience, as does your partner. Why should you think yourself a one to be feared?"

B'Elanna's eyes turned to Tom's, and then away. "Well, it's a little more complicated than that."

"The matter seems always more complex when one thinks of oneself," Bakali told her gently, understanding B'Elanna's meaning then. "Yet we are all one--from one source of life. When the universe brought itself from the void, it made consciousness. From that miracle, we all came to be, in all our countless forms. We are all of that same great force which made the stars and all things beyond it, and our spirits--our energy, should you accept that meaning--are as everlasting and as eternal as that same force.

"As Desalians who believe completely in our oneness, without condition, we would accept your nature without prejudice. Though we may not always accept your way, we yet accept you. Thus, you may trust we shall not be hurt by any manners not Desalian by nature. Rather, we would likely embrace it far more readily than even you do yourself."

The woman had spoken, simply and her gentle touch unbroken. Though, at the end, her hand dropped to take B'Elanna's.

"Maybe you are right," the younger woman allowed.

"We shall but share what you wish to give, Be'i," Bala said.

"But you would be able to see inside of our...thoughts?" Tom asked.

"Should you wish to call it such," Bala nodded. "Yet we shall not open doors you close. It is a crime among us to pry at them."

"As in our conversations," Bakali added, "your memories are yours to share. We have noticed at tellings that you rarely speak of yourself. It would not be asked, nor suggested now. Only what you give is seen, and what we shall show you. There shall be nothing but the memory of the experience."

B'Elanna finally shrugged; Tom merely blinked, relaxed a little. Pleased with their tacit acceptance, Bakali took B'Elanna's other hand, pulling both of them gently to the center. Bala took Tom's hands in the same fashion. There, they adjusted the younger couple's right hand fingers to rest upon each other's palms.

"Look upon your mate," Bala quietly instructed them, "and recall our pure sun nestled within the blue sky..." He touched his bondmate's palm, and she his. Then both elders touched the children's temples, then their left palms....

Firelight flickered in the plain, pillowed room, yellowed with dirt and more with age. The rain outside the shutters steadily fell, the wind rattling the panels with each breeze. Four lightly robed individuals knelt, utterly still, each couple gazing, locked, into each other's eyes. They were all rain clean, though their clothes were ruffled, and upon two grey heads were fair-colored scarves, one pulled back at her fan-marked temples, the other wrapped neatly with the ends trailing low over a shoulder. The other two, younger, alien, had in turn short blond hair and the other wavy brown, both uncovered.

They grew smaller, these figures, moved away. They yet did not move, even as the stars tunneled around them, spinning and...

A light surrounded them, and he embraced her fully in his first thought on that plain, making her laugh and hold on, kiss his willing mouth. He thought they might share a place; she agreed. She stared all around her. She could see perfectly there, in the light with no pain.

No pain exists in this place, came the elders' "voices" as they joined the two on that plain and all is as it should be. It was suggested they journey to gardens and that they suggest one they knew.

Then, all around them appeared a lawn of green and a careful, colorful garden, stretching beyond neatly kept paths and clean people walking upon them. Their steps were like flying, out to a sea of rich blue and small crafts above them. The park outside the Academy, they knew, a place where they had both found some relaxation while there.

It was there they had their people's novitiate; the elders looked around in wonder of its simple beauty even in that very organized state, its same dressed people and curving paths leading to straight ones. They tended their gardens to appear as nature, it was noticed.

That was not denied. There, it was an art, as was the art of the discipline they taught.

Life was regulated; nature's facade was controlled. It could be seen why that would be.

Sometimes too much. It didn't suit everyone, especially if the individual wasn't ready or wanting to be like that.

This was truth. They did not remain in that organized place. Both sought other desires for unvoiced desire, pain well hidden...vindication as well?

Fear, anger, redemption, need of security, of freedom, of contentment... Their movement ceased, the sea grew grey with clouds above. This weather was common. So many needs, different but similar...

This was understood.

The sea flew below them then drifted away... A ship among the stars and a woman at the head of a table, speaking with care but confidence; men flanked her on either side, her subordinates...friends, now, or at least comrades. They too sat at the table, neatly uniformed, healthy and tended. There was promise in tragedy, freedom there, a chance--yet another chance. They were to begin again, whether they wanted it at first or not. That curse--their curse in life--had become a blessing. But that too was lost. Many things were lost.

And yet acceptance has been borne beyond it. Not by your choosing, yet you have found promise at Azlre, too.

It's been longer ago as the time we spent there, but we have accepted that loss.... Their hands clutched and they saw each other there...in the light again. The fear, the pain, the ache...the whole of it...it was memory.... They stared at each other and saw how they were, once were. Her glorious arched ridges rose high into her crown, her thick, umber curls lying around her face. Her lips bore a touch of rose lipstick, her sable eyes shone with both her intelligence and her pride. His dark blond hair was freshly cut, his light golden skin was unburdened by sun or scars, his blue eyes, clear and clever, held far more than he admitted to. His expression was as bright as hers was, and as searching. They bore casual

attire, vests and shirts and trousers, boots, all clean in muted, earthy colors.... They knew of their love without speaking it. They indeed had come to love each other, need each other, trust each other. For them, this was both a blessing and an irony. Yet this was how they knew themselves to be, seen also by the other--and the others there.

They touched, and their ancient smiles grew in awareness....

The young turned and saw their elders now quite young themselves and wrapped in regal dress. Her mane of hair was golden brown, rolling down her back and over her shoulder, reaching her knees. There were tiny braids and golden beads woven into it. Her ankle-length gown was like burgundy satin, embroidered finely. Her coat, teal velvet tied with open stays at the front, was embedded with jewels and fit snugly around her long, slim frame. Framing her head were gold-laced white headscarves with more beads pinned in to hold another mass of her hair. Her bondmate stood taller and proudly behind her in his long, amber tunic and trousers. His robe, deep red, was as rich, with an indigo sash heavily embroidered. His tightly curled brown hair was crested with scarves of white and beaded tassels. Their smiles were cultured, loving, kind--the same smiles of the elders. They were beautiful....

Their bright hazel eyes had grown as one in their bonding, and they were lit with welcome into their garden... A rich terrace with generously bent trees with fruit and undulating walks of white stone, encrusted with design. It was there where they took each other's being as one, a courtyard within a lush field of heavy rose-like flowers in blue, violet and arbors of coral blooms, heavily scented. Waterfalls trickled down to little streams, lit with flecks of gold. Fences around it were set with precious metals and the people there were as opulent in dress and posture, eating deeply colored foods, taking wine, laughing, embracing each other, their parents, their siblings, their friends and the deep, rhythmic music, a blessing for the bonding, all around them...

Ki'all shost ali va'i sull;
Daknall ra jirr Tsi'eharr.
Tsa'o kle wi ja'hall;
Eta ti'e brri re'ir...

It was a lavish event with no detail spared. They could feel the joy and laughter, the contentment.

It was yet too much--overindulgence in every manner and corruption in imbalance... Beyond the garden, Antral desperately pleaded for Unar cooperation, Koba, Brija and Suresha had been overtaken viciously, crying out for help while those in the garden did not hear, but drank wine and laughed in their deafness to all. From that they were freed.... This is not agreed upon?

The balance is more like overcompensation. Excessive indulgence to too much poverty is too high a price to be paid for too long. The suffering of people who did nothing wrong is no payment. It is injustice. There is no argument to this. More citizens suffer now with no means of practical improvement.

The smiles grew reflective. The work at Azlre would perhaps bring greater balance.

Freedom and peace will bring the most.

This, we would all feel joy to see. The garden filled with laughter again then faded, became distant. Yet a heavier weight will wrap around us should we bring it to the sun without regard for the lessons we have taken. And still we love and pray, hope for someday our suffering to be assuaged and for fate to permit our full redemption, as do you wish your own vindication. You work as we pray--wishing for the

same?

Maybe the result of our work. Maybe to get something done--to make a difference. There is nothing left of that past but to not repeat it. We live not wanting to have it again.

It is yet a part of you. Desires you once bore are yet remembered.

Yes. But it's still in the past. Uillar killed it. Hychar.... His white, ghoulish face appeared, raising his gloved hand above them. She found herself, thin and wet with heat, shielded by her companion.... The glove swooped down and her body smacked the red dirt. More red poured from her and he was rushing to Hychar to grab his throat...

They watched the violence and the lines of Desalians walking slowly past. Dalra, Miztri, Aratra...Sashana'i, scarred and unable to speak, joined a guard, pleading for medicine. She disappeared into the barricade. The struggle continued as all the others moved into the shacks, looking back with sad, hollow eyes.

He lost the struggle, spitting blood upon the dirt, crawling towards her, and they all heard Hychar speaking of their curse, walking slowly away and holding a hand out to a friend upon reaching the barricade. The elders came at that, touching away the wounds and pain of the gasping couple. They were old again, plainly dressed again, yet their gentle smiles still radiated from their true spirits. They lifted the youths from the poisoned dirt, away from their poisoned spirits, left there to Uillar.... Hychar taught you humility in too great a measure. And yet, it was taught well.

Or maybe just enough. We still want change, if not for our past, which is impossible now, then to never let this happen again, to us or to anyone else. This kind of corruption--we won't die in peace without some justice. Someday, we will have to redeem what happened there.

It was understood. They lived with such equal need but no power.

And so you wait.

For the cleansing of our people, for their readiness for rebirth.... And in the fresh squalor of Desalia was a congregation of people; there, her hair was tightly braided and they were stripped of ornaments, their rich robes torn and dirtied, their once untouched hands bloody with labor. They had one bag by each of them, all they were permitted. They waited; a small infant wailed and a mother tried to press her milk with a bruising grip. Older children clutched to their fathers, hollow and shaking. Elders and scholars, coughing and pale, were taken from the crowd and the mother tried to follow, only to jump back in deference to Unar. With tears, cries to their beloved, they were transported away.... We next saw Cezia. The infant had passed, having not yet known life. Some hundred thousands more met the same fate upon Cezia alone in the years passing, millions upon other colonies, and many more shall pass in Irlae before our fate is completed.

It doesn't have to be. It shouldn't be! They shouldn't be allowed to continue!

Our dearest hope in life is that it shall someday be past and never be again. It seems hope has again grown through your actions' effect on us. Yet it may not be brought with the infliction of hate and greed and the other poisons Unar breed, not the selfishness we had bred into our way. They shall not endure, and Desal shall be present for their fall to resume their true way.

You can't be so certain of that. You can't just expect them to decline and think their destruction will

take care of your sins. That isn't realistic.

Again, truth. Yet our sacrifices have built a fate that shall not easily allow us our former transgression--as this is with yourselves.

But how many children will be cursed because of your crimes before you're free again?

As few as possible, we would wish. And yet, yes, we wait. This truth truly humbles us: There is little more we may do, children, which is the root of our acceptance. Bore we more power to build change, we would have effected it long before this moon.

...And the white light surrounded them, filling them with freedom from the pain once there, having shared it. In that peaceful realm, fading to deep blues and a place in the depth of space, far yet existent, with life unbound as they, waiting, expectant...

For the present, Children, we shall continue to live and hope to better the life we were blessed to keep. This is our prayer, for peace. The outcome is not of our control in this moment.

It could be, if you wished it enough.

Any thing may be one's own with sincere prayer and nature's allowance...and yes, action as well brings fate's attention. We are both correct. Someday, a balance shall suit us both. It is not believed you were brought to us in vain. You and your influence are now a part of Desal's fate, and know this is welcomed by us. Yet this fate too is in the waiting, as are all things before us. We shall someday see what was meant.

And they saw the room, and themselves, hands joined, kneeling in the square, staring deeply into each other's eyes. They grew closer and warmer, and the rain could be heard pattering on the shingles....

Bala placed the old, knotted blanket Bakali had brought over the young couple that had collapsed onto the pillows upon the end of the meditation.

"Perhaps this had been too great a journey for them, who have not known such travels," Bala whispered.

"They bear wellness," Bakali said, touching B'Elanna's hair, gently turning her thin fingers through the curls. "Much pain lies within them, much need, purpose and youthful arrogance. Their determination inspires me, yet it has drained them in life, blessed spirits."

Bala nodded, his mouth creased into a tiny smile. "Yet the sun and waters of Azlre assists their growth from a worthy root, I should believe. They shall continue well. Perhaps we all shall be so blessed by fate."

"Yes, my spirit. I would wish it be so."

Some time later, they awoke partially, only enough to find themselves entwined, still in the main room and covered with a spare blanket. Their eyes met, held to each other's for several seconds. Their breath caught as they both remembered...

Tom pulled B'Elanna closer into his embrace as she buried her head against his chest, breathing deeply, calming. They fell asleep again moments later.

Their eyes reopened to the same sounds of rain and the filtered light in the windows. It was though no time had passed, though they knew they had slept. They looked at each other, smiled slightly, nervously at first, remembering more with every blink. Seeing it reflecting in each other's eyes, it filled them all the more, what they'd seen, which made them laugh quietly, shake their heads as they pulled themselves to sit.

"Last night..." he said, distantly as he slowly put all the images together in his mind, "that was incredible."

B'Elanna let her stare roam the room, still in that world, too, not really knowing what to think about it, except, "I can only imagine if we decided to show them everything, what that would be like."

He shrugged, drifting his fingers over her hand. "You think someday we might try it?"

Her eyes widened. "You would want to?"

He was a little surprised at himself, too. He'd spoken off the top of his head, and yet he knew he was curious in spite of everything he knew he could be faced with in that kind of awareness. He knew without thinking he would never see their elders or Desal in the same way, having now seen their past, all they had and had been. Considering what they had experienced already of their own psyches, he nodded. "I liked it there, how we could see it all, from the outside--everything so clearly. It was easier to look at it like that."

She thought about that for a moment. A small smile crossed her mouth, wary yet wondering. "Well, it is interesting to see ourselves like that, so completely, I mean. Though I'll admit, I'm not too anxious to dig in my closet, so to speak...not *that* much. I don't know what I'll find there."

He rubbed her hand again. "I don't know, either. Maybe sometime, we might be curious enough to find out."

She shrugged, though her lips were turned pleasantly up as she considered it. "Maybe."

With no more words, they stood and folded up the blankets, rearranged the pillows. B'Elanna went downstairs for the latrine, Tom opened the shutter to take a bowl off the ledge for a pot of fresh water to boil, looked outside for a moment to the rows of storms approaching before locking up the window again.

It was strangest to him that even his indecision was all right, and that even the strangeness wasn't troubling. B'Elanna came upstairs again, running her fingers cursorily through her wavy hair, scratching to loosen up her scalp, then stretching her arms upwards, turning to him. Tom smiled. He could feel his heart beating just to see her as she was there, rumpled and uncombed, her slightly unfocused eyes finding him with a smile of her own.

Last night I saw her soul, her true being, as she knew herself, he mused, and she was precisely what I knew, too. I saw her spirit...

She lowered her arms, regarding him in turn. Her grin did not fade. Settling on her own unspoken thoughts, she held her hand out to him, raising her chin a bit, pulling her posture straight. They had to get dressed, breakfast to start and work around the clinic to get to after their morning meal, Tom knew. But just to see her expression, so familiar, so beautiful to him. It was good to see it there, in the real world.

Without a word, he took her hand and escorted her up the ladder to begin their day.

"The last Unar took themselves from this world eleven years past, when the sect scourge distracted the cause here, and they were needed in the campaign. With them, they took the last of my born children, whom we had smuggled from Maha'aje to be near us and away from the plagues. Their taking was learned not five years into our incarceration at Uillar, when Sashana'i and Aratra, children themselves, likewise came to us. In my sorrow and denial, I brought them in as my lost own and with Dalra bonded them in spirit. We touched their life forces with our own, only to know as rallkle passed that they could never be my children. I knew this always, yet saw it only years later."

Within the ring of Tom's arms, B'Elanna sighed to watch Miztri tell the sad tale as Dalra held her close at his side, his downward stare wise and wistful. But then, the woman smiled, looked over at them.

"This was when Be'i and Toma came to us, on first sight beaten by a man Prihar would have gladly put to ashes. --It is known this is not humble speech, my good friends. Yet any of Uillar would know the Unar penance Be'i and Toma paid, for but their beings...and perhaps for their passions as well, though that is of their truth. They yet withstood throughout and so I took them--as I had Sashana'i and Aratra--into my spirit, watching their life, their pride, thinking always of my children, now among our blessed ancestors. --Or to my base knowledge, they are among them.

"It is not known, the depth of my regret for the spirits taking Y'dri and Me'ekra, sprung from my giving womb and nursed past three rallkle each. I bear a mother's longing, a mother's natural desire I may not have outlived them, and that they would be by Dalra and myself now. This is not meant, it seems.

"Past ten Uillaran revolutions and a single one here, nothing of them is known, not of their spirits' liberation or of servitude. It is wished as well whether I must await or celebrate them. My motherly nature dreams to vindicate their memory, longs...longs but to touch their spirits once again. They are yet missed in my selfishness. My bondmate and I, however, have neither knowledge now, as Unar are ever taking as their own, and those in their depths are obscured so completely. Thus, we work and we pray, someday, for either word. I pray now particularly...that they do not suffer."

"You show unusual determination with this equipment," Padan noted as they shared tea, waiting for one of his people to transfer down his part of their trade. "Should I bear interest?"

Tom shook his head. "No. This is personal."

During the rains, B'Elanna had continued to infuse what plasma and ferranide Tom got from Padan. Within a du've, they had managed to build an entire toolkit of maintenance equipment, repair much of the equipment that Bakali had on hand, and then rebuild three functional replicators, powerful enough to supply simple, needed materials. The basic transporter they had put back together would be able to send equipment to Sacezia, too.

It still was a matter of getting there--more, getting the equipment there. The transporter was a low-resolution model, not for biological transportation, and it required another full system at the

destination. That problem had put a tick into Tom's mind between all the other work he and B'Elanna had. Then, discovering some very different scraps at Dviglar one afternoon, he decided to put that tick to some better use than the initial one. For the two du'ave of rain, when B'Elanna was out with the other women or working on her own projects, he used his time well, in an large, open basement a few blocks south of the square.

As usual, it was a matter of powering his clever solution. He did know where to go for that, however. Once the rains began to clear, Tom moved swiftly to that now familiar venue halfway across the city. He bowed to his fellow Azlrelians en route, chatted with a few children and their parents, answered some questions about the ongoing power system repairs and replicators, and good-naturedly waved off a mischievous offer of richala--a meaty rock vine known for promoting fertility--from the vendor who usually offered their nido'ev. Despite the many stops, Tom soon strode into Padan's flat with a clear intent and a parts list.

"Personal? Not to be shared?"

"All may use it--yet only two at once."

He had dealt with Padan for the graviton inverter and the extra jolt of liquid infused plasma for the drive--and a little galacite for the initiators. Padan sat back wisely for that, pushing little pieces of equipment for Tom to fix upon each request.

Tom repaired them without asking.

The Koba was being rather generous, Tom knew. He wondered where that would cease, when a higher price--as he and B'Elanna had often been warned--would be exacted. But Tom decided to worry about that later. He hadn't been ingratiating himself that long just to duck out because of his worthy suspicions.

With another look from the marketer, Tom turned up his palms with a small sigh. "It is a gift for her day of birth."

"For your mate Be'i?" Padan was pleasantly surprised.

"Yes. I have added the time and learned her day of birth should be at Ninjen of Ellalloj. --In another du'ave. This is greatly wished, Padan. Few have recalled her day of birth since her maturity and she has worked throughout her life."

"This indeed means much to you," Padan nodded. "My gift to her shall be this galacite, then."

"No. Your offer is appreciated. However, to earn payment for my products would be preferred. Please allow this."

Padan peered down at the firm man's tone, his lips curling. "You bear little trust in me."

"Yes," Tom said and grinned. "Yet this does not mean we cannot maintain our friendship."

"I do like you, Toma!" the Koba marketer laughed and looked around for another component for the man to fix. Having another infuser before he went through with the plan and left that place would not be a bad thing... Or perhaps he might wait just a while longer. Just a while.

He had nearly enough to earn him five years worth of living. He and his child, with his sister on Koba, would need it when the time came. The two outsiders would need what graces they possessed when all

was completed, too. Someday soon, it would all come back to them. They would see.

Soon enough.

"A hovercraft." She crossed her arms and aimed a squinted smirk at him. "You got *me* a hovercraft."

Tom shook a finger at her unvoiced accusation. "I made us a way to get the communications array and transporter parts to Sacezia," he said. "But I got *you* a tour of Cezia. Wherever you want--oceans, mountains, the lakes the vendors travel to; when we can find the right way, we'll head to Sacezia."

She had to smile fully at that. She'd wanted to go outside the Azlrelian Plain for some time, had always looked at the mountains in the distance, wondering what lay beyond them. Tom had too. Of course, she also knew how much he desperately missed flying... Then again, he *had* remembered her birthday, however he'd figured out what day it was. She knew she'd never told him what day it was in Starfleet time.

So she moved from her place at the edge of the field he'd run into to uncover his big surprise, smiling at her as if it were *his* birthday. Wading into the grasses, she let her hand drift over the smooth white metal, warm to the touch in the Ceisian sun.

"You always knew how to give a girl a proper ride," she quipped, moving close to him. Bending her head up for a kiss, he gladly gave her one. "Thank you."

He took her around the waist, hugged her. "Want to take a spin?"

"That is my part of the gift, isn't it?" she replied.

He took her hand as she lifted her cloak hem, stepped over the side panel of the diamond-shaped craft. Though Desalian in design and color, she could instantly tell Tom had refitted the inside. An easily accessible panel stretched around the entire seating area. There was even a mapping console, sensors, a retractable wind guard and some other systems--definitely upgrades--she recognized from Dviglar. She snickered to herself. It was just like him to be sure it would move swiftly and yet have that anachronistic "charm" he never seemed to mind and was all too easy to achieve on Cezia.

Tom came around and jumped into his seat. Immediately activating the lifters, the cruiser rose about a half-meter off the ground. Feeling that sensation under her again, B'Elanna laughed aloud. It'd been so long since they'd been around technology that just a simple anti-grav field tickled her nerves.

Looking over, she saw that look come over him. She had known it of him every time she saw him fly, a centeredness that was similar to any amount of concentration on his part, but with a particular contentedness as he squinted out to their destination. It was nice to see it again.

She remembered it from the last time they sat in the front of a craft together, staring out into the starfield, and how she'd settled on just being amused with the cocky pilot and his near constant need to joke around and annoy people. She couldn't take him too seriously after a while--unless he did get himself to work, where he almost always meant business.

He was a pain in the neck, but a nice distraction, an okay guy, a good technician--though he tried to

hide it, probably to avoid having too much responsibility, she'd thought at the time. Only days later, he'd taken on every ounce of responsibility and hardship that his life might have offered him, showed the colors she had seen only occasionally in him before and held onto since. Rising to the challenge, he had stubbornly refused to be defeated, as had she.

As such, they survived.

Gazing into his eyes, she wondered if they would have been any better off stuck in the Delta Quadrant rather than stuck on Cezia, considering what they were making out of their lives there and getting back in return for their hardships. They had declared as much before, but she was truly starting to feel glad she was there.

When Tom opened his arm, she leaned into it then watched the wind guard rise halfway up as he initiated the simple propulsion drive.

"Ready?" he asked, giving her a squeeze.

She nodded, her eyes out on the horizon. "Let's go."

From the first time her stomach shot back with the forward motion, B'Elanna loved cruising in the hovercraft. In little time, she would find any excuse to get them out, even geological surveys--though she knew damn well she knew nothing about geology except what could be mined for a ship's engine. But the excuse was a good one.

Over the grassy fields, they veered over the seemingly endless rolling hills east of Azlre, lit with bright white flowers and swarms of feeding insects, then turning sharply northwest to pass into wetlands, full with the residue of the rains. It was a beautiful place, Cezia, having come alive again after the "winter" storms, out in the undisturbed wilderness. It was little wonder the Desalians revered nature, those graceful trees, the thrush of the lowlands, even herds of wild goats and taller, deer-like creatures scampering into a tall forest near the west rise of the Mecrisop Range, visible from Azlre and yet farther and taller than they had expected.

Seeing the wild nature made them speak again on their wish to improve things at Azlre--if not elsewhere.

The warm sun brought every sense alive, as did the velocity as they climbed up the hills, looking for a pass, finding one only to climb higher and higher. The exterior temperature quickly chilled, but they ascended despite it, wanting to see how high they would have to go, looking for a gorge to pass through and enthralled by the motion as Tom arched through tighter passes.

After many trips out, they did find that pass, to the south instead of the north, within a deep green hollow and a great river, rushing white down the steep inclines.

Tom easily guided them through, thrilled through his core with the rush of motion, the warmth of B'Elanna by him or watching her lean up to tap at a scanner when they saw something new. But mostly, she leaned back and watched where they were going. He meanwhile easily recalled his pure love of flying, the travel and the company. Even that patched-up, old-fashioned hovercraft was a joy. Not that he was being picky about things like that anymore. They were lucky as hell to have that much, and

luckier still to be able to enjoy it together.

They came to take those trips often. At one point, Tom took Bala out to help them find a better route through the ranges. While not a native of that world, he did have some memory of maps and had lived there since shortly after the Unar overtook Desalia. The old man, in fact, reveled in the return of such travel as much as Tom did, thanked him profusely for the opportunity to have it again.

Then came their friends and their trainees and whoever else had been as curious to ask got a "spin" in the craft. The thrill and the sights of their world beyond the city only served to make them more anxious to continue their work and expand on it.

B'Elanna couldn't be more pleased. Her birthday present was turning out to be as much of a blessing as the new replicators were being for the rest of the city. They had already been well-used for supplies--though all selections were prudently made. Food was limited to basic un-growable nutrition. Bakali's medicines were limited for some time to antibiotics and inoculations, with which she, Cali, Yaricha, E'ildra and Suoti, hurried around from tenement to tenement for over a du've. Clothing, books and similar products were replicated only for children and the neediest of citizens.

Even so, Tom and B'Elanna--upon Sashana'i's insistence--did finally replicate a decanter of tracha, the traditional breakfast drink from Desalia that by its description was much like coffee. On their first sip, they decided they could definitely use another replicator--one *only* for foodstuffs.

Padan got the sensor grid he'd wanted soon after. He took it with solemn thanks and his usual smile.

With that extra hope and promise infused into Azlre, there came a definite stirring in the city. With the improved nutrition--if only via Bakali's vitamin supplements--the inhabitants' energy was increased, as was their mood. The chatter in the square over the "new blessings" was its own source of excitement, even if many were yet unsure of the nature of those improvements. Thus, their increased activity also brought on several philosophical debates on the matter of Desal even deserving so much. The outcome of that issue was never concluded definitively, however. The Azlrelians did not mind. It was livelier talk than they had enjoyed in some time--if ever in their lifetimes. With their elders' ready encouragements, they soon thrived on it.

Also as a result of their witnessing the positive effects of that "simple" technology, there yet came other people wishing to assist in making it, including many of their old Uilaran friends, who had been having to make their livings through other labors. B'Elanna and Tom gladly taught them some basics to start: Wiring, repairs and power infusion. With some, they soon moved on to general engineering, systems management and operation. As the teenagers had, the adults learned quickly and asked few questions, obeyed their teachers' wisdom when they explained the processes well enough.

"Just how you like them, good and humble," Tom quipped one night when she commented on that, only to find himself flung onto his back by an evilly grinning half-Klingon pinning him to the rag-stuffed mattress.

"That's right," she told him playfully. "I do."

By then, the elders downstairs barely noticed it.

It would take years to get the entire city re-powered properly, considering, but a few key buildings like the clinic, the commune halls and the silag, which they had begun to rebuild, had permanent power. Slowly but surely, the rest would come. Their thoughts now turned to Sacezia, which according to

Sashana'i and Aratra was in serious disrepair nearly nine years ago, when they were taken away to Uillar. Plans to share their good fortune and hard work with their sister city soon followed, and so they began to make the necessary arrangements.

Hearing of this, Padan had assured them that they would have their supplies. The Koba and the laskeb alone were much gratified by the repairs they had sent to Padan. They naturally wanted more. Padan needed only ask the usual. Tom and B'Elanna easily provided him with what he requested, not minding at all by that point their trades.

Each night, when they did finally lower themselves to rest after their usual long day, their eyes knew it.

They were finally making a difference.

Several robed Desalians came through the north gates of Sacezia to peer curiously at the arrivals. The two were foreigners, apparently, traveling in a land cruiser--an item previously assumed to no longer be a part of a Desalian's complement. They knew the traditional arrival place and procedure, however. They also were outfitted as handsomely as any Desalian could have been in those times. These details brought stillness to the reception. These guests should be treated with respect.

The tall young man in a pale blue headdress rolled up a robe sleeve and strode around to help the well-appointed lady down the rest of the way. When she turned, they immediately noticed her high, unusually scarred forehead above an intriguing pair of eyes and regal mouth; her short curls were barely hidden by her cursory scarves and cloak hood. The man bore scars of his own, yet was handsome, strong. Looking again, the group that met them noted then that they did not bear temple markings. Still, taking the lady's hand, the newcomer bowed properly; she followed in an echo. His words, however simple, flowed properly, too.

"We bring ourselves at the wishes of Bakali and Bala of the Na'ihaj house, our hosts and elders of Azlre, and with respectful greetings from our good regents, Sashana'i and Aratra."

An elder Desalian with short, salty hair, orangish scarves and faded brown robes met them in the middle of the path. "We welcome your blessed news of their wellness," he said, touching his temples solemnly, "and you into our city. I am Zepa, of the Mahor House, assistant to Lledri, prichava of Cezia."

Tom bowed again. "Toma. My mate, Be'i, of the Allanois house."

The elder man's brow drew up. "You are of Allanois?"

"By his right," B'Elanna said, catching the man's gaze, "Aratra, bondmate to Sashana'i of Allanois, adopted us into his house at the Uillar labor camp, with the blessing of Sashana'i."

Zepa seemed well enough impressed and bowed again. "You will be taken to the silag for your residence."

B'Elanna blinked at that. The silag, temples to the ancestors, were a common part of any Desalian community. But it was also a *temple*, which was not quite the lodging she had considered when they planned their trip to Sacezia. "It is not necessary to show us such honor," she told the man.

"To house you properly is customary," Zepra replied simply, not an argument.

"We would rather take company with elders of Bakali's status and wisdom."

"Few elders remain here, good lady, and none of fair status but our prichava. Please bring yourself in peace."

B'Elanna knew better than to argue further, thanks to Aratra's stories about his birthplace. When she had been recuperating from her illness on Uillar, he told her how the Unar divided portions of the "refugees" coming from Desalia-Four. Sacezia's population was immediately tripled with the addition of well-born but provincial citizens from the west central region, as Azlre had been packed with both the cosmopolitan and elite from the capital city of Desal. Other regional populations were similarly shipped to the larger cities on Saha'aten, Maha'aje, Llatso'a and other planets within what had been Desalian territory. It was not known how many were kept on the homeworld. Bala guessed the more modestly educated peoples and agricultural workers were retained to maintain the planet's farms and basic systems, half a billion, perhaps.

Later, B'Elanna learned that the only scholars to survive and relocate with the refugees were well hidden and later smuggled away, undetected like Bakali, Bala, and the prichavas of Sacezia, or trained in secret, as Dulla and others after him had been. While these scholars and others likewise trained some able youths in the spiritual practices of the scholarship, such as had been done with Miztri and Dalra on Maha'aje, none of them could present themselves publicly as an organized body of knowledge and counsel. Thus, the population had no government and little guidance, and so they had to rebuild their way of life from what they knew and what they were permitted. When B'Elanna and Tom planned to make the long journey northwest across the mainland, Aratra reminded them of the result on Cezia: Sacezia's populace was far more strongly rooted in Desal's ancient traditions than Azlre.

Neither found that easy to believe until that moment, when they saw an entire row of hooded individuals bow to a knee, allowing them to pass, whispering reverent greetings and prayers to their high-ranked guests. Their breaths were a steady hum as they began their journey into the city.

"You shall now be taken to her, honored guests," Zepra said.

Bowing again, the man gestured for them to walk by him. Shrugging, Tom offered his arm to B'Elanna and moved beside Zepra, meanwhile taking in the difference of that city.

The capital was not unlike Azlre architecturally except perhaps in its layout. Built in a crescent along the shoreline, it had but one main avenue with cross streets and some open spaces. They appeared to have once been gardens and perhaps meeting squares. It was difficult to tell for the rot that had claimed those areas. Despite the welcome humidity, it was rather hot, and the substantial rains came not in a yearly downpour there, but in regular sea-driven storms that etched the city, taking a little back in the wash each time. Indeed, only moss seemed to grow there, well within the cracks. The old flowerbeds were nothing but cracked dirt and no commune gardens existed that they could see.

The tall, jury-rigged buildings were more corroded than the ones in Azlre, the salty, wet air having eaten into the stone without repair. Others lay in plain ruins, big hunks of stone unmoved for sixty years, with shanty-like rows built up against them. It amazed them that half of the housing was standing at that point.

The denizens were just as thin and poor--if not more--with thinly clothed, scampering children and purposeless people strolling around to one place or another. Seeing the strangers, they bowed humbly

with kind smiles, all, but their gazes were otherwise vacant. Moving farther into the city, several of the citizens there seemed to have protracted illnesses, coughed hard or wiped their reddened eyes. Zepa quietly told them not to worry, that the contagion had passed and they witnessed only the recovery. Tom sighed at that admission, knowing they hadn't brought nearly enough medicine for a full outbreak of what was likely influenza, the most common disease in Azlre.

It all looked familiar to Tom and B'Elanna, though. "I feel like we did the first day we left the clinic," she commented. He nodded to that. With an effort, they simply returned the greetings politely then turned their eyes ahead to keep walking.

"Replication devices? Planetary transporters? Power units and communications?" The well-ornamented woman in her mid-sixties, mindful of her rank as elder and example, bent over her fresh tea. The leaves, braided into sticks and tied with sweet root, were a gift sent to the prichava from the youths' elders--a noble custom that easily proved the identity and status of their Na'ihaj family. Despite the compliment, however, she still had the children before her to examine. "This I should think would be more than what is considered deserved of Desal at this time."

Tom bit his tongue, got more comfortable in the deep pillows of the dark, musty, but thankfully cool temple, where Lledri, its watchful, quiet-voiced keeper, had found them a chamber. The rest of the building loomed several stories to its arched roof, making their voices echo in contrast to the occasional rush of waves, just outside the west altar. In its day, that silag must have been majestic, Tom thought.

"Yet," the woman continued, "it has given benefit to the ailing, which is a blessing."

"More equipment has been planned, good Lledri," B'Elanna explained. "Yet we would require transportation for your replicators to be brought. For your children and ailing here, this would not be too great an additional blessing."

The elder woman nodded slowly, sipped again at the fine tea. "You are not of Desal by birth."

"This is correct," Tom said. "Does this trouble you?"

"No. Yet it is unclear if you can truly speak for Bakali and Bala, or for the house Dulla left, upon the debt of Desalia. This would be a thing not born of you, yet rather learned."

"We speak for them with our voices," Tom replied wisely.

"As you take Cezia as a home, Desal into your spirits."

"Desal has been ours since our incarceration on Uillar," B'Elanna told her, "its people our only family. We desire no other and wish to be among Desal as it regains its honor and health, wish to see its long hoped for future. Bala and Bakali, Sashana'i and Aratra, among others, share this desire--granted it is in accordance with their continued pure-spiritedness, of course."

Tom nodded to that. "It is believed in Azlre we have not overstepped our wishes, but attempted to ease the desperation and bitterness of our poverty. Thus, we shall continue."

The woman smiled. "You bear ambitious dreams--yet this is not criminal. I would feel more

confidence in your beings would you choose to claim our community entirely, to bear the kraja upon your temples and thus be citizens in spirit and not but within your good beings."

"We bear no preparation for such a commitment at this time," Tom said politely, though caught a little off guard. They hadn't thought about it yet. They had been so welcomed in Azlre that citizenship simply never came up. That more traditional population might want it, however. "This has not been discussed. It shall be."

"This is understood." Lledri drew another drink of her tea, finishing it, then looked over to Zepra and his assistant, Eraja. "Carry the word that their offer shall be accepted. --Be'i and Toma of the Allanois and house of Na'ihaj, you would be sufficiently weary from your travels. You shall now be left to take rest. I shall bring myself again at sunset, to save our lady Be'i's sight. Past our prayers to the blessed ancestors, we shall take food and speak again among others."

Moving to her softly booted feet, she bowed. "I hesitate at your gifts, yet there is acute awareness of great need among our own. Unar own quite possessive beings and it is believed that our debt to Tsa'aita is not yet paid. We may pay more for our kindness to our own than is expected. Yet I shall not risk the opposite, do nothing and risk refusal of the spirits' blessing. We shall see which credit is truth in time, what fate's response shall be."

"Much is understood in this," B'Elanna said, training neutrality into her syntax and tone. The debt to their history, she could understand--but not to that enemy. "Yet it would not have been at all should it not be meant, yes?"

Lledri smiled. "An easy reasoning is your position, Child, which is considered," she replied and turned to draw a curtain for their privacy.

B'Elanna lowered herself into the bed of pillows with a long breath of relief. She looked over at Tom, who looked as glad as she was to have that much done. "One down, ninety thousand to go," she quipped and rolled over into his open arm.

"Nothing to it, Chief," he grinned and closed his eyes against her.

Outside, Lledri took Zepra aside with a soft touch to his arm. Looking up to him, her red-brown stare moistened with awareness, and a smile curled her lips.

"My good lady?" Zepra asked, wondering at her emotion. The prichava was not often affected, and he would not have expected the two foreign-born representatives to make her so.

"I stand as full as a blessed child," she told him, her voice crackling with excitement. With an effort, she controlled herself, though she continued to allow the joy. "The Allanois house is not forsaken. These two, siblings to Sashana'i by claim, bring news of life and progress. The sanctity of our spirits, certainly, must be guarded, yet I believe the way remains. Allanois yet remains among our living spirits, my friend; thus we shall be delivered."

"Their purpose is truth?"

Lledri gave a single nod. "It is. We shall accept their pains for us and this fate they bring, for our better or worse. Through this, we shall continue to protect the house of our people's fate."

He considered this. "Sashana'i is of a nine-year past the age scholar's bonds are traditionally taken.

She bore no desire when she last saw Cezia, even while bearing the legacy's disarray within her and much in need of stability. Aratra having indeed taken her as bondmate may affect similar distance--yet potential."

"They shall choose when it is meant," she dismissed and squeezed his arms lightly. "Zepa, the House of Allanois must thrive in any status--for Desalia, for our children and theirs, the line must continue. No redemption may be found without completing the circle and restoring the balance of our own. Oh, Zepa, they remain among the living; the blood and the memories of our blessed regents Sharana'i and Mi'ejara are strong and vital and more proud than we shall ever rightfully be, and they bear adopted siblings of good measure and wit. My very spirit floods to know Allanois thrives again at last."

The sentry took the elder lady into an embrace, so full he found her with relief. But soon, she broke off, moving again to the entrance to alert her novitiates to send for food and prepare the chamber for prayer. For their honored guests, they would take every pain. Fate would return her efforts well, had she any power to affect it.

When they hopped out of the cruiser at Azlre six days later, their smiles were such that Sashana'i clapped her hands, knowing instantly their success.

"It is a blessing on all our houses!" she enthused, hurrying from her work to embrace them both. "How appears Sacezia? I assume it remains standing?"

"Surprisingly enough, yes," B'Elanna told her, "and it practices *twice* as zealously the customs you warned us about. We were kept at the silag the entire time and attended four meditations each day."

Dalra, nearby, laughed loudly. "At silag so long? You and Toma? I find surprise the *silag* yet stands!"

B'Elanna gave him a wearied look. "We're not complete heathens, you know. I can take it--to a point. And it wasn't all *that* bad. I am surprised we got anything done, though, with constantly needing to stop and praise the ancestors and give thanks to the weeds for growing."

"By whom were you kept?" Sashana'i asked, frowning her brow. The prayer sessions were no surprise to her. She remembered her birthplace well, had dearly missed the temple's grandeur and solace after she and Aratra were taken to Uillar. "The custom to treat guests with great honor is known, yet a full visit's stay at the temple is unusual. It is a grace that this remains possible. Who keeps it?"

"Lledri of the Stiga'a House," Tom told her.

Aratra smirked as he leaned on the storage wall, cutting a wise look to his bondmate. "Ah, Watsha's former assistant. She is the prichava now? Vya! A fine spirit, truly, though I bear certainty she wears her status well."

"As I am yet more surprised she would bear you," Sashana'i agreed. "Watsha was of a traditional school--traditional even among us--and she found great approval with this. Your foreign status would not necessarily qualify you as Allanois without citizenship."

"She asked about that, actually," Tom told her, "if we were considering the kraja."

"She would bear curiosity about this, ka. They sought my scholarship when I bore but sixteen ralkle, when my good Dulla passed the legacy to me. To desire such honors are first required, and thus I resisted. Scholarship they pressed, however, for its proper place with a regent. Being you are adopted into the regent's house and close to Aratra and me, your citizenship should bear great importance to Lledri as well."

Dalra chuckled, coming forth to pat Tom's well-robed arm. "It is for your dressing of your siblings, good Sashana'i, I first thought they would have been taken."

She shrugged. "Be'i and Toma are dressed as befits their station, and yet humbly. Lledri likely sought their minds as they are related to my house and our people at present." But a moment later, she shook her head of it. "Aratra soon takes himself to procure food and I must bring our floorcloth to our elders this moon. Would you wish to assist Bala and Bakali before our evening meal and assist the preparations? Cali's intended shall be delivered at the west gate at sixth quarter."

B'Elanna smiled at the mention. Their friend had received her lover's payment a week before she and Tom left for Sacezia. Payment was notification that a drask's release would come within the next du've. "How is Cali handling the anticipation?" she asked.

Sashana'i's eyes hardened at that, recalling instantly how her friends felt about such matters. As quickly as she had spoken, too, she regretted her cheer of only moments before and her casualness with such fated matters. It was a grim reminder of how seasoned she and others were to the passings of Desalian laborers. A wrong attitude, she scolded herself. With her ambitions, her bearing should have been the very opposite.

"Zhall ye'o," she said. "Your forgiveness for my error. It is reported he has passed onto our ancestors, Be'i. His shell is to be returned for the ceremony--a gift of...Unar."

B'Elanna blew her breath as Tom turned back to the craft. *A gift of the Unar, all right*, she growled to herself and stared back to Sashana'i. "Was he beaten?" she asked.

"No details were offered," Sashana'i admitted. "It would be suspected his neck was broken, however. It is the usual method, as is known."

Tom had pushed a small cart under the land cruiser to pull it to its storage space. "It's funny," he muttered tightly. "Every time we start thinking things are going right and it starts getting comfortable around here, we're reminded of what's really going on--as if we had the right to put it aside."

"Easy enough to do when they're not breathing down our necks," B'Elanna agreed, but willed away the rest. She knew well there wasn't a damn thing she could do about it--not for Cali's intended, anyway, not for the present. "Sashana'i, I would like to start the inverter coils tomorrow morning. --Aratra, do you think you could take a trade to Padan this evening? I have that dilithium infuser ready. He would probably like that."

Still in the door, Aratra nodded. "It would please to do this."

Sashana'i smiled to B'Elanna, touching her arm supportively. "And I shall join him. Our market visit remains this evening; it shall be good to walk."

B'Elanna nodded and joined Tom in setting the cruiser away. "Thanks."

They dressed for dinner--changed their dusty clothes--quiet and expecting a gathering like ones they'd had before. Comfort for the "mourning." On the floor below, Cali and little Haviki were assisting Bakali in setting up their eating pallet.

"At least Cali's taking it all right," Tom said without much emotion, pulling on his dark tunic, running his fingers through his hair.

B'Elanna pulled her gown laces behind her and tied them off. "Haviki's still without a father and Cali's got to keep going on her own," she frowned. "They have friends around them, but it'll be hard. I could see it at the ceremony. She's being accepting, but she knows, Tom."

"Yeah. She was quiet."

Shaking her head, B'Elanna went to sit on the side of the bunk to wrap her shoes onto her feet. As she she finished the first, she dropped her foot on the floor.

Tom turned after several seconds of silence and saw her reach tentatively up to touch her face, to feel the remaining bridge of her nose, trace its inward slope. Her fingers lifted, immobile a moment before she placed them upon her forehead. She stared numbly ahead as her touches drifted around the wasteland of her brow, the nook that dug into her left eyebrow where a piece of a ridge had been displaced, then up into the flat where the smooth bone had been grafted. Her hand shook slightly. Her fingers spreading to the right, she touched the scattered remains of her ridges. B'Elanna's stare lowered with her hand.

Tom took a breath against his sinking heart. Nearly six seasons on Cezia and she hadn't done that, cared to explore her own face, to know what she looked like. To his memory, she had never even looked in a mirror. He was used to her appearance and honestly never thought her unattractive for her injuries. He knew he wasn't the one wearing it, though.

"They don't have the right to do this to us, Tom." Her voice was soft yet plain.

His was, too. "I know."

"But we're sitting here, just like we swore we wouldn't." She looked up to him. "We keep busy, fix and build things to help people--and that's all fine and worth our time. But Bala and the others might never see it's not enough, and we'll just keep doing it to keep busy. We're not really accomplishing anything permanent."

"It isn't the swift takeover we had planned, is it?" Tom agreed, his mouth screwing down.

"No. It isn't."

"Do you want to leave here, then?" He wanted to know.

She considered that a moment. It wasn't a difficult decision. "No," she said. "We might have to, to do what we need, though. You still want to fight back, don't you?"

"Yes. I do." There was likewise no doubt there, nor when he softly added, "But I don't want to leave, either."

She drew a thoughtful breath, blinked slowly. "Bala said that once Azlre was on its feet, he might reconsider. We need to discuss this with him and Bakali."

Tom nodded. "How about tomorrow?"

"It's as good a time as any."

Their gazes still locked, Tom moved to kneel before her, barely creaking the floorboards as his knees found them. Then he was looking slightly up to her, unblinking, and he reached up to touch her forehead. She did not resist, though she closed her eyes, stilling herself with the feel of his warm, tender fingers pressing against her skin. She inhaled. His scent filled her nostrils as his touches circled her brow's displaced rises, over the fragments that once was her center ridge, around to her crooked temple, back to her hair. It didn't hurt at all anymore, but the skin was still sensitive. A little chill brushed over her neck and back.

When she opened her eyes again, slightly misted, his deep, unblinking gaze warmed her immediately. She felt his look beat in her heart, twinge deeper still within her. She drew a small breath. It still amazed her sometimes, how powerful it could be...

"Tsi'a tsu yets me abbro," she whispered. She knew he did. She knew his true self, too. They had not forgotten Bala and Bakali's gift to them, the sight of their beings. They never would.

He eased her down and kissed her brow, soft and fair with healing and shade. "Tsi'i tsujis yeta'o mes vi'a ye'a," he responded softly, and then choked a sigh when her small hand touched his neck.

"Ah, I bore nineteen years, dear kinisi'i, when I took my chosen name, one cycle of Tb'rras before I took my steps in the silag, consecrated my union with my bondmate by entering the novitiate.... My name of birth? The name my parents gave unto me was only lent by their blessing; it is no longer my own. The scholarship is a great responsibility; in it, one humbly gives away all things of youth and dedicates one's self to the honor of knowledge and dedication to sharing that knowledge with others.

"Not all of Desal was fit for this journey. Known were we as scholars, yet only a fifth of our population took their vows as students at the institute. Less than a sixth were truly scholars.

"Yet enough years are yours that you may bear this explanation. In the lush days of Desal, stretching thousands of years into our history, the scholarship was a great body among the citizens. Our noble regents had been in state; in a glorious time, all its realms were cared for beneath their loving eye, and yet these honored regents were yet a center to all things Desalian. They bore advice from the scholarship--were nearly all scholars themselves--and were enlightened by our blessed word painters, who, like our good lady Tshedydi, wove the words of our ancestors and their own, deriving meaning from them as teachers of our most minute histories.

"In the provinces, however, in the land surrounding each institute, the scholarship was a place of knowledge and guidance, of fair advice and public contest when there was an agreement to be sought. Each scholar had a trade--a special place of their work--in which they were trained to their finest potential. I had found fine training in teaching our youth. Bakali's trade found natural medicine. Others trained in physical medicine, the histories, the psychological practices, technological arts and physics among the many sciences, agricultural development--many, many trades.

"In the span of six thousand revolutions, through fifteen great houses of the Regency, Desalia grew and thrived in this manner. The true regency bore the weight of its world and was a symbol for our oneness. When this degraded, all others followed.

"Ignorant of this change, our indulgences continued. Many bore eyes so blinded by pleasure our future terror could hardly be seen, even as it sat just upon us. Most in our highborn houses were no exception, even while some of our neighbors were consumed by the consequences of standing against the poor policies of the time. My graduation to the novitiate was a lavish event, my robes like spun bronze so soft they barely made weight upon my shoulders. My hair was tied in beads of t'vi'usad crystals and my blessed bondmate looked as though every grace in creation had fitted her array, dressed in the morning sky and shining like sunlit water. We stepped together in the ancient dance, consecrating our journey to be taken together; we drank sirril wine and sang of our love and youth.

"Sobering at the rise of our next sun, we took ourselves to our parents and guests and humbly asked their blessing, and chose our names of being. Our parents proudly touched us with gentle words and kissed us in their joy for our spiritual maturity. We rose and turned for the silag, where we would be cleansed and reclothed, then led to the altar to pray for our great ancestors, our families and our own spirits. Deep in meditation, we would discover our truest spirits for the first time and be permitted at the threshold of eternity, as would be done when we soon would bond. Yet, again, our entry into that threshold was withheld; we could only be made aware of what awaited us when someday we would pass. This was the way, and awakening, we were inspired to follow in the path of those we had spied in our journey.

"The great scholarship of our people has not been destroyed, dear children. It is merely relegated to hidden places in our people's midnight--some burrowing among us upon Cezia, or the south ranges at Saha'aten, or within the vast tunnels of Maha'aje. Many of our good elders remain in hiding in the rocks of Trisk Rojis and in the crystal gorges of Brija-Three, where Unar are blind. Our knowledge is passed to those who may bear it well as we await the day the sun shines warms Desal once more. Then we shall again glory in our people's most ancient blessings."

They watched the others smiling at the thought, though Sashana'i's and Aratra's stares grew inward with Bala's, likely for the memories they knew too well.

"Why had Unar left you among us?" Haviki asked. "You as scholars are not hidden."

Bala's gaze turned wisely toward his bondmate, who bent to collect the napkins. Her eyes briefly closed. Then he looked again at the child. "Those words would be painted another sun, kinisi'i."

The present sun was beginning to set, its ruddy rays slipping through the cracks in the shutter. Tom moved to the mantel to stoke the dimming fire. Adjusting the coals, he added a few more shales, and then replaced the grates. B'Elanna looked across at a sedated Haviki, who fumbled with her braids, satisfied with Bala's answers. Holding the child, Cali's smile was gently sad.

"I should hope to meet them someday, our hidden scholars," she said, very softly, as she stroked her daughter's shoulder. A fragment of a thought, it was all she said.

B'Elanna smiled slightly. "Maybe you will...someday."

Another moment of silence passed before Aratra picked up his bondmate's hand to kiss it. "It is time," he said. "Padan shall be returned by this quarter."

Sashana'i nodded, slipping up to her knees then giving Aratra her other arm so he could lift her. "We shall be diligent, Be'i and Toma, in our trade."

Tom looked up at them. "Don't take anything less than thirty grams of that Mihoran crystal. It only has a quarter the capacity of a good shot of photonic plasma and he knows it."

"He shall make his attempt regardless," Aratra grinned as he pulled on his coat. "We shall be wise."

She would have difficulty bearing children, should she grow with child.

Bakali, with the aid of the newly repaired equipment, could easily make this diagnosis. One simple scan and her eyes had darkened with a knowledge she knew all too well for herself, long ago. She did not have the equipment to treat the remaining damage-- "As yet," the gentle elder assured them both, her smile a well of strength as she touched their joined hands. "I shall procure your treatment, Child. This is promised."

Sashana'i and Aratra took it well enough. She in particular had faith in the future. There was a time nearly nine years past when all seemed as bleak, and bleaker still when she nervously offered herself to Maghet in trade for desperately needed medicines. At the time, she was completely ignorant of Unar physiology--more ignorant still of their practices with alien women. She became accustomed to it. It was not as painful as it was uncomfortable and humiliating. The trades were worth the cost, she convinced herself, and worth the small dose of power it afforded her. The sickness she often suffered afterwards was temporary. Likewise, when her time at Uillar was ended, she had gratefully put that time away as generous payment for her people's sins.

She did not anticipate that her choice would follow her so far--and did not wish to believe her presently barren state was fate's balance for the murder of Hychar. A demon of his viciousness had the right to join what had spawned him, if only by the hands of the house he had so brutally attempted to make suffer and destroy. Her own weighted conscience was the balance. She yet had faith in Bakali's dedication and her healing. Aratra did as well. They needed only be patient, as always.

For that matter, she had far more to wish for than children just then.

The sun had nested into the hills, though the dusk shed more than enough light to navigate Azlre. The warm breezes wafted through and around the alleys into the main street where she and Aratra, her hand on his arm, walked steadily east, towards the bazaar. They greeted friends and acquaintances, allowed the bows to be lower than their own. It had become a comfort to her there, their respect and willingness to follow, another source of hope. She would require their compliance.

Coming to the first vendors, where work was still traded even after dinner, Aratra cheerfully greeted Tahinka, a boyhood friend of Sacezia, who after a service in an Antral house had been deposited back to the wrong city. He had been there since, weaving joth and crissij fur for his bread.

"Remain and speak with our friend, my spirit," Sashana'i said easily to her bondmate as he and Tahinka laughed over the latter's child's first taste of sirril. "I shall bargain the trade."

Aratra touched her, giving her a quizzical little grin as he regarded her. "Bear you certainty, my lady? You should not be left to the claws of Koba currency."

"I am well able to procure our trade," Sashana'i scolded him. "It is well known you are far less able at it than I."

Aratra chuckled. "Then I shall await you while you stir your laundry with Padan and prove that knowledge."

She rolled her eyes with a knowing smile, but bowed to their friend, took the infuser and left a moment later. She worshipped her bondmate without question, he who had stood by without jealousy or ire during their dark years at Uillar. It pleased her more than ever to see his natural mischief return to him upon their return to their birthworld, even if he did pick at her traits like a playful bird.

She turned into the nook leading to Padan's flat, a large space in comparison to the corners and crevices that Desalians lived in; idly, she admired the remnants of the murals painted long ago on those once rich entry walls.

That we might see it again, she mused with bittersweet reflection on memories not her own, running her hand along the faded colors as she neared Padan's ajar doors then brought it down to pull the latch. Then--

"Ulllosk mik bawajopkreek ohkragerratus is."

Sashana'i stilled at the dialect.

It was Unar.

Her stomach fell and her hand impulsively clutched on the long handle of the door. The Unar words came again and she instantly heard speak of coordinates. Mindlessly, she opened the door, a natural impulse to hear more.

"Only the Trisjorr district," the voice continued. "As part of our bargain, you will only do this much. They will find their lesson in it."

Padan stood before a nicely repaired communications system, his long robe and burgundy hair hanging neatly down his thin back. The remainder of his house was...unfurnished. Sashana'i's chest fluttered and pounded as her eyes took it in, and her brain turned the sight into a comprehensible conclusion.

Padan finished his words, clicked off the comm. Then, he paused, taking in the slightly moved air. "Who has entered?" he calmly asked.

Sashana'i could not speak. When he turned, he seemed at first annoyed to see her--perhaps not someone else. Otherwise, he showed little emotion.

"You have heard," he said.

Sashana'i moved only to speak. "Why, Padan?" she asked dumbly. For all her experience and memory, she could not see a Koba in line with Unar. "Why court your enemy, who has stolen from you as generously as us? Who bears your wife as a slave?"

"It is the only way," he replied.

She shook her head. "To what? --Padan, this must be stopped."

"It shall be the only way to stir your frozen blood," he told her and stepped closer. The lady did not move, not afraid of him yet trembling with her knowledge. "And yet, good lady Sashana'i of the Allanois house, of your blessed regency, I know your desire, too. You wish Toma and Be'i to fight the Unar--to cleanse the plague that has raped your people. This cannot be denied. Your blood cannot lie to me."

"Not through the passings of my own people," she responded, feeling tears sting her eyes. "I would fight. This is truth. Yet to employ such mercenary manners cannot be. Our trades, your equipment--you would seek to destroy it? For our passionate revival?"

"No resistance in Irrlae shall be successful without the passion of Desalia. We have tried to stir you and found only failure. Your former dominion was vast, your people powerful. Though you live like peasants now, you bear wisdom and cunning, and numbers within Unar walls far beyond all others. Without your dedication and technology, we only try in vain. As for the equipment, I have carefully instructed my contact."

Sashana'i felt her blood spinning in a way she hadn't felt since her last acts on Uillar as she glared at the man above her. "You cannot do this--not in your good conscience!" she told him.

"I already have--and with a greater conscience, for not only my Iblas, whom Unar do hold in servitude and misery, but for my people, and even yours as well. Yet think I find cheer in my only choice? I would not have remained at Cezia were I not pleased with your kind. Regardless, your people have become too comfortable in their guilt. Through this tragedy, there shall be change." Padan held the young woman's wide, gold-lit stare, leaned a bit towards her as if to make his point clearer. "The hope you have sewn in this city shall be desecrated. If this does not anger your people, then Unar have already taken what is left of your blessed spirits and eaten it as candy. You would already be dead, and so the destruction shall not have mattered. Yet, either way, Toma and Be'i shall be incensed. They should make fine members of the resistance."

Sashana'i's eyes hardened immediately to know the gist of his plan. "You shall not take them! They are of *my* house and their own fate! Your attempt to manipulate them is complete arrogance!"

"They are outsiders," he corrected, pleased to see the passion emanating from the young Desalian's face. Indeed, it was very good to see, even better than Bala's acceptance of the trades. "And their truest selves are disposed to the fight. They admit this in your own tongue. And you encourage this."

"They yet would *never* wish the destruction of Desal to secure their aims!"

"Desal shall not be destroyed," he assured, stepping back to his console. Taking a small component into his hand, he turned again and aimed it at her. "And nor shall the Allanois. You are needed in your rank among your people, who require its regents. Rather, you shall be saved."

"Yet it is inequitable!" Sashana'i insisted.

"It shall be regardless," he replied simply, bowing his head. "My regards to your friends and bondmate, Sashana'i of Allanois, and to you. We shall not meet again, I should think."

"Please!" Sashana'i pleaded, holding her hands forward. "I beg you, good man, do wait. Allow us--Gye!"

With a press of his finger, she was silenced.

Padan lowered the stun pistol as the Desalian lady collapsed to the floor in a pile of hair and robes, her small body lost beneath. The last of the current trickled out through her outspread fingers; examining her a moment, he saw her taking tiny breaths. A few minutes was all he needed, he knew.

Quietly, he assembled his gear, sure that he left nothing of importance. Reactivating the comm system, he called for the ship he had arranged for just before making the final deals with his Unar contact. When he passed over her body to put himself in position to transport, he noticed the dilithium infuser half exposed in her pocket.

She had brought it in faith, he knew, just another trade for another replication power source. In good, Desalian faith.

Padan's lips curled up into thin grin as he reached into one of his duffels and found a canister of pure photonic plasma. It was enough to recharge a ship's main generator--and then some. He knew at Dviglar, there were ships that could be brought to health, so his choice was practical, he thought. He placed the canister beside her.

He did not take the infuser. In as good of faith as hers, he left it where it belonged, where it would likely find better use. He walked calmly to his gear again, closed his eyes to his room and waited.

Moments later, he dematerialized.

"Bakali!" Aratra screamed, feeling his lungs burn with the exertion. His bondmate, limp in his arms, jostled carelessly with his frantic pace.

When he had felt the crush in his chest at the bazaar, Tahinka had to steady him as he recovered. It took some time and his wildest thoughts nearly knocked him down again. But he did stand, stumbled through the bazaar and into the back row to Padan's flat. The door had been locked, but with Tahinka's help, they managed to get it open, only to find the flat empty and his bondmate on the floor in a heap.

His feet pounded on the stone streets as he ran, his breath puffed hard in the dry air. Though she was of little weight, her unconsciousness made her feel like a fo'aj of lead. But he ran anyway, passing people he barely noticed, smelling with every gasp the burn on her shoulder, crying out for their elder even though he was only halfway through the Kikull District.

He had waited with her, suffered, starved and stood again with her, followed her willingly to horrific Uillar, bore the excruciating weight of her legacy with her upon their bonding, felt her sacrifice to Unar each and every time she had to go to Mahget, held her as she expelled the curse of it and cried weakly in his arms. She had convinced herself that it was just payment, and he had given his sad blessing to her chosen suffering. He had resigned to suffer, too, for what he had come to believe through Dulla and through her. He had faith in their plans and hope for Desal's freedom. He had no other choice but to trust their union and all that would have to come from it...

"Bakali!" he shouted again, his voice cracking. He had finally come to the east entry of the square, and not a few shutters opened to see the source of such terrified screams.

But then a rumble sounded behind him, to the southeast--familiar thunder not of nature's making. His memory knew that atmospheric disturbance...

Why should Padan disable Sashana'i? his mind began to turn. Take his belongings and himself away from Cezia without warning? The rumble sounded again, closer, above and beyond in the evening sky.

Aratra felt his blood drain and he turned back towards the clinic again. "Bala! Bakali! Toma, Be'i! All Desal! We are under attack!"

Three stories above the street, Tom stirred at the echoes of voices and commotion and drowsily wondered what thunder was doing at Azlre that time of year. Pulling his head from the mattress, he heard the rumble again, and then...yelling? That much was coming from the square below, so he couldn't quite decipher it. But something wasn't right... Then the thunder steadied...

It wasn't thunder.

"B'Elanna, wake up!" he whispered loudly, shaking her. Her eyes opened then turned upon hearing the same thing her mate had.

"That's not a transport ship," she knew immediately. She then paled when she heard the screams--"*Jorrabki'o! Gabikych!*"--to vacate--to run.

"I think--"

"I'brrelo!" The floor flap opened and Bala's head popped through. In the light pouring up from the main room, he saw they were awake and nodded quickly. "Toma, Be'i, bring yourselves. There is trouble."

They needed no second request.

They scrambled down into the clinic just as Sashana'i clutched at her elder's robes, crying openly. "They shall destroy the Trisjorr district!" she wept. "This is my doing! My doing! I could not sway him! My words would not be heard!"

Coming around the table, Tom moved to catch her desperate stare. "Who, Sashana'i?" he demanded. "Who's doing this?"

"Unar!" she cried. "They are brought here by Padan!"

"What?!"

"He wishes to bring fury to our spirits," she told them, reaching out to grab the sleeve of Bala's robe, "as we have lived in peace and you who have honored us. His desperation and my curse...my curse!"

Tom and B'Elanna's eyes locked as Sashana'i buried herself in Bala's arms, begging forgiveness. But the old man was thinking quickly despite her sobs and their shock. "Take yourself to Miztri and Dalra and Latsari and Bolmra!" he told Aratra. "They have just taken themselves to Cali's flat. Send them and others among you to evacuate the east and south districts. Let the word spread like floodwater! Sashana'i bears wellness. Take yourself! --And use care in your action. Little time remains."

Aratra punched the door flying out of it.

B'Elanna was shaking hard as her mind put the pieces together. She knew well what she and Tom had been repairing for the marketer. Releasing her breath as Sashana'i wept aloud her guilt again, she went to the table and gave the people there a solid stare.

"This is my fault, Sashana'i, not yours," she said. "Tom and I were the ones to deal with Padan. We were the ones who fixed his comm system and everything else. He used us--and we knew he was up to something, just not what."

"B'Elanna's right," Tom said, not liking having to admit that, but damned if he'd let their friend take the blame for something she was barely involved in. "Their deaths are on our hands--mine really. I made the deal."

"And this was permitted by me," Bala told them both. "I likewise welcomed it, both in word and in my spirit. We all bear responsibility, Children, for procuring a man of twisted intentions an inspiration. Yet the fate he has put into action was truly his own action, not ours. We know this in our good spirits. What is of importance now is not our guilt--a thing we all share and cannot reverse. Rather, the preservation of Azlre should concern us at present."

The rumble of ships' engines steadily became louder and the elder steadied his nerves, if only as an example to the others, who looked ready to bolt from their very skins if to take themselves, too, to Trisjorr. "Bakali, remain with Sashana'i. Toma, bring the glowglobes and our cloaks. We cannot retain those meant to pass, yet our share of the remainder shall indeed be ours."

Tom ran for the stairs, but a sudden roar of fire and a crash deep into the ground threw him forward against the hard steps. "Damn!" he cried out, both in pain and at the heightened horror being realized in the city. Outside, a wave of screams rose and echoed through the clinic as Bakali jumped to secure her patients in the other room, telling them to remain. Tom scrambled to his feet and continued forward.

B'Elanna rushed to the window at the crash, but she could see nothing, not even a ship, though its thrusters rattled the entire house and she could practically smell the antimatter waste. People were scattering toward the west gate, out of Azlre's perimeter. She could understand. They didn't know.

Then, a burst shot out from the black sky, a bright red phaser beam planting itself into the southeast side of the city. She pressed her fingers to the window.

Suddenly, she couldn't move, though she grasped the shutter when the reverberations from the hit in the Trisjorr District rumbled through the floor again then grew stronger, making her knees shake. Her heart beat harder, fluttered with dread as she realized what was happening, and she swallowed the horror for all her inability to do anything otherwise.

There wasn't a damn thing she could do but watch.

As much as she hated it, she could only hold on and hope that those poor, helpless, unsuspecting Desalians would go quickly. Their friends, people they had chatted with, bowed to and smiled at--apprentices...children... She hoped they were right and their souls really would go to their ancestors. She hoped whomever survived district wouldn't suffer.

But she knew from experience that there *would* be suffering--and not all would die well.

The Unar fired again, a long, rounding shot in the same vicinity as the last. The panes rattled; the floor shook. Somehow, the ceiling didn't come down on them. The buildings never looked as though they'd withstand as much, but they creaked and quaked, and stubbornly held on.

She still couldn't do anything--wouldn't. There wasn't any use in it. She had no ship, no weapons--no defense at all. If the Unar beamed down and decided to use them all for target practice, she could fight

them a little, but they would win. She would die just like any other there.

She knew that shamefully well and hated it the most.

She jumped when she felt Tom drape her cloak over her shoulders. She then glanced up to his pained face, now aimed at the terrified people, still running in the light of the phaser fire.

They watched from those windows only a moment more. When yet another hit came down, Tom grabbed her hand.

"Where do you take yourselves?" Bala asked. He was still pulling his robe over his thin shoulders.

"Outside to do *something!*" Tom returned and pulled B'Elanna out to the front patio. She jerked back before he got to the step. He spun around. "What?!"

"It's not safe, Tom!" she insisted.

"What the hell's safe in Azlre right now!? Come *on!*" But for his yank, she yanked him back twice as hard.

"Tom, it's no use." She turned her head up to him, taking his arm in her hand. "What *can* we do? We can't stop it. We have nothing here that'll defend us."

He choked a breath to hear it. Her tone was as sure as ever, but her words were telling him exactly what he didn't want to admit at that point. "But we can at least go out there--warn them," he told her.

"By the time we get there, it'll be over," she returned, holding his stare. "Tom, we have to wait until they go away. It's not safe to go anywhere."

"Bullshit! We have to get out there!"

"For what?! They'll still be gone! Tom, it's already over!" Another blast and she gripped his arm for support, choking out a tearless sob as the people on the street stopped a moment to brace themselves. A child somewhere cried out and a mother swept him away. Another man grabbed his frantic woman, dragging her towards the west gate. B'Elanna's head dropped, and she shook it from side to side in frustration. "Damnit, don't you think I *want* to do something? But we can't! There's nothing...nothing right now."

Tom stilled, watching her try to compose herself. He too was shaking from head to toe, ready to act, knowing that on the other side of the city, a whole district was being plundered. A single Unar ship still loomed in the atmosphere, shaking the entire city and likely terrifying every citizen in it. He could only imagine the sight at every gate...

But B'Elanna wouldn't move. More, she was holding him there, trying to keep him from wasting his time and safety on something against which they were powerless. They wouldn't stop the people from running, or save anyone in the district from anything already done. They surely couldn't stop the Unar. They'd have plenty of time to act after, in the aftermath.

She was right. He felt his blood drain, felt himself shaking his head, even while he knew...He knew it before but had convinced himself otherwise. It was an old instinct neither had wanted to give up.

That night, they would have to.

Disengaging her grip, he pulled her to him, embracing her firmly on the step of the clinic, closing his eyes against the rest. There, they trembled together, perhaps not in fear as much as the strain of remaining unmoved in the chaos, reminding themselves over that to move would be more foolish than their inaction would be hellish. So they waited, and they hated every second, every jostle and noise.

The smoke was making its way into their noses, blew around and through their cloaks. An acrid odor, probably for the composition of the stones being burned black...and the people...Meeting their ancestors, he told himself over and over, forcing himself to believe it.

Bala found them there. Tom didn't address him. He bent his head into B'Elanna's hair, further blocking out the view, filtering his nose from the dust and smoke, feeling his tight chest stubbornly hold back from breaking.

I can't even cry anymore, he thought, burrowing his face more deeply into her thick curls. That edge of tears, combined with too many senses and feelings assaulting him, dissolved into a strange numbness and stranger stillness. The sounds on the street and in the distance faded away, the smells were gone. His eyes closed, so he saw none of it for the mean time, either, and there would be another time to cry for it all. All he knew was that he was holding a small, shivering body against his own, waiting desperately, silently, for their enemy to leave them.

Just like the Desalians had been doing for over sixty years.

Of their sixteen students, only Mazji, Yorlla and Rrebna survived. They lived in the north district.

The bazaar, a natural separator between the east and central districts, was rattled and weakened but otherwise unharmed.

In the fire that raged after the initial attack, not only Trisjorr, but several neighborhoods around it were damaged beyond livability. In all, approximately twenty thousand citizens perished, most in their sleep, when the Unar fired upon their buildings; thousands more perished in the fires that followed, when they did not or could not evacuate quickly enough.

People were still dying, in the clinic and around it; the replicators were put into full use to treat the equal numbers of wounded. It simply wasn't enough for some, however.

In the rubble that remained, Tom and B'Elanna helped to uncover the bodies trapped there, and to salvage any materials to be passed on to others in need. Silently, they bent to their chosen work, side by side with hundreds of others in the same sacred duties, pulling with callused and scraped hands the stone and metal away.

They remained near Miztri and Dalra, who were far better able to maintain their labor. B'Elanna arranged that, as their friends knew when to stop them from overexerting themselves, particularly Tom, who had to wrap his torso to hold his weak ribs steady and stave off some of the pain. Later, they crawled into their bunks, into each other's arms, silent lest they scream and completely exhausted.

They had worked to be certain they were exhausted.

The bodies they found were in pieces or burnt beyond recognition, though the robe of one looked

familiar, and they had seen that toy rolling around on the street at one time. They tried not to think of the child that had played with it, tried not to recall the blankets that one aired outside on lines, or were shaken on the streets, or the etched water pail they'd seen some man carrying. They pushed it all out and continued to work.

They even recognized their own labors in recently repaired solar units. They were useless, though, after that much damage.

The stench would have been unbearable had it not been for the seasonally cool breeze pushing away the worst of it. After a couple days, it was sickening despite that relief. It would be many months before the rains would come and wash whatever remained away. Until then, it would take several more suns for the rot to fade.

In respect for all their people, Bala had postponed the ceremonies for the passed until the population was properly calmed after that horrific violence in their city. After nearly twelve years of non-interference, the return of Unar had shocked them all--and the elders and regents wisely did not publicize the cause of it. More, for the improvements in the city of late, their better health and sanitation, many found it discouraging, in the least.

Bala had heard the comments in passing; others had brought their troubles to him and Bakali while offering their service to the overburdened clinic. They spoke of hopes they had never known and the pain of being crushed, worried for their spirits that they had wished more, wished a reprieve of their terrible fate. Bala gently told them all that progress might yet be meant, and that hope and improvement was never a vain disposition in moderation. Faith had need to be tested. Only time and strength would show their true path.

It was odd to find in their once compliant people, Bakali thought, but good. Her fellow citizens truly did not wish to return to that darker time, when Unar loomed over them in constant threat and demand; they sincerely desired to better their lives, had begun to grow past Desal's redemption with but a little impetus, without relinquishing their humility. It may have seemed selfish to some to strongly desire continued progress, but the elder knew it was far more natural.

"And yet, it is likely that our improvement was not meant. Our weakness for desire has been tested; the answer has been given."

B'Elanna glanced up from her water and vegetable wrap to the man sitting near the clinic steps. Dusk having descended upon the city, the salvagers had set aside the rest of their day for their dinner. Yet instead of eating inside, since the attack, they, like many neighborhoods, had chosen to eat outside among others, even if Tsi'omad was several days away. The Desalian community had a tendency to gather themselves more closely than ever when conflict faced them. The square was unusually crowded.

Tom looked up too, catching Bakali's sharp stare for the man's pointed and insensitive statement. Nearby, Dalra and Miztri hadn't reacted, but had certainly heard. Across, Sashana'i just shook her head, not surprised, as the man had often been among those who had long spoken against change in Azlre. But finding Tom's attention, Bakali begged his silence with a slow nod. Tom breathed against his reaction, but only for her requesting it.

To his relief, B'Elanna spoke up. Still staring at Chorsa, she had not noticed the elder's silent request.

"Testing by whom?" she asked, training whatever neutrality she could into her tone.

"By our spirits, corrupted still," he answered simply.

That time, B'Elanna bit her lip. She knew if she started, she wouldn't stop. She knew if she opened her mouth...

Tom couldn't obey that time. "The only corrupted spirits here are the Unar," he said.

B'Elanna let out her breath.

"You may assert this," Chorsa said, "and yet it is your gift for which we pay."

"Gye ak tra'ol," Bala said firmly. "Chorsa, you may not blame Be'i and Toma for actions permitted by me. Their labors offered no addition of debt."

"I bow humbly to you, my good elder, yet I would disagree."

"I bet you would," B'Elanna muttered and finished off her meal. Drinking the rest of her water, she scooted to her feet. "I'm tired. I'm retiring for the night."

Tom stood, too. He could tell B'Elanna wasn't about to listen to Chorsa--or anyone else--accuse them of something they'd already thought of, that they were to blame for what happened there. They had been working four days straight with that on their minds, twisting "what ifs" in their consciences with a force they'd almost forgotten in their time on Cezia. It was just as troubling to know that their penchant for overly critical self analyses came back so well. They'd thought themselves somewhat over that.

But they both knew they hadn't caused those deaths; they'd said so several times by then. It brought little comfort to either of them.

"No addition of debt would be truth," Chorsa added, "would Be'i and Toma bear no inclination to actions much like Unar, in violence and selfishness."

Tom spun around, pinning his glare onto Chorsa's, whose responding look was expectant. "At least we don't sit around and thank the Unar for blessing us with a life of pain."

Bala sighed. "Toma, little sense lies in this debate."

"You're right about that," he returned. "*None* of this makes sense. People like Chorsa will hold Desalia in chains until you're all wiped out."

"While you earn our debts in threefold," Chorsa countered quietly.

"Who the hell are you to say who earns the debt?" B'Elanna finally responded.

Dalra knew immediately where that was going. "Be'i, this ancient argument--"

"Is beginning again," she cut in. Her blood had already begun to rise, after too long of holding it back, of feeling that powerlessness, of trying day after day to accept their situations there--not to mention working all day under a hot hood, pulling body parts out of the rubble of an Unar attack.

"Answer me, Chorsa--Ak tsau ye'o," B'Elanna demanded. "Have the ancestors granted *you*--a lowborn,

uneducated joth clipper--the right to say who makes things worse around here?"

Her seething insult did manage a blink in the man. "No trouble preceded your presence," he told her.

"There was trouble for over *sixty years* before our presence! And you still just let them roll over you--for what?" B'Elanna gestured around to the others there. "So Bala and Bakali could watch their baby die? So Sashana'i could get her tongue sliced and have the Unar screw her for hyposprays? So Cali and Haviki could get l'efa back in five pieces after waiting for three years to get him back whole? So Dalra and Miztri could lose all their five children? So Tom and I could get the crap beat out of us by an Unar maniac? So *all* of your people could starve and drop dead of simple diseases? What the hell kind of balance is *any* of this insanity? What kind of payment is it to watch your own people suffer year after year?! *You* earn your *own* debt by not honoring your past--by making the same damned mistakes over and over!"

Dalra had moved to his feet during B'Elanna's tirade. Indeed, he had not seen her so upset since Uillar, and it had caught the attention of nearly the entire square.

"Be'i," he gently reminded her, hoping she would hear him, "the crime of our past must be paid for."

"For how long?!" she responded. "And you haven't learned anything. You gave up on everyone around you, just like your forebears did!"

Sashana'i straightened, feeling a wash of vindication to hear her adopted sibling's perfect point find the their people's piqued attention. She squeezed her bondmate's hand as she worked to suppress her otherwise inappropriate smile. "How, Be'i, has this not been learned?" she queried, loud enough for their audience to hear. "Please, tell our people how." She might have told Chorsa herself, but she wanted it said--publicly and with the passion B'Elanna was so adept at conveying.

B'Elanna didn't disappoint her. "Your grandparents and great grandparents turned their backs on everyone crying out for help, ignoring every threat and crime around them to keep living in their comforts and indulgences. I have seen this through Bala and Bakali." She looked at Chorsa again. "Aside from having everything your heart desires, you live without a care for anyone but yourselves--the suffering on all those other worlds who desperately *still* need help, your own children, your families--*everyone*--because you're too used to not doing anything but walking around in circles all day and wasting away your life without any purpose. You're just as lazy and irresponsible as they were! You've learned nothing but how to be poor and victimized!"

With her completion, the silence of the area around them was painfully noticeable. Every eye was turned to the clinic and the strong willed couple standing there. The dark woman, confronting outright a humble man with her mate standing by, would not sit again. And her accusation, echoing through the square, paled even the heartiest facade.

The elders, too, felt this clearly. "Be'i and Toma, Chorsa, all," Bala said with a calming breath, "this is a matter of public debate and--"

"Then we'll make it," Tom interjected, moving forward to take B'Elanna's hand. Looking out at the curious gazes, he took a deep breath. "Zha brrile! Ak me'o Desal a'o lluas!"

Chorsa finally stood and moved on the other side of Dalra, who seemed to have already positioned himself as an intermediary. Sashana'i gave her arm to Aratra, who helped her to her feet. Bowing formally, she took a place by Dalra, her back straight and brows raised. She was anxious to hear their

exchange, indeed.

It was time.

Bakali closed her eyes and felt her bondmate's hand squeezing her arm gently. Taking a deep breath, she reminded himself that some challenge was bound to happen with the understandable discouragement of late in the city. Her charges, too, had grown quiet and short-spoken since Trisjorr, a sign of deep anger, she knew of them by then. She gave a solemn nod. "Speak your minds, good children, and know they are conveyed to a proper audience."

"By the right of a citizen," Chorsa said immediately, "I would contest your additions to this city and to our people. Your ambition clouds our minds and sets hope for that which cannot be--*should* not be. We were born unto our sorrow and taught by our parents to believe in our contrition. In *their* honor, we obey and live humbly, in the debt of Unar, who freed us of our hedonism.

"The balance of our nature shall be returned to us when this debt is paid off and the Unar have spent their depravity to its limit. Yet your crimes and your undue influence of our humbler ways to fall back into our unnecessary pleasures must not continue. You increase our debt in causing us to regress to that other time, which we have endeavored to cleanse ourselves of."

He bowed to Bala, and then to Bakali. "I am a man of few words, yet I believe my argument is sensible. It is also well known in our own teachings. Thus, this is all I may say, and this view shall not be relinquished."

B'Elanna shook her head. "I've heard that argument so many times, I could throw up," she snapped. "I pulled a five year-old from a pile of sandstone out there. Do you think I'm going to say or feel nothing about that? Well, I won't. That little girl never even had time to live."

"It is not for us to decide the fate of a child," Chorsa said.

"Bullshit!" B'Elanna shot back. "You heartless bastard, how can you say that? She was crushed to death! How can you rationalize that as some blessed fate?!"

Dalra hadn't even wanted the conversation to go so far--and suddenly he couldn't help but wish he were in his rickety overhang again, speaking around the quiet fire in the cold air. "Be'i, you speak for your sorrow," he said.

"I speak for *justice!*" B'Elanna bellowed. "Justice--which is in all fairness, balance--and you've got none of that here! They didn't pass to the spirits--they were *sent* there! They didn't even pass--they were slaughtered! Children *slaughtered* in their sleep! Your friends and family, burned and mutilated and smashed by people without enough honor to show their hairy, white faces when they *murdered* your people. How can you dare say you adore life, worship experience to feed your spirits with, when you would let those monsters take those lives whenever they wished it?! You are *all* hypocrites, just rationalizing away your own fear to act."

"You needn't insult us all, Be'i," Dalra scolded quietly. "We have lived in purification. This argument has already been made."

"And I challenge it!" she returned. "For all you know, you're just twisting yourselves up even further! You say it is your fate to suffer through this life--what about your children? And their children? By the time your debt is paid off, Desal will be so diluted it won't even exist anymore! You can't just lie here like

your parents and your grandparents and pass *your* responsibility to pay off that debt onto children who are just as innocent!"

At that, Tom took a step forward. "And exactly what *right* do the *Unar* have to make you pay in the first place?" he demanded. "The *Unar* are not *Desalian*. They're the spit of *Prihar* that you *invite* to keep you under their heels and make a whore out of the remainder of your regency. They have dishonored and manipulated everything about your people they could touch. And it worked: You have yourselves in so tight a theological knot you're afraid to break yourselves by fixing it. It won't stop, as much as you think they weaken with their own corruption. They have you right where they want you, convincing *yourselves* that you deserve this. They won't give that up--*ever*--and it will only get worse with time."

The square fell silent again. For several long moments, barely a breath stirred the air around the challenge and the watchful elders. Meanwhile, at *Dalra's* side, *Sashana'i* tried down her grin Tom's argument sunk into the horrified faces of her citizens.

For her part, *Bakali* nodded slowly as she raised her hand to them all. "Your arguments shall be heard as befits tradition, yet not at the expense of *Sashana'i's* heavy sacrifice."

"*Zhall ye'a*," Tom said, echoed by *B'Elanna*, who drew a slow breath, paced a few steps, willing her energy down. It had been too long since she had voiced her frustration and pain. The head of it gone, however, she began to think again. Then the oddest thing that could have come to her mind did just that, and she surprised herself to think it might just make sense to them.

Then she wondered why she hadn't thought of it before.

"Fine," she said, noticeably contained and that time looking out to the very observant onlookers: Her and Tom's surviving students, their neighbors, all their acquaintances and friends. *Their* people, she knew, and suddenly she knew her real purpose there, too. She was speaking not to challenge *Chorsa*--as if she could convince the likes of him, anyway. She was speaking for the people who *had* responded to their work there, their desire to improve things there, who wanted change and a future, and whose hope and faith had been tested.

For that matter, she knew it was well past her turn to tell a story.

"When I was girl," she began, thinking of how to put it even as she spoke, "I used to run off alone to play in the woods. I was...unhappy; I liked to be alone because it was easier that way. I never let people near me, even if I wanted them to be near at the same time. I was so scared that they wouldn't accept me that I prevented the trouble by secluding myself.

"I used to imagine all kinds of things, things I'd do when I grew up--getting away from my homeworld, mainly, having adventures, meeting all kinds of exotic people, all that. Looking back, I guess it was sort of normal for a lonely little kid. I pretended I had invented all sorts of things, climbed trees, dreamed I was anywhere but there.

"One day, when I was embroiled in some fantasy, I saw a mouse eating a mushroom--a little field mouse, nibbling away. My mother used to tell me that mice were dirty and not worth their meat--don't ask. But I was fascinated by it, especially since I had never seen one sit still for so long. I wasn't near enough to scare it away, so I watched it. I remember wanting to touch it, play with it, even if it might have bitten me.

"Well, while I was deciding what to do and before I knew it was there, an owl flew down and pounced

on that mouse. I jumped back. It'd surprised me, coming out of nowhere like that. Before I could think to scare the bird away, it had already turned the mouse onto its back. And the mouse just *stayed* there. It hadn't been injured. It could have run away. But it didn't do anything, just sat there with its legs straight out, waiting for the owl to kill it. And it did. The owl opened its beak and tore the guts out of the mouse then grabbed it by its hind leg and carried it off to eat it. The mouse was still twitching when the owl flew away, squealing a little, too."

She looked around again. She knew from the various animal tales she had heard around fires in Azlre that her story was a somewhat grisly one. Several people who had been curious at first had paled at its concluding imagery.

"But you know," she said, pointedly casting her stare at Chorsa, "any biologist would tell you that it's only the food chain and the owl feeding on the mouse is just an act of nature. The mouse was destined to be slaughtered. Of course, it's also in the mouse's nature to run, to try to preserve itself. It didn't do that, though.

"I never went back to that part of the woods after seeing what I did. I couldn't stand to think I'd see that owl again. Even when I was a teenager and a lot thicker skinned about things like that, I still walked around that place--probably out of habit. But I never forgot what that mouse looked like, what it sounded like. I always wished the little thing would have at least tried to run away."

She looked at Dalra. "Do you remember at Uillar, how I used to say that you were like frightened sheep, just herding by because you were too scared of consequences?"

"How would I forget any of our spirited debates?" he answered, lightly as he knew he hadn't truly regretted them.

B'Elanna laughed quietly, but let her grin fade as she looked out once more, holding for a moment every gaze she found. Drawing a firm breath, she continued. "Well, you're not like sheep. --You're like little mice that Tom and I just happened to find. But we don't want to play with you or watch you from a distance. We have made a home with you, at first because we had nowhere else to go, but now because we want to be here." She felt Tom touch her back.

"But we can't stay like this," she went on, her voice strong and sure, rolling off one voiced thought after another. "You say you don't want improvement because you don't want to go back to those old ways that got you here in the first place. I can understand that to a point. You also say you resist taking your own steps because you're afraid of accepting the Unar poison--the violence and the hate. I can understand that, too. Trust me, you are the purest souls I have ever had the luck of knowing. Things could have been so much worse for Tom and me. We could have not had Dalra and Miztri's help when we were deposited at Uillar. We could have not had Sashana'i and Aratra's friendship and acceptance--or Bakali and Bala's, for that matter--or any of you. Your kindness and generosity saved our lives, and I think we've learned a lot from you.

"Even so, the Unar haven't poisoned you--they've paralyzed you, just like the owl pounced and waited while the mouse sat there, twitching and crying but doing nothing. The Unar have let you get so buried in your own reasoning that they could do just about anything to you and you'd explain it away to your debt. Do you think they don't know that? Haven't capitalized on that? Tom said it first: They have you right where they want you. They're *using* your spirituality against you.

"From day one at Uillar, Hychar trained Tom and me how to be more Desalian--humble and passive, just follow the line, turn your eyes down. And we did it. For the others, we did it, so I can understand

why you came to do it, too. Here, the only thing that kept us from rebuilding those ships at Dviglar was the elders' asking us to make things better here, with replicators and better power and sanitation. We did that, too, because we knew it was for the best. And we don't regret any of it.

"But we need more. We look at this kind of devastation--the murders of all those people, *our* people now--and we can't just say, 'Well, it was meant to be' and move on. That's an excuse, just like the excuse your regency used when it shrugged off its own duty to protect their people and their friends, everything you had.

"You're obeying the wrong lessons of your ancestors--you're doing as much to help your people and sacrifice your comfortable spirits as your so-called blessed elders did. And you will keep going in circles until the Unar have destroyed everything you know. Your technology is gone, your histories and databanks are confiscated, your regency is down to two, your word painters are suppressed and hidden--even here--and your scholarship is no more than vocational school. You barely even pass your memories down anymore.

"The Unar aren't teaching you humility, they are slowly destroying you. A few more generations and you will be nothing more than slaves with a distant memory that won't matter because your grandchildren and great grandchildren will be too busy to care and too empty to regret it.

"Well, Tom and I won't join in that. We refuse to lie here and let them do that to us, too. We've gone through too much to survive to let it go to waste. We need to make more of our lives than that--and we deserve to. So do you."

She was done. She offered her palms then let them fall; then she turned back to Tom. She had said her peace and more, and by the stunned and saddened faces she spied among her audience, she knew they at least had understood her. Giving her a small grin, a single nod, Tom took B'Elanna's hand again and looked at the elders, who also stared up at the woman in frank regard of her words.

"Bakali, Bala." He bowed to a knee, offering B'Elanna's hand in the proper way as she also bent in respect. "My mate and I humbly request you free us from our promise to you. Either allow us to leave Azlre and Cezia, or allow us to build ships that *will* be a real resistance. It doesn't mean we must be merciless. We don't have to destroy life as much as weaken their defenses, disrupt their works--maybe dirty them and reclaim some territory in the mean time.

"One way or another, though, we need to fight back. As Chorsa said, we weren't born here. We can afford whatever sacrifice to our spirits is necessary--and we're willing to make that sacrifice. We could sit around, stay comfortable, but that would betray everything we believe in and feel is right. And it would slowly kill us, especially now, as we've made this decision. You are family to us--you've earned our trust, which is not an easy thing to do. At the same time, we also have our needs, for *our* spirits' health. We have been very patient."

"Ka," Bakali said. "This is truth. You have borne great patience, as well, taken peace into your spirits, opened your minds and accepted much. Azlre's sun has seen much growth in you. Yet I bear fear for you."

"Trust me, we've both done worse than we would ever do to the Unar," Tom said with a slightly careless quirk in his voice. "We don't have the equipment for that."

B'Elanna couldn't help but snicker at that one, though she didn't touch it further.

"My honored elders," came Sashana'i's clear, formal voice as she stepped forward, "before your answer to our friends is made, may I now speak? As sister to Be'i and Toma, and as the blood heir of the Allanois house?"

Bala and Bakali looked at each other before nodding. "It is an ancient right," Bakali said.

Taking a deep breath, bowing her head in thanks, Sashana'i held her hand to Aratra. "Assist me in addressing our people," she said with a quick breath of preparation.

Aratra grinned, glad to know at least one of them would speak. He might well have stood up and cheered for their adopted siblings during their argument. On Uillar, he and Sashana'i had long planned how to spread those same words among their people, even if they must begin it in that camp. Thus, it was indeed gratifying to hear it all voiced for them in not a slow change of minds, but a passionate public debate by two known for their wit and force of feeling. Bringing her hand to his temple, Aratra proudly led Sashana'i to the nearby dais and watched from the top step as she moved forward and looked out upon the people in the square.

"For lack to add to Be'i and Toma's words," she began, increasing her volume as she spoke, "I shall be brief. To public I bring this wish that you publicize this evening's hearing--with fairness to both parties concerned. I respect our good man Chorsa's mind, though I find favor with Be'i and Toma. Yet each end of the spectrum must be known, else it shall be incomplete. We are true Desalians should we give honor to all the views expressed here, in goodness and regard of our kind."

She paused, seeing their compliant nods, then thought carefully. Despite her outer calm, well practiced for years, she yet felt a dizziness come over her as generations of desire, of impressions and pains she bore with herself, finally promised some fruit. She yet knew she needed to take care in her presentation.

"I bring myself before you as Sashana'i of Allanois, spirit-child of Dulla, the last born within the halls of our once great regency. My tola buried his mother, our great and gentle regent, Yusi. She had already taught him in some measure her graciousness and watchfulness and bore into him the spirits of the Allanois legacy as well as her own. My tola took to the life of any ordinary laborer of Cezia with such heavy conscience. He endeavored to live purely, yet with the future embedded in his desire.

"It was Dulla and Aneschi, as well, who bore unto me their teaching when my blessed parents found our ancestors after an epidemic at Sacezia. Their sense of duty and wisdom was bestowed unto me, as well was their mission, that in my time among the living, I should find peace at Desalia. Yes, they knew this could be truth.

"They also believed it would require the sanctity of all our present spirits to achieve this end. Unlike his terrible father and others like him, Dulla believed it was for us to cleanse the way through our own sacrifices. I, a naturally impressionable child, learned of him well, and took far more when upon his deathbed he gave unto me the same Allanois legacy, among his own and Aneschi's. Their desire is utterly embedded in me.

"The regency is mine to give or claim. You have returned this right to me after I relinquished my family name at Uillar. And it would pass upon my word should I wish it. Yet I do not wish this: I and Aratra *do* claim our rank and know our place among you as Regents of Desal. Thus, should you bear truth and believe in our responsibility for you, know that it is keenly felt, that we would accept every sacrifice to find Desal again fine and strong and blessed. My life's purpose is our resurrection and my spirit is for the taking in this desire. It shall gladly be given.

"For my blood alone, you might better despise me. Yet this is not our way. So I shall place myself instead in the position of the despised and bear any burden of conscience and spirit that might suffer in achieving the restoration of Desalia.

"My sister and brother in spirit, Be'i and Toma, should have freedom to act. Living in nature among us, the seed of their beings has been accepted by them, and they would show us loyalty in their choice to make change. I shall not deny them my family or my love for their desire to fight for Desal, yet rather bless them as they have blessed us. They have redoubled my goals and inspired hope in us all. For this alone, my gratitude shall never fade.

"We need not accept the poison of Unar into our beings to engage them, to resist their dominion over all, both innocent and guilty, within Irlae. We need not be selfish in order to procure *our people's* truest beings again. Active hope is not necessarily an arrogant assumption of fate's duty to nature. Rather, it is likely as meant that we assist in that balance, put into thoughtful motion the ideas and blessings our spirits have developed and preserved in us.

"Even in war, my good people, we may find balance. Even in the struggle for freedom, we need not be monstrous. Even in sacrificing a share of our purity for the future of Desal, we yet may certainly be blessed--*should* we make our struggle a pure thing and respect those who have forced our contrition upon us, mutilated nature's gifts by taking it into their own dominion for gain.

"Thus, whatever fight Be'i and Toma join, I shall join as well in Desal's name, should the blessing of our gracious elders be given. Whoever should bear it within their spirit to follow, I shall grant it be their right and *my* responsibility, as I shall both absolve the crime and personally absorb the sin for any citizen among us who chooses to follow my desire. This, I swear upon my eternal spirit. I am your regent in all propriety and accept my duty with Desal's oneness and humility in my own spirit, as is the *true* way.

"I have completed."

With a deep bow to her people, Sashana'i removed herself from the dais, taking her smiling bondmate's hand tightly in her own.

"You were glorious," he whispered into her ear.

"I bore more nervousness than I ever thought possible," she breathed then smiled for Tom and B'Elanna, who stood staring at her, plainly taken by her new policy. She took them both into her arms and embraced them. Feeling their hands touch her back, she drew a happy breath. "We are all one," she told them, "and you are in truth my family now." She kissed them both, touched their temples before she stepped back a pace. She looked at Dalra as he unashamedly dabbed at his eye, and then to Miztri, who wrapped her arms around her former charge.

"I shall stand by you as well, my little kini'isi," she said softly into her ear. "And my spirit need not be claimed by you. I commit myself of my own wishing."

"I shall not fight," Dalra told her, but then offered an assured smile. "Yet I shall support your desires, good regent, as I have always."

"More could never have been asked of you," Sashana'i said graciously.

That settled between them, all six turned to Bakali and Bala, who had remained seated on the sandy curb of the stone street. His soft wrap boots planted flat on that surface, his robed arms crossed easily on

his knees, Bala continued to observe them with well-taught eyes and slightly raised brows. Bakali scanned the crowd, taking in the heavy buzz of translations and reactions.

"Well?" Tom asked.

The elders looked at Chorsa, who turned to his regents first. "Sashana'i, Aratra, of Allanois," he said, stiff but respectful, "I would beg your forgiveness in dissent."

"Your good and honest way is accepted by me and my bondmate, Chorsa of the Decazull house," Sashana'i replied formally then touched his temple in friendship.

Others who had gravitated near to Chorsa added nothing. They would not bend, yet they would not dispute. They had said their peace. They knew their disagreement was respected. Chorsa finally bowed to his elders then took one step back.

Bala looked at his bondmate again, placed his fingers upon her markings, took in her gaze, and then parted. He and Bakali agreed. With her nod, they returned their attention to the children there. For the first time in his life, Bala wished he still bore his youth but with his present wisdom. *Selfish as Bihla, perhaps, yet truth*, he grinned to himself.

They all waited as patiently as any might have expected. This, too, was pleasing. In thanks for that, he put it simply.

"You bear our blessing."

"Not all within the square that moon found oneness with the ambitions of Be'i and Toma, and yet under Azlre's suns, there had always been acceptance and more for the choices given to a people once convinced they bore none. In one's nature, after all, one wishes freedom and hope, while others find contentment with less, yet still hope. In the least, they yet paid respect to their elders and to their rightful regent. Were there a belief shared among all, it was a particular patriotism: Desal's survival was meant.

"And so it was in Azlre for many suns following, a gradual dissension of how that wish would be fulfilled. Those more impassioned spirits moved forth to begin the infant preparations of their desire, and some others did indeed follow. Few technical matters and far fewer thoughts of war were known among Desal, certainly, though they did now bear knowledge of what truly would cleanse them: The sacrifice of their purity and safety for the future of their own. These new ways, therefore, became a necessary step in their restitution.

"Much was to be learned--by Be'i and Toma, as well. Yet this was already known by them all."

"Bala?"

"What are you doing here?"

The old man chuckled as he led Bakali by the hand into the once regal craft with which all six were quite busy. Nine, he then counted, seeing the wisps of the apprentices, one slipping by and into an access hatch, the others taking out wasted components. Looking around, Bala gave an appraising nod. "What nobility we bore in our tastes and abilities," he said without conceit. "I had all but forgotten how beautiful our travel once was."

Sashana'i, black up to her arms with conduit soot, had blinked at the mention of his name and straightened from her own work in a bulkhead. "I should think you were a neutral party, my tola," she said.

"I yet bear the right of guidance over your spirits," he replied. "The responsibility is mine as elder to you all. As Desal makes its claim against Unar, it shall yet be made in accordance with fairness and pure intention. I bear my duty as well, my regent."

"Bala ka," Sashana'i smiled. "We would of course welcome your generous wisdom."

"There would be that," Bakali grinned. "Yet we were reminiscing of our former travels during our peaceful youths. Ah, and this craft bore much greatness. One of the regent vessels, I should think."

"The Azallis," Sashana'i nodded. "Yusi of Allanois' private transport. It bears the finest hull and remaining systems, thus it was decided to begin here."

"A fitting choice," Bala said. "We shall witness your work for a quarter, should it not be an inconvenience."

B'Elanna shrugged and dug into the navigation cluster. "Make yourselves at home."

Tom snickered. There was something about B'Elanna at work on a ship. Invariably, she forgot everything but her plainest manners and just got down to business. It was a side of her he found irresistible--or at least amusing.

Bakali neared B'Elanna and peered down to what she was doing. Deciding she likely would never know, she offered the young woman a smile. "Think, Be'i, that with some success and more effective trade within Irlae, more equipment might be procured; perhaps your cranial wound could be treated."

"Actually," B'Elanna said, not taking her squinted eyes off what she was doing, "Tom and I made a sort of oath. Until this fight ends, it stays as is. I want to wake up and see it now. I don't want to forget what they did to me..." She glanced up to the elder woman, "...or how I have lived with it."

Bakali was pleasantly surprised as she looked at Tom, whose lips turned up, accentuating the jagged crease in his cheek. "Think of it as an outward sign of our humility."

"I should think it rather an outward sign of your stubbornness," Bakali replied wryly, moving off to see what Aratra was disassembling. Again, the inner workings of a ship were certainly not her trade, but thankfully, the young man was much more willing to explain it.

They remained some time, watching the busy people, curiously examining the components and the procedures they used to work on them. With the nine of them laboring together, it took little time to clean the bridge of stray parts, wires and non-functioning equipment then pull in some prepared replacements, which would be the truer challenge--replacing all the systems they needed and making them work.

Then, just as they were beginning to discuss what was to come next, the bridge hatch creaked and rolled open, revealing the bright day outside.

"Could you close that?" Tom called, stepping in front of B'Elanna as she shielded her eyes.

It was Cali, holding Haviki's hand and carrying a large satchel. "I would of course continue biding my days in this fruitful labor," she said, smiling upon them all. "I humbly beg forgiveness for my lateness. My blessed Haviki was all of the sun this past moon and yet this sunrise, I was alerted to a salvage of some interest."

B'Elanna pulled her hand down and smiled as the door closed again. "Welcome aboard," she said, genuinely pleased that Cali had come. They had barely even seen each other since before the public hearing several days before, not even at the storage. For that time, B'Elanna had feared Cali might have been among the dissenters, but couldn't bring herself to ask. "It is good to see you."

"My thanks, good lady. There shall be others to arrive and assist you, I may warn you."

Tom and B'Elanna looked at each other then back to their friends. "Others?" Tom asked.

"How many?"

Cali smiled again. "I did not count. They waited at the storage until I finally took myself there, curious of what they may do to aid in our shared desire to claim our debt as paid. They follow me closely." She lifted her satchel to a console. "I have brought this as well. It has been discovered at Padan's flat, when we scavenged there."

When she saw the canister, glowing bright orange in the shallow light of the bridge, B'Elanna knew the shot inside her was guilt, particularly when she noted by the indicator how much plasma was crammed in there. Tom's breath behind her made her know his agreement to that sentiment. By the look of it alone, she knew it would help them get a good start. Until they had were allied with Irliae's other resistance groups, she knew just having the means to sufficient power would again be a prime concern for them all.

The Koba marketer had called the Unar to Cezia, *asked* them to slaughter an entire section of a city without provocation. The Unar had happily complied with him. And yet, Padan had left that trade knowing they could use it--would need it.

The trade: Power for their self-empowerment. He wanted them to fight.

The plan worked.

B'Elanna nodded, willing up her nerve again with a little effort. "Aratra, would you like to show Cali where engineering is? Store it down there until I can come down and take care of it."

"I shall..." he began then turned a wicked grin back to her, "Chief."

She just shook her head as they left, dipping her hands into the panel she'd opened a minute before. Feeling a set of eyes on her, she looked up again and frowned at what met her. "Now what, Dalra?"

His expression was as judicious as ever. "This rebuilding of ships has brought recollections of Unar's envy of technology. They shall employ more diligence in their task to rid us of it when it is learned we are any more than nibbling mice."

"Are you telling me you've changed your mind?" she challenged as she held two bundles of optical wiring in her fists above the panel. "You have that right, you know."

"I have not decided anew," he told her. "Yet I would warn you they would endeavor to surpass what they discover."

B'Elanna laughed at that. "Well, I wouldn't give them that much credit."

"They may earn it with time," Dalra countered.

She sighed shortly. "There is something I don't think you understand about me yet," she said, "that being, I'm an engineer. If it becomes a problem, I'll deal with it. In the meantime, I have a fleet full of problems that need to be taken care of first. Okay?"

Tom felt his grin well in his heart. "That's my B'Elanna," he beamed, though he ducked back into the main navigation grid before she could get on his case, too. Mate or no, all was fair when B'Elanna was in her element.

He couldn't have been gladder to be there with her.

In the greenish light of the glowglobes, late that evening, they held each other, warm and naked. They stared up at the little patterns on the slanted ceiling of their attic room, still basking in the journey they had taken with Bala and Bakali after dinner, another journey into themselves.

They had not yet shown their elders all that was within them, but they had wanted to slowly open their minds to them--very slowly, as neither wanted to overwhelm those gentle people. Still, they had been curious to return since the first time. Their elders gladly took them; in return, Tom and B'Elanna showed them more of their birthplaces, of their lives before accepting their new homes at Cezia, before accepting their fight for a people they had claimed all but officially as their own. They showed them Earth and Kessik, Starfleet, the Maquis and Voyager, and they even recalled their previous camaraderie to the elders, who were much amused by the difference, but gratified by it, too.

They parted that evening in good cheer, with hope for hard work, continued progress in the morning and continued hope and faith.

It indeed would take time. It would take their entire hearts and spirits. But they did dream and plan, and they wanted to make the best of all possible worlds in their fight...for their home, their adopted people.

Turning away from the soft swirls of light on the ceiling, they looked at each other. Their fingers still traced each other's skin, softly, comfortable in the dim light and easy warmth of late evening. At the same time, their lips turned upwards, and they moved closer still, pressing to each other again, sharing their warmth completely. Tenderly, he raised his chin to plant a soft kiss upon her forehead. Her arms slid around to hold him gently there.

It was finally starting to work. All of it.

And it was only beginning.

5. Parameters

"In this manner, sleep found them, wrapped in body, met in spirit, able to look to a possible fate and believe, truly believe, substance and healing would follow. Some fruit had been partaken, yet much was left to eat.

"How their second bite would be taken, however, is yet to be seen."

When she turned onto her back, she felt the cooler sheets more clearly than usual. Cool, empty space on the clean, well-cushioned mattress...

Kathryn Janeway sat up, sighing away her latest attempt to rest. Aside from napping, she couldn't keep herself still that long though she knew she was well past exhausted. It was clearly insomnia at that point.

Maybe I should have the Doctor sedate me, she thought, moving from her bed to the main room. Finding the replicator, she said, "Computer, coffee, bla--" She stopped and sighed. "Computer, cancel. Warm milk with honey."

The cup appeared conveniently in the slot and she took it. Such a simple thing, she knew, so desperately needed at Azlre, fought for, sacrificed for, insisted on. The Kazon had been desperate enough for that technology that they'd been willing to kill and die for it. The Desalians were once dying for a lack of it--and many died to get it, thanks to Padan of Koba.

Between their desperately needing to distract themselves from the tragedy of being stuck in that place, of being mutilated and feeling powerless, Tom and B'Elanna had managed to shirk the system and rile some people up after all. Janeway wouldn't have put it past them, knowing how those two could be...had been...were.

For lack of anywhere else to go, the captain leaned against the cool, smooth wall and looked aimlessly at her quarters, drinking the steaming milk.

They had become lovers. (Kathryn sipped again.) It wasn't too strange a thought. They seemed well suited for each other as they responded to their circumstances. It made sense that they would come to need each other, truly respect and trust each other, love each other.

Anai had unabashedly spoken of their intimacy, explaining that there was no shame in the physical love between mates, a thing "Be'i and Toma" had become much accustomed to. Despite whatever enculturation her officers had been through, however, it still felt a bit intrusive. Seeing the crew's slight embarrassment, Anai did giggle and move on, though she continued to tease her audience with innuendo until the end. She gladly detailed their togetherness, had named it a good thing for them.

Perhaps it was, but it reminded Kathryn of her own loneliness, particularly just then. She would have walked somewhere else in the room if she thought that pacing in circles would do any good to killing the same nervous energy that had woken her too early--again.

They had reformed the resistance. Janeway didn't know what to think about that. For all the precepts of the Prime Directive that met her first reaction, she also reminded herself that Tom and B'Elanna had given up on ever leaving long before, given up any remaining ideas of rank and their status as stranded officers. They had lived in Irlae twice as long as they had been on Voyager by the time they committed to that fight--and sought the support of others in it. And others did join them, revived in their hopes, in some of their strength and dreams for their homeworld to be returned to them.

For this, Sashana'i had formally resurrected the regency, for her people's sake offered her soul as the lamb for the sacrifice in Desalia's fight. A leader forced to bear the responsibility for a people's very being and be the visible symbol of progress and correctness, while still delegating all she didn't know or couldn't be. It sounded familiar.

It discomfited Kathryn, who was still coming to grips with the mere loss of her crewpeople and the guilt of not only sending them, but also having to be practical and get on with business without them. She still needed to officially replace two of her senior officers before they left Irlae, oversee two more reassignments in engineering. Despite the necessity, it seemed...tactless.

She'd done such a thing before, of course, but despite her commander's facade and experience, losing those people like that had been... She didn't even know what to call it anymore.

Anai of Cezia returned to her thoughts. At Azlre, she had been content to let Tom and B'Elanna go about their way, knowing somehow--like Padan had--that they would react sooner or later and help her towards her goals. At the same time, she had guided them subtly, assisted them, educated them, opened their minds to Desalian ways...

For this, they were eventually killed. Her proclaimed brother and sister were lost for all her machinations. It seemed to be a debt enough to both Anai and Ara, an adequate source of guilt as difficult to amend--if not more, as they indeed had had to wait over a century before even having the chance to. At the same time, Kathryn believed she knew her officers well enough by then to think that Tom and B'Elanna hadn't needed much prodding to swear their loyalty to the good-hearted people they'd been living with. They'd essentially been homeless before ending up in Irlae. They were all but homeless before ending up on Voyager, too.

She continued to drink her milk, sighing through the heat it brought to her throat and stomach. It

didn't make her tired, but it did relax her a little, which was almost as good as sleep, in her opinion. She moved back to her bed, sat on the edge.

Looming in the distance was the Desalian sun, readying to rise over the far side of the planet. Like the morning before, it came quickly. Kathryn blinked as the light poured in, as the reds, golds, then warm white, filled her cabin. She didn't ask the computer to dim the viewport, but watched the sunrise silently. It was only oh-three hundred in Voyager's time, but the captain decided she'd slept enough.

Setting aside her milk, she called to the computer to activate the sonic shower, removed her robe as she crossed to the bathroom.

She wondered what Anai was doing that morning. It was probably about their breakfast time in Desal.

They awoke as they so often had, laying facing each other, staring into each other's eyes.

Ara's hand unconsciously reached out to Anai's temple, and his fingers rested there. She realized this upon waking and so moved her fingers accordingly, slipping her center finger into his left palm. Blinking slowly, her lips turned upwards, feeling his spirit entwining with hers.

It was a longing, his wishing to touch her, wanting to feel her body wrapped around him. The painting of the night before had made him miss her more. For all the joy in such talk, Anai agreed. Yet the telling was necessary. The alien crew needed to understand.

They would need to rise soon. Their daughter Mar'lli would come for them before her morning meal. She was required at Cezia for two days to smooth over some disagreements there. She had been called again the night before. As prichava of the silag at Azlre, she did have her responsibilities, despite any telling that would occur. Her bondmate Valno'a would remain so to relay the continued painting to her properly.

Petalla had already gone. Their youngest son, all of ninety-four years, a member of the Worlds Council, had been a busy man since his graduation into the scholarship, but had likewise left his willing bondmate Nivrlli at his parents' home for the stories.

Their children would be far more occupied when they passed, when all their elders' words had been painted and they could allow themselves to let go of that world. Tramasa, their grandson and Havetsi's grandfather, in particular, would take on some great responsibility in assuming the house ledgers. As both her elder sisters lived on Cezia, Babaki with Osna would assume the role of house elders. And young Havetsi, chosen with Cera to carry on the Allanois line, would be busier still as the new blood regent.

Much change awaited their family. They had led the Allanois House for most of their lives. The elder-parents had done all they could to make the transition an easy one.

Then there were the ones from Voyager, their responsibility to them. A century's worth of wishing and wondering...more than that, in truth... Their work was not done, not then, not yet, even if it was largely out of their hands. They yet had to hear from the girl Kes.

Even so, Anai had to admit she was tired, had begun to feel her age with the emotional expense of relaying that past--such a distant and painful past, she realized once she had begun to finally express it.

Despite that time's constancy within them, among all the other memories alive within them, her and Ara's daily lives had necessarily taken precedence. For decades, they lived caring for all that was near them, helping to heal their worlds and people, reestablishing the regency as a sound and just voice among Desal, learning and teaching--so much learning, so much they all had to know again. There went years where they, their family, or their close friends hardly even mentioned it. Only in her paintings of that time did it come up; even then, it was always another account, and but a mention at that.

Only when Ara found his illness, when they knew their passings approached, did their minds become consumed again with their plans. Finally painting the words which she had sworn to relate, her own story had cut into her, bringing her purpose so painfully alive again...and the guilt they both bore, such wretched guilt...

Anai wondered if it was correct to continue as she had with those people--not as she had originally intended. What would be the great crime in allowing them to move forward again with their guilt eased rather than agitated? The thought was increasingly inviting to her, knowing what was to come and what likely would not come, knowing all that she and Ara did.

But then she had the encouragement of remembering what a loss of hope felt like--the despair of losing despite hopes given. It burned into her memory, searing her upon arrival. So many losses... The field, the phaser, Be'i's scream and those last encompassing moments, ripping into her spirit.... Tears gathered in Anai's eyes to remember her blessed sister, who so wished survival, found the realization of her quickly impending passing a hardship beyond all others, if but for all she must leave behind. She knew how much they were needed, their knowledge was needed and how much they both wished to see those following suns. Yet he was all but gone as she fought for each last breath so to live just a moment longer, and perhaps just a moment more...

It was not to be, she knew. They were not meant to continue...

Ara closed his eyes, comforting Anai in what ways he could. A century later, she still cried inside herself to remember that trauma; it tore at him in its own way. His bondmate being the direct recipient of their adopted sister's torment, Ara was left to feel Anai's agony on top of what he had collected. Yet they had also succeeded in all their aims and ambitions. They had fulfilled every desire of their ancestors, the many other spirits they bore within their heavy memories, centuries old. There was nothing to regret or wish different. Even if all their promises remained incomplete, they had done all they could.

At the very least, their guests would carry noble memories of Be'i and Toma, would be assisted in their mourning the passed spirits of their crew. So, perhaps two more nights would not be too great a strain. The rest would simply require patience or acceptance. She had practiced both of those in good measure and could again. He had always been patient to a degree, and acceptance had rarely allowed contention.

In the end, their fate would be known well enough. They could wait.

Anai admitted again and without shame that she was tired. Ara was too.

Sighing, Anai broke their contact and kissed the man by her then pushed herself up to begin their day.

It wasn't real, or at least it didn't seem like it, as Kes sleepily picked through the foods Neelix had

planned for the crew's meals that day.

She knew she was feeling off that day: She had ended up being only twenty minutes late for the onset of Anai's story, having snuck in and found herself a seat in Neelix's warm arms. She let him hold her all the while, listening to Anai, barely lit in the torchlight, her eyes distant and placid, weave the pictures for them all, Tom and B'Elanna's life as it became on Cezia. For several parts of the story, she had needed Neelix's comforting embrace.

She had walked with the others quietly back to the east gate, whereupon they were, group by group, transported back up onto Voyager. She and Neelix had walked with Harry that time. He didn't talk about how he was feeling, the tired smile painted on his mouth enough, perhaps, to express his opinion of what he'd just learned of his closest friends. They all had been quiet. Hearing the details as they were, without an ending, had left them little room for anything but taking in the information and waiting for the next part.

All but her.

After kissing Neelix good night, she went to her personal terminal and began asking the computer questions. She continued throughout the long, undisturbed night. Though she did not require much sleep, even she was tired when she woke at her usual time.

Neelix had noticed it upon seeing her the next morning. "You've been taking it hard, too? --You always did feel so much more than ordinary people," he said comfortingly. "The whole crew has been affected, of course. I admit, as morale officer, it's been a challenge."

Kes had to force herself to look at him, but not to smile. "I think you shouldn't try."

"Shouldn't try? But--"

"I think our just being there for them when they need us should be enough. You'll know if they need more than that." She had taken her basket with her soon after, assuring him she was fine, that she would be back soon.

She yawned and tried to breathe herself awake throughout the small harvesting, tried to clear her mind of the loops that all the data had spun into her head, to no avail. She also wondered why Anai would have chosen her, of all people, to look into her plan. She was having a difficult time with the complexities of the elder's instructions and simulation parameters. It was indeed a lot to put into one sole program--far more than she knew she was capable of handling in so short a time.

Of course, Anai had also been correct in assuming that she could trust her. For the first time, she regretted that.

"How are you, Lieutenant Carey?" she asked as she poured the man's coffee. It was not yet breakfast, but the soon-to-be chief engineer had stopped by between double shifts--crawled in, it seemed to Neelix, who instantly put aside his creations for the solitary diner.

"Getting by, I guess," Carey said, his baggy eyes glancing up for but a moment.

Kes understood. Of all the people who had a right to be tired, it would be him. Not only was working double shifts since Lieutenant Torres' disappearance, but he had also been at Ara's house both nights. "I hope it's not been too hard on you."

He shrugged, took a drink of the coffee. "As I said--getting by. Maybe after all these repairs are done, it'll get better."

"Maybe if you asked Captain Janeway, she would let you take the alpha shift off, to get more rest."

Carey shook his head. "Oh, it's not the shifts. I'm the one assigning myself. But...well, I need to keep busy right now." He laughed shortly. "I have no idea how Torres did it. That woman never slept. When Anai said she slept soundly, I couldn't believe it at first. Maybe she did once she set her mind to it, for all the time she put in down in engineering."

Kes smiled and took the seat next to him. "She always did seem to be there despite the time of day."

"Only a year on Voyager and I can't imagine the place without her." He let out his breath. "We weren't ready to lose her or Susan--or Tom and Kurt. It just seems so sudden. But at the same time, it wasn't--*really* wasn't in their case." Again, he shook his head. "I don't know." He bent to take another drink, but pulled it away as soon as the lip touched his mouth. "It sounds hateful, but I almost wish it'd been quick. It'd have been easier on our end. I sure hope they really were happy for a while, or at least were satisfied. But we won't know *that* for a while, will we?"

"It's only a couple more nights."

Carey nodded slightly. "I'd really come to respect Torres, you know. We didn't get along all the time. Frankly, she made me nervous, but she was a damn fine engineer. She had an instinct, and that just doesn't happen. The more I came to know her, the more I could see that. She didn't let many people in... Hearing those stories is like peeking in her diaries."

Kes reached out to place her hand on his. "I don't think Anai would be telling us about their lives there without a good reason."

"If she didn't have a good reason to tell us so much," Carey replied, "we'd have gotten it in a file and we'd be along and on our way."

That sentence ringing in her mind, Kes found herself in the holodeck not fifteen minutes after Carey left. But as the numerical storm flashed in front of her again, she thought again about how well she *should* have been trusted.

It was unfair of Anai to have given her that responsibility, particularly one so important--at least to her. Anai and Ara were clearing their own consciences with their telling. The rest was just a curiosity--according to them. They had used her to see if it was truly viable. They claimed no enormous importance in it.

No, they wanted to know. Kes could tell. She had seen, had *felt* their desire to resolve that part of themselves, to resolve all their doings and difficult decisions. Even if Ara and Anai died in peace, having told the stories they'd saved so long, she knew they would also die knowing they hadn't completed all their promises...

Kes didn't like that the more she thought about it.

So, she took a deep breath and contemplated what she should do--and whom she should ask to assist her.

They would simply have to trust her a little more, she decided.

How was it done by Be'i? Havetsi wondered, peering over to her bondmate with a cheerfully wicked intent.

The man yet slept, though the sun had risen and his woman was well awake. Though she knew she was to have met with her elder-mother that morning, for talk and comfort, the telling of the night before had set entirely different things to be eased within her.

That reminder of such passion... Among schoolgirls in particular, Be'i and Toma's passionate natures had long been a diversion within the serious study of the occupation and war--a part of their public reputation in life that made the study of their histories even more appealing. The way her spirit-mother had painted their truth did indeed bring that part of them alive.

How did they say it had been done? she wondered again, moving closer to Cera's warmth, smelling the musky, manly scent that he would wash away upon waking.

How they had come together was perhaps not so passionate, though it was amusing. She couldn't help but recall their unusual union from the vantage point of both their memories as she watched him, so undisturbed and unwitting as ever.

Cera had in fact been Havetsi's secondary pre-novitiate teacher--a young novice himself, instructing the well-spoiled sixteen year-old, who was all too pleased to eventually graduate from his classes and move on. Ruffled from throwing herself into her preferred courses, she had called him a pedant before his own class, her chin held high and a terrible, challenging smile painted upon her lips. She accused him of boring his students to death and misusing the education provided to him by the sacrifices of their noble elders and ancestors.

Unfortunately, he could not fight the young Allanois. Despite her proud disarray and prouder tongue, she was a terribly bright student. Moreover, he was only a novice. Still, he did correct her behavior, her arrogance and stubbornness and disrespect. She replied only that it was a blessing of honest teaching that she did not bow blindly as others did merely for his being a teacher--and a dull one at that.

She had troubled him, cajoled him and insulted him outright, daring him to respond then dismissing his corrections. So, as was the way, the novice teacher begged an audience with a proper forum--in that case, the elders of the girl's house. He knew well the pride of the Allanois family, leaders of exceptional bearing and trade, well worthy of Desal's loyalty, not to mention all Irlae's great friendship. More than even that, his family was very close to theirs. Cera's great grandmother was dear among the regents' memories.

For those reasons and for the right his position afforded him, Cera felt some comfort in going to those dignified scholars. With nothing but their usual, well-worn graciousness, the Allanois regents accepted him at their midday meal at the Institute, in the sunny garden off the mall. He set himself down before their floorcloth and spoke of his troubles with his student. The elders listened as they set out their bread, cheese and fruit, the man slightly amused, the lady simply taking in the young man's words and expression.

Finally, when Cera had explained the situation with their spirit-daughter in full, he begged their wisdom.

"Why wisdom would be asked of us is not a question," said Anai of Cezia. "Aveketatsi is not in err. She bears great youth, yet her nature is forward and curious; truth as a great virtue likewise has been encouraged. She projects the lessons of her spirit and elders well."

That was not what Cera had wished to hear.

"What brings you discomfort, Cera," said Ara, "is her correctness."

"Your birth was well-placed," Anai observed. "As son of Van'sura of Ella'omb and having witnessed your upbringing, we bear awareness of your being."

"This is known," the young man nodded. "My great-grandparents maintained a long friendship with you, and it is recalled that my great-grandmother bore much fondness in her recollections."

"A lady of great skill yet quiet initiative; she is one among many to whom a great debt remains." Anai leaned back upon her pillows, stretching her sandaled feet out before her. "You shall teach our child Aveketatsi and allow her truthful way. You need not agree with her, yet her words shall be allowed."

"And," smiled Ara as he rolled a sirril pod around on his palm (he had not found his illness then), "perhaps what is truly within her words may be seen in time, in *your* being, accepted. In acceptance, your dilemma shall be corrected. Were you to call it wisdom, you now bear it, Child."

The girl spent the remainder of the ralkle in Cera's tutelage, unendingly torturing the man, who had essentially been advised to take it.

Even after she graduated from his course, when they passed, she would ask if he had sent any to the ancestors with his drivel. Grown into a beauty with another year of maturity, with her sharp eyes and long, thick hair, and having taken on the proper coat and scarves of an adult, to hear her all but denounce his very being became unbearable. A willful child was one matter, a lady with the bearing and energy of all her fine bloodlines was entirely different.

Finally, his pride hurt enough, her grace too difficult to witness, Cera found himself *requiring* retaliation.

His public lecture would be coming soon and he determined his very purpose in life at that point was to impress her beyond any possible criticism. He toiled and studied, traveled through all Desal, seeking the advice of other scholars in his mission to stave off the remarks of a girl whose very chosen trade was not his. He in truth was an instructor of the arts and had taught her the theory of symbolism. Her concentration resided in the astral sciences.

By all right, she need not have had *any* reason to berate him in the first place--and perhaps that was why it troubled him so. Perhaps the good elder Ara had been correct. Perhaps she did have reason.

Nevertheless, during this time, he smiled to her jibes and bowed reverently when they passed. He even sought her out sometimes, when he found her scrubbing her work-soiled arms in the public bath or at the laboratories of Makhar. He made himself conciliatory to her, a thing she accepted with a quieter pride, if not thoughtfulness, which apparently reflected some growth. Her statements were yet pointed enough to make him continue his mission, however. He even went with his family to her induction ceremony, which would bless her in her impending journey into the novitiate. There, surely her arrogance would be challenged, he thought.

Yet upon arriving at the Allanois' garden, he found her even more lovely. No longer a girl at all, she carried herself with such poise and purity of nature that Cera's breath halted in his chest. She had been dressed exquisitely that day, with finely embroidered silks tied close, her braids woven with lace-edged ribbon, her fingers, so smooth and gentle, her penetrating gaze.... Even the way her feet had been dressed suddenly seemed beautiful to him.

Interestingly, she had noticed his presence and seemed discomforted by it. She barely spoke to him throughout the day and barely met his eyes when she did bother to show him some attention. Cera was not surprised, but remained in the garden, choosing to take his conversations with others as well. Her beauty, indeed, compelled him, but he finally understood she did not intend to bear any more than that to him.

Yet when the Rite of Being came, when she was led to kneel on the ginhra cloth before her venerable elders, she looked straight at him to call herself "Havetsi" for the first time, her round, brown eyes misted with emotion. She came into womanhood looking into his eyes.

Immediately, his spirit was enlightened and his entire purpose about her changed. In one look, that simple yet daring look, he realized she had been right after all.

He had not known his spirit before, for he found it at that moment.

His lecture day came, and before the very heart of Desal, he spoke--spoke dearly and from deep within. He had edited his dissertation and presentation until that very morning--unheard of among most would-be scholars--so that he might be even more effective, particularly to her. His assigned topic was simple and ancient: "The nature of art." Speaking boldly, moving with purpose and gesture around the Institute dais, he stretched the worn, philosophical question to the realms of mind and emotion, time and event, both alien and cultural and sub cultural--and the manner of interpretation between the man and woman, the search for both passion and balance within an inanimate thing. He even extended the argument to himself and his recent discoveries.

When he began his final analysis, he finally found her face in the crowd. She stood near the center in her novitiate's robes, yet to be consecrated at the Institute proper but no less befitting her as her stare shone above her proud smile. He drew a full, new breath and boldly pressed his points into all the people there, with pride for all the result of his labor and passion for not only his topic. Upon his completion, cheers of congratulations rose for his efforts. It was a rousing success.

His first news upon leaving the dais was that he had qualified for his final admittance into the scholarship. With genuine humility, he thanked his elder-teachers, yet his eyes were pointed out at the dissolving audience, which was still alive with his presentation.

She was gone. He could not find her. Cera sighed to himself, but settled upon that fate. He was content enough in knowing that she had taught him, purposefully or not, what truth lay within him and that he must show it. He had certainly done so that day, before all his people. He was indebted for her embarrassing lesson. He returned to his family's house, settled himself to rest with a small smile on his face, a bittersweet gratitude.

What he hadn't known was that her attentions had indeed been purposeful. The girl called Aveketatsi had found her young teacher handsome, with a fine intellect and a thrilling voice which would have spoken more deeply to her had she not been bored to tears by his extraordinarily lackluster words and stiff facade. For all her youthful daydreaming, she knew that a man with such a cloistered being could never appeal to her spirit. It was somehow in her very being that such dullness could never be accepted,

though something about him had captured her attention. So, she had endeavored to see what sort of spirit lurked behind his sleepy lectures and simplistic logic with all the zest and carelessness a girl of sixteen could muster.

She had not been disappointed. In her doings, however, she realized too late that she had embittered the man, had raised his ire far more greatly than she knew at the time how to control. By the day of her induction, she was certain that he was forever lost to her. He had only the afternoon before taken her words with a short, "We shall see," and turned away from her on the street, his head held high with pride and determination.

"Vya, your little turtle bears some strength in his spirit!" Anai commented wryly as she aired the girl's new coat.

"And that good spirit has been turned against me," Aveketatsi sighed, unusually sedate as her mother Beshelli clipped on her earrings.

Anai giggled again, sharing a wise eye with Beshelli. "This child remains a child, I should think."

Beshelli embraced her daughter, and then held her at arm's length. "My beloved, Cera has risen from frustrating dullness. Allow him the effect of your pointed belligerence first then judge the outcome. Bear patience."

Aveketatsi was not comforted.

Anai yet smiled. "You need merely make your being known in this, Child. This sun shall be appropriate. Word has reached me he shall attend to bless your way unto the novitiate."

"I should not think he would wish it, for the torment I have put upon him."

Anai stood to turn her great-great granddaughter from the mirror. Staring deeply at the child, she smiled, both ageless and ancient. "A painful way at times allows us truth within ourselves. From pain, our truest nature may be better realized, our fate more clearly seen. In this knowledge, we may find contentment."

Her nali would know more than any other on Desalia, Aveketatsi knew. Looking to her mother, she found agreement. With a deep breath and a bow of her head, she accepted the advice, turning back to the mirror to examine her braids more closely.

She yet found her usual daring slipping throughout the day. She could feel his solid stare following her, prodding her pessimism, and she found herself wandering around the garden she had walked throughout her short life, person to person, hardly listening or speaking, unable to decide how to express herself to him.

At last, tired and impatient, when she knelt before her elders and took her name of being, she at last decided what she would do with her feelings toward Cera. Likely, it was not a proper way, but it would have to be hers, else she forsake him entirely.

"How shall you be called from this sun unto the ancestors?" said her nali, and she found him standing near the daknal tihad, his tall frame accentuated by his fine red coat and white robe, his scarves partially hiding his short black curls. She held his eyes in hers and spoke her name to him, "Havetsi." And her voice was strong, assured. She had no doubt of her spirit, now.

A week later, she returned Cera's favor and attended his rite. His lecture was, quite simply, thrilling: full of life and wit and all his precious knowledge--all melded into a lecture even she might not have dreamed of him. He in his "revenge" had shared his passion with her, meeting her eyes briefly with a charming twist in lips. She felt both stir wildly within her.

Unfortunately, Havetsi had her own courses to attend after the lecture and departed the moment he finished. She barely paid attention as she flitted through her projects, hearing his rich inflection ringing in her spirit, his stare melting into her. By evening meal, she had worn herself to complete distraction, barely eating her favorite selections and even removing the soiled dishes to the rinsing sink in her kitchen chores.

Anai finally had to take the child aside. She and Ara had seen the lecture; they also had been witness to much of the play between the couple over the past seven seasons. She knew all too well why both hesitated as they did. So, meeting Havetsi's eyes, she merely grinned and said, "Take yourself to him, Child. Make yourselves one. --It is plain a man of his need for persuasion shall not bring himself to you, only display his wish."

Anai's smile found her old eyes to see the young woman's stare spark with that truth--and her blessing.

Havetsi ingratiated herself into his family's house but ten minutes later. Begging their pardon, she found herself opening Cera's chamber door but minutes after that.

Not quite as she expected him, she didn't find him bent over his crowded desk, but at the window seat of his dimly lit room, staring out at the stars. The fragrance of the nearby Shantsou Gardens wafted in the warm air. She breathed it deeply, relaxing herself, reconfirming her desire. She moved into the room, closing the door silently behind her.

He turned and saw the young woman silhouetted in the globelight. Straightening, his lips parted, but they neither spoke.

Taking another step in, Havetsi reached up into her hair and untied her scarves. Her braids and dark curls rolled down her arms and back; freed, her scarves drifted slightly in the still air then slipped onto the cool floor. Cera rose from his seat, still surprised by her presence, and now stunned by her explicit message.

He yet did not speak, even as she went to him, pressed him back down onto the window bench and knelt on it beside him. Running her fingers into his uncovered hair, she leaned down and softly placed her lips to his. The contact her gasp, her spirit surged so then. His arms slid around her, pulling her to sit across his lap, and she followed his guidance without question. His fingers dipped into her hair, his other hand pressed warmly to her exposed calf as their kiss quickly deepened.

Breaking apart, her lips found his temple as he tasted the sweet skin of her neck. Readjusting herself with an unpracticed grace, she moved her leg over so to straddle him, leaning him back against the sill of the window. Caressing his body with hers, building their mutual warmth, she smiled to feel her clothing slowly loosening. Of course, he understood. She then bent to his ear.

"No other has taken me," she whispered, "for it was known I belong to you, Cera. You shall take my body as you have captured my spirit."

Needless to say, the man was overwhelmed. Each touch, each kiss, was all but a true joining to her spirit, so withheld from him before that he could not imagine how he had survived their ever being

apart. He shook his head in amazement at their fate as he bared her fair skin, kissed her soft breasts when she offered them, shuddered as her hands, with strange and determined ability, unlaced and revealed him, too. He gasped into her hair when she moved herself down onto him, taking him into her no longer youthful warmth.

She cried through her smile at the sharp sensation that met her descent. The pain soon brought joy between them both, just as her nali had professed. And as they stoked that blessed pleasure, they called to the stars then to the spirits themselves when he filled her and swore his love, which he had not realized until she had forced him know and share his true being, and she could not respect until he had made her know humility, balancing them both.

They knelt upon the ginhra cloth but a ralkle later and accepted each other's spirits.

In the following years, they had gladly been consumed in their trades and with each other for their rightful pleasure. Perhaps with some purpose, both had remained too busy to create a fruit from that bloom, still fragrant.

She stared down at her bondmate as he slept. With a half-quarter before needing to rise, Havetsi decided time enough had passed. The stories of the past moon had not only brought her senses alive, but reminded her further of complacency and daily ritual, even if comfortable and beloved, leading to nothing. Within the desolation of the war, the necessary pain, there was growth, joy and development. Certainly, in her own good life, she might accept the responsibility and the risk of motherhood.

It was time. Not to mention, she knew it was *her* time.

She even knew the name she should bestow upon the blessing.

So, how shall this be committed to first? she mused, easily arousing herself by concentrating on his handsome features, his fair olive skin and curly black hair, so soft to the touch.

Moving her leg over him, she wove her fingers into his and slowly pulled his hands over his head, giggling quietly to herself as she did. She believed that had been their way. His breath among other organs stirred, and then his eyes opened. They had hazed since their bonding, yet were no less beautiful to her--more, in fact.

As his gaze began to reflect wondering, she enticed his flesh with her own, assuring him about her desire. "We shall bear the fruit of our treasure now, mes va'a," she then clarified, still smiling at him.

This time, he instantly knew: His woman had taken the initiative and again sought to teach him a thing they had not known before--whether or not he was necessarily prepared for it or she knew precisely what she was doing. Cera grinned to himself. She had not changed in some respects.

Of course, he was well beyond resisting her, even if by the time she had joined with him and expertly brought him to the threshold of their climax, he flipped her onto her back and thrust a cry to the ancestors from her sweet throat.

To her pleasure, he had learned quite a bit from her, indeed.

The woodsy landscape Chakotay knew so well was little trouble to tread over in the short shadow of his spirit guide, who blended in with the roughed out earth of pine and ancient leaves then appeared to him again, mischievous, teasing.

"You search for the lost?" she asked him, darting over a fallen log, rotted to dust at one end.

"I'm looking for the dead."

"But they're not dead--or so say the Desalians. Their spirits are eternal, they say. You should say the same."

He moved to climb over the felled tree. "If their bodies are no longer with us, I'd like to find their souls."

"And if you cannot find them? The spirit world is a vast land to commit to such a search. You may not find me either, now."

Sure enough, as soon as he managed himself over the obstruction, he found himself alone in the forest. He continued to walk, however, through the thicket. Through the pines, he could see the lake, its azure glow shining through the trees.

But then he heard a chirping and turned to see the mouse on its back, the owl perched above it.

"Damnit!"

Before he could speak, a fair-haired man jumped out from another direction and swatted the owl. It flew screeching away.

"Tom?"

If he'd heard him, he showed no indication, but bent over the mouse, which was still trembling and prone. He gently lifted it into both his hands; cradling it, he turned and moved quickly away.

Chakotay moved to follow that path, weaving through the dizzy, thin trail until he heard a voice--

"Is it okay?" It was B'Elanna, asking excitedly. "We can't let it go."

He sped his heavy steps to find them.

"I don't know. We'll see."

"Tom, you can't let it die."

"I can only try, B'Elanna."

"I know, I know. But it just can't die."

He saw them, kneeling on the ground, knee to knee and in clothes he recognized from their Maquis days--Tom in a beige shirt, brown trousers and ochre vest; B'Elanna had her old boots, dark trousers, leather vest and red shirt. Chakotay grinned to think that it might well have been how they'd imagined themselves in their spirits--or maybe it was just his projection.

Either way, it was good to see them. He missed him--even Tom, surprisingly enough. Seeing them made him smile, made him warm with memories despite the scene they had created.

They were huddled over the mouse in Tom's hands, which B'Elanna touched very softly with her small, careful fingers. The mouse had stopped crying as she stroked it. Tom smiled at her, a pure, loving smile.

"I have an idea," he said softly, and turning the mouse into one palm, he took her hand. She returned his smile then, nodded. Standing together, they ducked and disappeared into the thicket.

Chakotay set himself to follow again. But he didn't see them or another move in the heavy trees, though their voices were still close. He continued towards a lake, speeding as he heard the loud ripple of the water and the cry of gulls bury Tom and B'Elanna's sounds. Determined, he pushed on through the thickening trees, webbed with saplings.

The mouse ran around his feet and into the thick.

Then he looked up again...

On the shore of the lake lay the pair, bare and joined. Her umber curls flowed upon the sand; the flesh of her breasts was crushed between her and his torso, shifting as he arched into her. Her fingers grasped his hair, a lock of which had been woven with beads; he touched her face, stared down at her in adoration. Her strong, thin leg wrapped around his waist as they continued the slow but steady rhythm, oblivious to any audience. Aside from their gasps of pleasure and confessions of love in half-Desalian inflections, they made little noise at all.

The sight, gently passionate, was a beautiful one Chakotay oddly didn't mind witnessing.

"Like Bihla and Sa'alli, they found a balance."

Turning, Chakotay saw Susan Nicoletti and Kurt Bendera playing with a nest of mice on the edge of the thicket. Sitting on the leaves, the mice crawled up her dress uniform, his fitted trousers and long, white shirt.

Nicoletti looked up, gave the commander a shrug. "We couldn't blame them for that."

"Besides, they were happy," Bendera said. "And they'd never forgotten us. We appreciated that."

Nicoletti grinned. "To say the least." Standing, she waved off the mice and gave the commander a formal bow. She gestured to them with a sweep of her fingers. "Forgive me, Commander, but I must not force Gatra to look for me."

"Never a bad thing to keep him on his toes," Bendera chuckled, but got to his feet, too. "Don't worry, Chakotay. You don't have to go looking for us."

"But I wanted to see you," Chakotay protested.

"What for? There's nothing to see here but a few souls in limbo. Well, at least Be'i and Toma did their best, but that's beside the point." Shucking off the last of the leaves from his thighs, he grinned and started back into the forest. "As I said: Don't worry. You don't have to look for us. We'll be around if you need us."

"Hold on, Kurt. I want to talk."

"There's enough talking going on for you to listen to," said Bendera as he disappeared.

Chakotay turned again to the water. The beach was empty.

Far in the distance, he heard the song of prayer for the Desalian new year, echoing over the water....

The carpeted warmth of his quarters filled Chakotay's eyes as they slowly opened then blinked. He removed his hand from the akoonah.

More than usual, he forced himself not to decide on it at first--as if he could. But drawing a breath, touching the wing--

"*Tuvok to Chakotay.*"

Gnashing his jaw with a hard sigh--*Bad timing must be the rule around here*--he tapped his comm badge. "Chakotay here."

"*Commander, Prime Minister Osna has returned from Saha'aten and would like to review the chemical list with you before preparing for the first transfer.*"

"Open a channel in my quarters. --Chakotay out." He carefully folded his medicine bundle up and set it on his coffee table. Diverting his still slightly affected and confused mind to the official and necessary, he managed a polite smile when he clicked on the comm and saw the older man cheerfully touching his temple in greeting.

"Good morning, Prime Minister," he said and nodded to Osna's low, respectful bow.

The first thing Kathryn noticed that time she walked through the busy streets of Desal was the change in reception. When she had first transported to the surface two days before, her brisk walk with Havetsi had been met with respectful bows from various people, but it was otherwise nothing special.

Walking through those same streets with Anai of Cezia, bondmate to Ara, Scholar of Azlre and Regent of Desal, was completely different: They literally cleared the way for her.

It was more an impulse that had brought the captain to Desal so early in her morning. She had a full day ahead of her, with the first batch of power transfers coming in and the seemingly endless repairs on Voyager's battered hull, among the many other repairs happening at the same time.

When the stories were over and the major repairs were done, she planned to give the whole crew a month's shore leave. They deserved it--they needed it.

**I* need it at this point. But that's nothing new.*

Babaki had already offered the time and Havetsi reinforced it on their way back from Uillar, having noted some hull fractures that could become worse with time and more stress. She even offered a drydock at Ivliisa, Desalia's closest and very hospitable colony, for that and any other non-space hardy repairs they might have needed. Janeway was grateful--and had begun to wonder when her luck was going to run out with those people.

Then she reminded herself that it already had and they were making up for that.

So, for the third time, she'd met with Anai. Upon her arrival at the family house, Kathryn was brought past the central hall and through several arched passageways to the back by Sisji, Kolana's elegant bondmate, who had just come in, herself. Arriving at the dining room, she was given a space to kneel on a soft floor pillow at one of the bustling dining tables and was promptly served tracha by a young man passing by with a carafe. Then she was passed a tray of bread, cheese and fruit by a salty brown haired lady called Beshelli--Havetsi's mother, Ara informed her with a nod his great-granddaughter's way. Kathryn greeted and thanked her in the same sentence, and the captain instantly knew where Havetsi had gotten her clever smile.

Meanwhile, several children wondered about their honored guest's interesting "ornaments" and--of all things--her black issue boots. Around the rest of the table, the chatter continued, most of it untranslatable but for a word here or there. Eventually, most of them began to speak more simply, so she might join in the conversation.

It was of general matters, getting the children to school or planning a walk with their babies, their own schooling, things to do, work to be completed or started or that they planned. A few times, they asked her opinion on various matters, once concerning preferred color combinations, another time about the nature of magnetic containment outside the Barrier and even about sewing.

Then, admitting to have knitted in her lifetime, Janeway invited a good deal of attention, nearly a hundred detailed questions and several anxious students, much to her great surprise. Kathryn's politeness at that point, she noticed, had sent the elders into a minute of barely withheld laughter. Grinning, she promised to send them the Federation database on needlework then continued with her meal.

Being away from her own home, she knew all over again how much she'd missed such gatherings. Tom and B'Elanna had come to attend meals with anticipation too, she mused.

Finished with her portion, Beshelli leaned her elbows on the table. "I recall as well the small... --How had they been named, Nali? Sachets? --Susik once made lovely sachets. Her floral combinations bore such beauty, always."

Kathryn was shaken from that amusing present with the mere mention. "You knew her, Beshelli?"

The older woman nodded. "By my spirit, yes, Susik was well known in our family, was dear to me throughout my childhood. And Derra... You have known him as Kurt? Derra was his...*'nickname'*? Derra was likewise known well. The remainder of his many years was spent at Azlre with Yasis, his wife. Susik and Gatra were a well-regarded couple of both Antral and Desal, and often were guests here when later their residences included the Ella'omb house. Their son Mi'eka was my uncle's dear friend and was a fine composer of music--his mother's influence, it is said. Though Susik Kichyrn was by trade a celebrated data analyst, they by tradition are a family of artists."

"And in Ara's house, a family of the utterly exhausted at first sun," came a man's exasperated voice from behind them.

Looking back, Janeway caught the tail end of Cera's bow as he hurried to the kitchen, his scarves and robe in his hand and ignoring the giggles and suggestive comments coming from the table. Raising her brow, Kathryn watched Beshelli stare archly at the kitchen door, still swinging from his entrance.

"Does my womb's treasure again make you tardy for your anxious students, good Cera?" she queried.

"I bear the strain accordingly, Nali," he called from within, much to the family's continued amusement. A moment later, he exited, swallowing whatever he'd drunk. Then he plucked up a leftover piece of bread from his mother-in-law's tray as he gave her a kiss on the cheek. "You would think she bears great satisfaction with herself, my Havetsi."

Getting to her feet, Beshelli's eyes sparked with mischief. "And with *you* now, as well." Nearby, Ara and Anai were nearly beside themselves laughing, trying to calm themselves for their own sakes.

Snorting, Cera shook his head. "Never again shall I teach with her agenda, thus her initial aim for me would be fulfilled--save that I shall sleep through my lessons."

Janeway didn't dare say a word, but she knew she wasn't holding down her amusement well when she looked up into his sleepy eyes and saw him chuckle tiredly.

"This is not always our way, good lady," he told her, taking a step back to don his robes. "My bondmate takes her wills quite seriously, however."

"Kash!" Anai clucked, "You speak as one who has sworn off my spirit-child at any point in her devising!"

Cera laughed and shook out a thickly embroidered belt as Beshelli reached up to his loosely donned scarves.

Once he finished tying his sash, she moved in front of him to finish re-wrapping his headdress. He yawned and she gave his black nape hair a playful tug. "Remain still, Child, else a trail of cloth shall drift to the Institute in your wearied shadow."

He complied, eating the rest of the bread he'd picked up. Then he pushed the stubborn curls off his brow as the shorter woman worked around him, twisting the top row of scarves tight before looping it around his head and tying it into a twist over his ear. Patiently, he stood still as she adjusted the headdress with quick fingers and a careful eye.

Within a couple minutes, the mother finished and reached down to stuff the remainder of her bread into his pocket. Grinning, Cera touched Beshelli's temple, then his own, and then bowed to Janeway. "Peace in your--"

He stopped upon his turn to see his smiling bondmate leaning wantonly on the door. From the table, Kathryn could hear him sigh--and the rest of the table about to burst out in giggles again.

"...sun," he finished more softly. Moving to Havetsi, he gave her a wry grin, a simple kiss, and then, finally, sped out the door, ignorant of the comments that echoed behind him.

Havetsi indeed was pleased with herself, and she held her head high to every comment and quip as she found her place by Beshelli. "A peaceful morning, my Nali, elders, Kathryn Janeway--and all. Does much tracha remain? --Good captain, I bear matters for you as well."

For a short time, they discussed what Voyager was to take on that day. The younger woman assured her all their supplies were en route or being refined. She had also contacted the engineering assembly at the Institute at Ivlisa to prepare for the Voyager's possible arrival, if Kathryn wished to drydock her ship there after all. Anai herself had secured the space usually reserved for the regents' transport.

Though she thanked Anai sincerely, who had listened with Ara from their pillows to the business discussed, the captain made a mental note to do something--anything--for those people, for their

kindness. She could almost say they were doing too much, even in the spirit of reparation.

Not too long after, the large family began to filter out into the hall and away, first the children and their parents, then the teenagers and adults. Havetsi needed to get to her ship and the supply runs, and she promised on her way out to return by the afternoon. Soon, Kathryn was left with but Anai, Ara and a comely teenager named Fahadi. After the latter two left--the elder had promised to assist his descendant in preparing for her advance entrance exams--it was just Anai, sipping away at the last of her tracha with a placid smile and her eyes on her bondmate as he shuffled down the hall with the girl.

Upon completing the cup, she invited Kathryn to take her on a stroll. She wanted to purchase chisak stalk and her legs craved movement after hours of sitting the night before. The captain accepted, not minding the idea of a walk, either.

Her pace was necessarily slow, but that made no one any less patient for her to pass. Whatever they might have been carrying, every citizen they neared moved and bowed respectfully as Anai proceeded. In return, the diminutive regent responded to every greeting, chatted briefly with closer acquaintances and friends. All were deferent despite their relation to her.

After hearing the story of her reclamation of rank on Cezia, Janeway wasn't surprised to see such honors from the devoutly traditional people. Still, it was a strange feeling, seeing so many bows before her. Even as a captain, she could never imagine herself accepting such tribute without growing tired of it very quickly. Far better bred to the idea, Anai patiently, with both grace and dignity, bore through her duty.

"It is a fine example of the old way," Anai told Kathryn, her well-tailored coat and gown shifting over her silk-covered shins in a steady rhythm, like sandpaper on small blocks. "It is accepted as a mere honor, always returned. When the role is assumed by Havetsi and Cera, our fellow citizens shall turn the same to them."

Kathryn looked at her. "Isn't she rather young to take over the house?"

"Younger regents have ruled, as is known," Anai smiled. "She and Cera are entirely capable of inheriting the whole of the memories I and Ara possess. Two years past, they had been chosen by the family to carry on both our legacy and the Allanois Regency. They accepted with truth in their desire to honor us and have diligently prepared. Thankfully, she and Cera shall not bear certain other traditions my bondmate and I have shared." She grinned at the thought. "I should think those would be maddening."

Anai bowed in return to another group of people they came upon, patted the cheek of a ruddy-haired child with a loving smile then touched his soft temple. "Ra'ishch, natsa zha'e," she said affectionately.

Kathryn smiled as the boy, about ten and equal in height to Anai, bowed low before his elderly regent. His parents proudly explained that he was to receive his first spirit journey that day, earning his last marking of earth--his final temple kraja. Anai graciously blessed the child in his journey and gave him a section of her hair ornaments as a gift for his ascension. Waving as they moved on, she took Kathryn's arm and started them off again.

"When our closer children and grandchildren petitioned Havetsi and Cera as the next in line, there was little resistance," Anai continued. "When I bore thirty ralkle, I was far less centered, and there was far more to assuage and accomplish."

"That was during the war, wasn't it?"

"It was."

"You seemed to know what you wanted and did what you could to get it."

Anai smiled. "My thanks, Child."

Nearing the end of the tree-lined neighborhood, they walked through a small, whitewashed gate, softened by a lovely arbor of blue flowers--daktricha, Anai called them--and into the market. It was one of four, she informed Kathryn, that one being the first market erected in Desal after the war.

"Anai Cezhiat'i, zhresb'llar," said one vendor and she whirled around to uncover a fresh stack of chisak stalks even as Anai took three of the ones before her. "Oh, my good elder, these have been touched with too much sun."

"It is preferred they be unfresh as they all shall be prepared upon the sunset," Anai replied and nodded to Kathryn.

Suddenly remembering the sack one of the grandchildren had hung on her shoulder as they left the house, she opened it. Inside were a communicator and a purse of thin power cards. One form of currency in Desal was ferranide, which were given to vendors for goods that could not be grown at the nearby commune gardens. One palm-sized card would run a farmer's irrigators for three days, enough to grow one sink of chisak, so Dilsa had instructed her.

"Four cards," Anai told her and smiled to the vendor who took what she was given with a deep bow and breath of gratitude. "A blessed sun, Child."

"And to you and yours, fair regent," the vendor responded.

Anai leaned closer to Kathryn as they moved on. "I always give too much."

Kathryn grinned. "Why doesn't that surprise me?"

"I should believe it would not!" Anai giggled, hugging Kathryn's arm against her.

"Anai Cezhiat'i," said another passer-by with a generous smile and a touch to his deep brown temple. His brow flicked up flirtatiously. "Blessed sun."

Anai laughed lightly and pressed her old fingers to the young man's markings. "I greet you in peace this midday, Kobpraca. My fine student--"

"Ah, I am student no longer," he returned with a sweeping bow.

"Always shall you be student to me," Anai returned with mock insistence, "be it only as I am elder and certainly better practiced of nerve for having been elder to *you*," They both laughed a moment after she finished. "Dear man, give kind greetings to my friend...Kathri."

Janeway rolled her eyes at Anai's nickname and, without thinking, offered a bow to the handsome young man. Belatedly, she realized that it was hard not to mimic the Desalians after a time.

In that fashion, at that slow pace with many stops and more greetings, they continued shopping. Soon,

they were nearing the end of the vendors and moving into a quieter neighborhood. Anai led them onto a nearly deserted back street, where they would not need to bow or interrupt themselves for a time.

Waving a hand out to the vine-adorned white buildings around them, her steps shuffling on the pristine road, she sighed. "Va, had you seen Desal when Ara and I had first been summoned here--or, it is better you had not. There was such difference from this present. You would not have recognized it."

"Havetsi said it was all but in ruins."

"More than ruins had claimed it. It was *Unar*."

Kathryn looked at the elder for that curt description. The way the words had rolled off her tongue with her heavy inflection, it sounded all the more unpleasant. For all her goodness, it was strange to hear that--even if it was the first mood she'd met Anai with, berating the Unar records.

"It's been a long time since the war," Janeway noted. "But you're still bitter, aren't you?"

"I have recalled a time when the war was fresh," Anai answered, "a'o ka, their history is unforgivable, nor are the few of their people who to this sun call for dominance. I could never give them pure trust. Such youth had bled from me by that war's end, bled for giving away my resilience, my body, my spirit, and bearing knowledge of the horrors within my long memory. There is no hatred for them, and I bear many respected Unar acquaintances, yet I would not hold company casually in their presence. This is a crime earned through pain and yet this springs from an honest way. Comfort lies only in that the younger generations have not felt this--nor the need."

Anai's stare drifted out to the end of the row. Her sallow and heavily wrinkled face shone creamy white, while her eyes sparkled like copper in the late morning sun.

"Kathri, had you seen my city, seen any Desalian who chose the fight upon taking acceptance of our ability to stand proudly again, who saw through what all Irlae sacrificed so willingly to find our capital city, your spirit, too, would be weighted without ease. Here alone, Unar, so obsessed with their purity, poured their filth and waste into our waters, blackened our lush ground, left our women depraved and barren, our children hollow-eyed, our men beaten and crawling upon their dung for poisoned water. The dead were thrown into heaps in alleyways to rot, and families were forbidden to claim them for the pyre. Ka, how we found Desal upon its liberation was horrific. It was at this place as well we sacrificed more...so much sacrifice. My own with Ara mean nothing in comparison to what suffering was endured in this city. It changed all that we had thought even to that sunrise, what our people had survived."

She turned her eyes down, breathed away the rest of her remembrance as she led Kathryn farther down the court, heading towards an overlook on the curve of the street. "There lies a thing to show you before we take ourselves to the east gate. --Your errands upon Voyager are yet to be performed this day. The replacement materials shall be brought soon, ka?"

To her surprise, it had almost slipped Janeway's mind. "Yes. Havetsi told me it would be about twelve hundred hours, the first transfer."

"Should more assistance be required, you are aware that you need only ask."

"Thank you," Janeway said. "Actually, Havetsi's already offered, but I think we can handle it on our end."

Anai nodded slowly. "It pleases."

"I wish I could bring you aboard Voyager, let you see where they worked."

"My thanks to you, good lady," she said respectfully. "Yet the transportation would be a great strain on Ara. I would not bear such risk, particularly now. Perhaps past my duty's completion, we may find an acceptable alternative. I should like to see your 'world.'"

They came to a meter-high stone wall, where Anai slowed her pace and finally stopped, placed her small fingers on the rest. "Desal," she said softly, nodding to the landscape before them. From there, they could see a fine stretch of the walled capital, the Institute directly in the middle, the parks surrounding it blowing gently with the breeze, showing off the silvery teal of the higher tree branches. Around all that sat more of the residential area Janeway and Kim and traversed with Havetsi their first day there. Far in the distance were foothills to a range on the horizon; to the left lay a sea of deep turquoise water, Desalia's main ocean.

"A council formed by elders after the final peace was achieved, summoned us here." Anai told her. "Shantsa of Desal brought himself to us past our graduation into the scholarship to beg our presence. Ara and I arrived willingly, yet with heaviness to leave Cezia, which we loved without question. Every ralkle, some turns more often, Ara and I took ourselves back to our homeworld. It had enjoyed a beautiful recovery, with hopeful spirits leading it well: Hanla'i and Sollve'a at Azlre, Ashri and Gi'odra at Sacezia, and Cali at Dviglar. Long were their tenures, and great was their adoration. Each visit inspired us further."

"Yet our presence was required here. As the last of the Allanois and newly scholars--our thanks to Lledri for her great patience with us--our work and presence as leaders here were much needed. Bala and Bakali and several of our comrades from Azlre came as well, and together we first erected food systems and clinics and repaired the shoddy power systems for temporary relief." She shook her head at that recollection. "Those pains had not even been taken, seven du've past their liberation and with assistance from trained technicians. A number of citizens continued to resist their contrition's completion until Ara and I brought ourselves before them and commanded them otherwise."

"At last, matters moved forward as they became convinced, and past the stabilization of power and sanitation, we rebuilt the central silag then restored the Institute. With others arriving, the housing restoration could be continued, which began just there." She pointed to a circle of rooftops on the west side of the city, near the water.

Moving her hand the other way, she pointed to an ornate, spindle-domed building, perched on a slight rise on the other side of the Institute, beyond which, no more of the city could be seen. Snickering quietly, she squeezed Kathryn's arm. "Do not laugh: It was wished Ara and I live there, at the palace."

Considering their relatively simple lifestyle, Janeway did see the humor in that. "It's a beautiful building, though. Is it as rich inside?"

"It was desecrated by Unar, of course, yet is quite lavish this sun." Anai shook her head. "It may well have become a scandal, the refusal to reign over Desalia from such a height. Our instating a prime minister as the leader of world affairs caused much commotion--yet even that at the time was little in relation to our choice of lifestyle. Ka, we claimed airs in the infant years, as tradition, symbol and influence of Desal required. Yet Ara sought then claimed the family house of Bala and Bakali--the Na'ihaj house. Preceding the occupation, it had been a regal estate; fate blessed us in that it, among most of the residences in our district, remained structurally unharmed during the occupation. Humbly, we asked our

gentle elders we share that residence. This was gladly agreed upon. Past the liberation of Desal, their closeness was immensely desired here, where such loss had been borne, and where many...many had lost so dearly."

Once again driving herself off that topic, Anai looked out to the silver and bejeweled structure. "As matters stabilized and all Desal was again in assured growth, it was finally 'decreed' by my bondmate and I that the regency was satisfied in its aims and that the former home of the Zezhembe, Shricha and Allanois regents would become a historical museum and chamber for Worlds Council meetings."

"It seems to have been for the best, then, considering how it turned out," Kathryn said.

"Ka. It was. When my word painting for you is concluded, you may wish to see it."

"I've always been a little interested in art, as a hobby. I'd like to see your people's."

"For our love of nature, there is persistent realism in many movements, though a lovely form of abstraction and symbolism has been practiced for several ages. Some remaining rooms of regents remain in tact or have been restored, as well, however much of it is recovered sculpture, art, physical records and relics, as well as new works. The new exhibit is silverworks of the Sricha Regency--very beautiful."

"You mentioned an artist in your last story. Was there much art from that time?"

Anai gave a nod. "Ka. I spoke of Kra'alba. Several fine artists worked among us during the occupation and redawn, and many depicted our lives then. The mediums were simpler and they worked in silence, certainly, and yet I have found them always quite moving. Should you desire it, Cera would be able to teach any of our art to you, as it is his trade. Indeed, when the museum reopens with its new exhibits on f'hajen--seventh day, six suns from our present--I bear certainty it would be his pleasure to introduce the many departments to you--and would find for you the Midnight of Desal, as the period is now called."

Anai drew a deep breath as the breeze floated up, lifting the scares around her face. "Many years and tireless work were required to return the capitol, like all of Desal, to its proper honor. Yet more was required to settle the roused spirits of my beloved people and to heal those who remained in the dearth during the fight."

Kathryn turned her eyes out to the view, too, took in the majesty of the bright white and flowered city and the sweet air rising from it. "Where we come from, the Bajoran people were under the dominion of the Cardassian Union for about forty years: They still were recovering when we came to the Delta Quadrant. But they had the help of the Federation. I can't imagine how difficult it was for your people to recover single handed after so many years and so much taken away."

"Through our will and respect regained, it became truth," Anai answered, her eyes still stubbornly lost on the horizon. "We all of Irlae have labored with much persistence." She smiled gently. "We have prospered for this. Desal lived in peace and prosperity for nearly seven recorded millennia preceding Unar's disruption. Such time shall be again, with the spirits' blessing. I shall pass at Ara's side in peace for our good lives and for all the accomplishments that made themselves meant during our time."

There, Kathryn understood and suddenly was caught by Anai's distant stare, almost in profile when she looked at her. There was nothing but ancient pride in her expression, the pride of so many lifetimes, within her golden memory. The captain wouldn't have been surprised to hear her admit she had been thinking about that entire circle, unbroken in her: The state before the occupation, the occupation and war, the recovery, the prosperity they lived with then. All of it seemed to emanate from Anai's eyes as

she stared out upon the city--her city.

It was a successful regent's pride, there, Kathryn could tell, but also more.

It was all of that knowledge, all of that history, that she radiated each time she painted the stories. The Voyager crew was being told about but a few of the lives within her. For a century, she had related all the others, making her "paintings" so greatly sought after. There was an incredible awareness in her facade, a familiar sort of expression that couldn't quite be named, eminently wise and yet...wondering. All this was devoid of youth. Indeed, youth was utterly absent in the ancient woman's stare just then, too.

As if Janeway had spoken those thoughts, Anai said softly, "Bear you belief in the afterlife, Kathri? Believe you in a spirit--an eternal 'soul' as is called by your people?"

"That's quite a question," Kathryn said in a breath.

"The answer is simple."

"Well, that I believe that I have a soul, I suppose I have to say yes. I'm not so certain about the afterlife part."

"Shall you require passing from your body to see your uncertainty answered?" Anai teased.

The captain took it in good humor, peering down to the woman by her. "I don't know--maybe. It is your intention to provide me a shortcut to that answer?"

Anai laughed. "Vya! You are a wicked child! Of course, I may not. Belief is what one brings unto oneself." Patting Kathryn's arm with her other hand, and then giving it a gentle embrace, she nodded to the view. "I believe utterly. When this elder's body no longer may sustain life and fate finally chooses my precious bondmate and I for the ancestral plain, I shall be freed unto the blessed spirits. Ara shall stand by me, our spirits as they truly are--as I have described in the journeys made by Bakali and Bala with Be'i and Toma. It is as that, truly. Of late, we have lived in anticipation of that eternity."

"You have lived a very long time," Janeway agreed gently. Despite the truth of it, it seemed sad that she would die, a woman of so much strength and experience.

"*This body* has lived a very long time," Anai corrected quietly, still smiling. "It shall be a joy to be rid of it for all the use it has had. Though you may not believe, Kathri, there is no crime in hoping for one's eternity."

Kathryn drew a breath. "Forgive me, Anai. But you could say I'm not the sort of person who can hope just for the sake of it."

"Would you bear hope that you may step upon your homeworld again--despite the possibility you may never reach it?"

"But there's a chance we will."

"Ka--and your fate has yet to be decided in this matter, I should think. There is also a chance you possess a delightfully obstinate spirit that shall meet the ancestors upon your passing--and myself, who shall welcome you openly and say I have told you this truth." But the elder laughed again to conclude it. "We may travel the circle of this topic for hours. --Your forgiveness. I bait you as mischievously as Ara

might for the sake of clearer knowledge of you."

"I don't mind," Kathryn smiled. "I enjoy talking to you."

Anai's eyes shone with her own grin as she looked up at her. "And I you, Child."

She tugged at Kathryn's arm, setting them off again. For a time, they said nothing, only enjoyed the sweet morning air, temperate sun and rich color, and all of the people whom next they came upon.

The captain watched the old lady lower herself to bestow a bracelet upon a child who had tugged at her coat skirt and begged her regent elder's attention. Though it was likely she would not have *any* ornaments left by the end of the day, Anai good naturedly reassured the girl's mother that it was what she wished to do; she also told the girl that the way was a good one, to give when no want exists, to share one's blessing and joy while among the living. The girl nodded reverently and touched Anai's temples with fair, soft fingers, thanking her. Anai lovingly returned the gesture.

So taken was she with Anai's simple acts, which continued through the remainder of their "errands," Kathryn hardly thought to think anymore about what the regent was saying, or even what brought her down to the homeworld in the first place.

The moment she materialized on Voyager and saw the crewman on duty, as she strode into the corridor and heard the clean, simple sounds of her ship around her, did she realize how much awaited her, and only then did she begin to wonder about the regent again.

She wasn't to the turbolift before her "world" gratefully caught up with her.

"On my way."

How certain moments persisted in his everyday recollections remained interesting to him.

Nearly every time he left his library, Ara could hear Bala laying out the repairs of the house, his thin but nostalgically proper voice echoing around the center hall the day they swept the remaining rubbish from it.

They had been sleeping in bare rooms with no furniture but their bedding pallets for over a t'brass, the worst conditions they had had since leaving Uillar--and had enjoyed greatly not bearing for so long, despite the humility and poverty they accepted. Unfortunately, they had but their spare time alone to sweep away the rubble and dirt. It was nowhere near enough. They all had required treatments for living in those conditions at first--not to mention working in the wasteland that was Desal at the time.

Anai, several du'ave pregnant, needed not to worry about that much, as her inoculations had been constant and successful. However, the pregnancy was precarious, and so she had been largely sequestered inside. She used the time well. Soon after deciding their decrepit house must be cleansed and returned to its noble origins, the renovation began and did not cease until she and Bala were entirely contented. She predictably told them all that she would always feel sorrow for having left Cezia. Even if she had willingly accepted that next and natural stage of responsibility as regents, she was unhappy. Ara had been, too.

Meanwhile, along with their elders, there was another child in that house, too, to see after--in addition to their long dreamed-for duties in rebuilding the city, the Institute, their people, their arrangements with all of Desal, not to mention Irlae. They had thought to repeat Cezia's blessing, but there on a larger scale. Yet once they were there and saw the enormity of that world's needs, they barely knew where to start.

Bala, in his constant and gentle wisdom, knew the home of Bakali's youth well and knew precisely where to begin: "At the back of our great estate, and the torrent shall be swept to the front, so all may know that the house has been emptied of Unar and its dreadful way. Our efforts shall stand as an example, one matter at a time. It shall be an inspiration to all who share our duty, my children."

It became just that in many ways. Hearing their elder's words well, the cleansing began upon the next sunrise, both inside the house and in the bowels of the city, where it was taken outward, street by death-streaked street. Multiple groups of twenty or more worked in shifts to cremate the dead, incinerate the waste and and push the rubble and even some obstinate citizens out of their way when necessary until sunset finally hid the city's malaise once more. At sunrise, they began the process again.

Ara, over forty years older than Bala had been when they reclaimed the Na'ihaj house, shuffled over those stones and recalled how difficult they had been to clean. He could see himself scrubbing them with his ratty hair stuck to his dirt-smudged brow, banishing the staining ash to Prihar. Ara looked at the trellises and knew when they had been planted, and when they had acquired one piece of furniture or another scone and each pillow. He recalled clearly how Anai had spilled nearly a full bucket of whitewash onto her long braids when they had begun to repaint the main hall.

They all had laughed as she wiped away the paint--then dabbed it on his nose.

Recalling that moment alone put a warm smile on the old man's face. There were many such memories made in that house, whether or not they had initially preferred remaining there. The beginning was full, indeed, of unwarranted desire--a solid determination to bring healing and education to their battered and backwards people. It was their day's work.

Yet they did bear much pleasure--and they, too, had healing. How they had needed both, particularly to ward off the persistent reminder of their first visit to that world and the losses incurred on that day...

"Tola, would you wish assistance?" It was Beshelli, home that day from her work in the archives.

"No," he stated, sure to follow it with a little smile. "Yet I would require it."

Beshelli's arm snaked around his thin waist a moment later. "Only your direction is required, my elder-father."

"Which in turn would require my decision, hmm? I should like to sit in my chamber, then. I carry my book with me and shall await Anai while reading it."

With sure and experienced hands, she assisted him there, up the curved staircase he and Bala had re-stoned by hand, and then into the first corridor and to the end. Within those doors, she helped him down to the pillows by the window, so he could watch outside.

He would rather have *been* outside. But the garden was taking its irrigation that noon.

Not that he felt no gratitude for the blessing of that view. It truly was superb. The leaves were

stirring on that cool summer day, and the sun, white and unobstructed, bathed the city with gentle warmth. He could feel it on his cold skin, sinking into all the lines his years had built.

Years within that house, on that planet, years of suffering and survival, of promise then long reward: There was little left to do with it, so much had been done. And yet he would continue would fate have it. Despite his practically mummified state, he did love life, if only as a spectator. So perhaps they grasped at life too jealously, for noble or selfish reasons--or both. When his heart began to fail ten years ago, he knew they could have chosen a natural completion, let his wretched body go and journeyed to the spirits with his precious Anai. But then, he long had shared her promises, their devising and dreams and hopes to see those people of the Voyager. It was as natural as a peaceful passing that they desired to see to their last few duties among the living. Remaining amongst their beloved family was certainly a blessing, as well. Either way, he would of course be willing to pass when the spirits deemed them ready.

And so he lived, enduring the treatments while his body crumbled and became useless, letting people assist him wherever he went, eventually becoming all but a hermit in his vital house. The trip to the Institute the other day had nearly sent him straight to Doctor Gihora's main ward. Babaki had every right to question his presence at the Institute. But without question he had wanted to go, wished to see what he too had been waiting for, those people. More, the glow upon his bondmate's face afterwards was well worth a trip to a Kahseht physician on Unar Prime, as far as he was concerned.

Laboring for a deeper breath, Ara glanced over at the memoir box, sitting on its usual place on the bureau. As was the way with regents, elders and scholars, and particularly as one was a known word painter, they had painstakingly drawn out all their stories, so that there was hardly a moment missing.

A gift to their family and their people, and also a gift for those for whom they had waited for so long, as were the paintings and that one other matter. That particular item sat in its own case within the box.

He wondered how Anai would bestow it onto young Kathryn Janeway when the time was right. She had not decided.

At present, however, he did not wish to think on that. Fate would reveal that part of it. Instead, he opened the book he had chosen for that day and reclined against his pillows.

There was time.

"Thank you," said Kes quietly, with the same supportive smile she'd been giving almost everyone since Captain Janeway had opened the comm and quietly, professionally told the crew that their crewmates were gone.

Harry had been there, listening to Janeway's choked-up announcement in a numb, otherworldly state. He could still feel Anai's hand on his cheek. It'd felt like crumbled tissue paper. Her eyes--he could barely meet them, they were so motherly and wise--sparkled into his as she spoke of his friends in the long past tense. Later, hearing her tales, he had listened dumbly, taking an occasional thick breath, blinking at certain developments, even smiling at others. Not all of what happened to them was bad, of course. Rather, some of it was great to hear.

He returned to his quarters only to pace the floors.

Kes' smile would have set him pacing more if he wasn't embroiled in the latest plasma transfers he'd been assigned to oversee. The Doctor had sent her down for a recalibration inducer--something they somehow had no shortage of. He found it for her and gave it without thinking about anything but her gentle smile. Similarly, the rest of engineering buzzed around him, too and he barely heard it.

"We're almost ready to begin transferring the plasma into the relay shunt. --Harry? Are you ready to take the containment manifold offline?"

Harry glanced to Carey. "Give me two more minutes," he said and looked down to his console again.

A couple months ago, they'd been at similar work. Thanks to Seska and a well-pointed attack, the entire navigational relay grid had blown out, forcing them to rely on secondaries for nearly a week.

Predictably, B'Elanna was pissed as hell--Tom's words.

They worked four nights straight in triple shifts and bets were going around the other departments to see who would crack first--him, Carey, Tom or B'Elanna. None of them had slept, had barely eaten but rather lived on whatever they could squeeze out of their rations for coffee. Even Tom couldn't lighten the pall after day two: No navigation meant no job for him, so he was damned and determined to do what he could, too. But after the fifth power node had nearly blown up in his face, he'd found his limit.

"Harry! Carey! One of you get me yet *another* node for this idiotic relay! Hell, one more night of this and I'll be *committing* harikari!"

Without warning, B'Elanna spit a mouthful of coffee all over her readouts.

They all saw it and froze on the edge of a mutual snort, almost afraid to make a sound for the consequences. But then, B'Elanna started laughing, even while she was obviously humiliated and wiping the brown liquid off her face, her tunic, the entire panel, the viewscreen. The more she cleaned it, the harder she laughed.

"I'm_so-- Oh God," she sputtered, "I just got the worst image of...the three of you and a...phase inducer!" She barely got the sentence out before she started up again. "It isn't even funny!"

Despite that, Tom started snickering, belying his bad mood. When their eyes met, they burst into a mutual fit of uncontrolled laughter. Harry and Carey did, too--relieved that they finally could. B'Elanna had to hold on to the dripping panel as she wiped at it uselessly.

Within seconds, it had descended further, to the point where they couldn't even think to stop and were wiping their work-swollen eyes, holding their stomachs.

Then Vorik passed and gave them all a stare: They howled.

Two months later, Harry chuckled unconsciously at the memory, hearing the echoes of their laughter so clearly then; Tom's rejoinders egged on their silliness until they finally quieted, minutes later, contained themselves, tried not to look at Vorik and got back to their work. They snickered their way through the rest of the repairs and finally got it done early the next morning.

In the turbolift together, none of them could meet each other's eyes. B'Elanna, off first, was last heard snickering as the doors closed. They grinned for days over it.

Harry missed them more than ever just then.

"Ready, Joe," he called behind him.

"Taking the manifold offline," Carey said. "Prepare to initiate the transfer." He tapped his comm badge. "Carey to the bridge. We're about ready here, Captain."

"*Good. We'll monitor your progress from here,*" replied the captain with her usual crispness.

About a minute later, the transfer was begun; with a blank stare and a couple glances to his console, he watched the manifold slowly come back to life.

Harry felt sorry all over again that B'Elanna wasn't there to see it: That plasma was what she'd been after in the first place, and she would have been satisfied to know Voyager got it after all. He could see her already, praying over the readings that were quickly making him blind, making sure *everything* was just right. He could even hear her ordering her team around, all business as she stalked around the deck.

Of course, if she and Tom *had* been there, they probably *wouldn't* be there, in orbit of a peaceful Desalia with those good, well-educated and healthy people. Voyager would probably have been fighting with the Unar then and probably getting nicely beat up for the condition the ship was in at that point.

He hated it. But if there was a good way to die...

He still hated it.

Pacing through his quarters the night before, he'd called up some oral records Babaki had provided him, among other records and databases, for Voyager's files. There were few visual records of that time--not surprisingly, as taking portraits was probably a very low priority even when they reacquired the equipment--but he hadn't minded reading reports on the various campaigns waged by the Irliae Resistance. Be'i and Toma of Azlre popped up quite often, as teachers, captains, technicians and tacticians, pilots, organizers and as the regents' siblings. Much of it was simple information, but by the look of it, they did a hell of a lot.

With a little more searching, he'd found accounts of their call to fight the Unar. One was recorded by a word painter called U'aslla. To read about that night brought Anai's words alive all over again--her descriptions combined with the other man's interpretation...

"Her hair bore the trim of a Sureshan man's, but with womanly straightness and confidence she held herself. Close to Toma, Be'i had raised her hands to us, asking of our spirits with her own. Each desire was echoed by her mate, just behind her, with his sky-set eyes and tall, firm posture and rightful words. As such, invoking the very stars which bore us, their cloaks of earths lit in the firelight and caught the stagnant air of death at Azlre, they finally, completely, bore themselves to us. Many suns had passed in our wait, for those passionate spirits to be as Desal or choose utter separation. Fate blessed us all: Desal was chosen with purpose and love. For this, many found their own spirits rising from the grave of our night's complacency and finally, fully, lit by the dawn of Desalia's redemption."

Overdramatic as the language was to him, it was near enough to Anai's depiction and said the same thing: Tom and B'Elanna had asked to give themselves for all Desal and invited only the willing to join them. Then Sashana'i stepped in and absolved her people's sins before their necessary crimes would be committed. And so the resistance was formed.

After so much waiting, they'd have been happy to be able to fight, Harry mused, staring at the deep red glow of the plasma inverters as the orders flew around him to relock the containment field. With a

few taps on his console, it was done.

They would have been satisfied with the outcome of all their struggles.

Tom would have hated being killed--obviously, but also despite his dedication to that cause. B'Elanna would've gone down cursing her fate. But they had a cause they believed was worth their lives and were ready to put all their talents and attention into it, to make themselves useful as they knew how, and also to help reverse that massive injustice. They'd already been to hell and were fighting that long before they had any support. It wouldn't have been too difficult for them to give their lives for those people...*their* people.

If Harry liked the Desalians any less, he'd have been jealous.

She fingered the memoir chips before returning to her undressing.

Ara lay sound asleep behind her. He'd only been taken up an hour before and somehow managed to get himself over to the bed for his nap. He had the novel, "Thall'rrab A'i Mashirr," though, still in his hand, and likely just then, he was dreaming of its lusty lovers running off to Gavllorst and repeating their passions over and over...and over. Not necessarily the most scholarly study, yet it was enjoyable.

Anai smiled and wryly thought it might not be a terrible thing for them to pass with that fresh on his memory. Decrepit as they were, she did miss his company, particularly having heard of Havetsi's newfound plans with her more than willing bondmate. It was good to see her beloved spirit-child ready for children at last. Anai had not too many more suns when she at last had managed the same.

Having pulled her coat away and slid her leggings off, Anai leaned against the edge of the bed in her loosened daygown to unbraid her long, silver hair. She watched herself as she did it, wondering at her own appearance.

It was strange sometimes to see herself so old. When she thought of herself, she still pictured her small, lean body, her long, bountiful hair and her full-boned facade--not that thin, crinkled face and the shrunken relic of a frame worn too many years by a youthful spirit too full of life and purpose to slow down. It was the younger form she knew better of herself, the one she viewed each time she journeyed with Ara.

She knew her age well and was proud of it, yet she still expected sometimes to see her girlish facade in the glass. Strange, but not discomforting. A curiosity, really.

Kathryn Janeway. The guest had properly remained on her mind throughout the day. So young, so bound to her duty. A part of the elder-mother wished to take the girl into her house and find her a mate to worship her body and spirit, feed her well and share a home where she could always laugh and feel content and safe. The lady had earned such goodness and Anai, not only a woman but also a mother, naturally wished she could bring about such a fate.

The leader in her knew better: The captain had a sworn duty to take her people home, to keep them safe. That was her being. It was as strong a feeling of responsibility as Anai's had been and Kathryn had failed--in her human captain's mind--on four counts. She had not spoken of it to her, had been pleasant and charming, willing to spend the morning with an old lady chattering on about a past that was not quite

relevant to the captain's immediate concerns.

But Anai understood the lady--and she felt Kathryn was coming to understand her somewhat better as well with their second talk.

Though this was good, it was not as she thought it would be.

In truth, it was all very odd, their presence.

She had expected to see them in good spirit, to relate all she and Ara had waited on for all those years, and perhaps also fulfill the other promise they had made. She had not planned to have enjoyed so much time with the young woman, nor feel so much behind it. She had not thought she would care with as much depth as she now did.

Of course, few things are expectation's mirror, she knew all too well.

But it had mixed her feelings considerably, seeing that woman and her people, watching them mourn. Despite their oath, which they would not consider breaking despite any feelings gained or lost, she wondered if she and Ara had done the right thing after all, if any of their doings were, or would be.

Anai's stare drifted from her reflection to the open window, where outside, in the portico, she heard Havetsi and Cera returning from their day's work, greeting the others there. Babaki and Osna were already relaxing over a glass of wine, having made themselves quite busy that day arranging for the arrivals of Voyager's supplies. The children played as they always did--nonstop, like a flock of little birds making havoc of the nest. As always, their house was a living one.

But all Anai could see were the softly drifting limbs above the upper garden.

She was tired, she knew yet again, and so much life resided below her window. How she wished she could hop down the stairs and go to play with them, share their young spirits with her own. She could feel the desire deep within her.

But she didn't; the space beside her bondmate was far more her own. When the time came, she would be placed beside him and they would release their bodies entwined. In the best of times, this was the way. It was the end she wished no matter how or when they finally allowed their spirits to be freed.

Bala and Bakali had met the ancestors in such a fashion. Anai had seen personally to their dressing, as well. They had remained a wise and humble couple after returning to their birthworld, but in their last breaths some fifteen years later, they bore the ornaments and regalia which befit their youthful station, complete to the difficult to attain burgundy orvish silk, which Bakali had so adored. Their last breaths were of gratitude and respect, their memories, given unto Anai and Ara, had both concluded with joy and relief. They passed unto their blessed spirits in true peace, the circle of their life having been completed, their spirits unpoisoned, their birthworld purified, and their people safe.

"Shall we bear the same?" she whispered to herself as she crawled into the space beside Ara to share his nap. Placing her head near his on the pillow, she closed her eyes. "Shall peace be meant at last?"

Her greatest discomfort then was that she truly did not know anymore.

Ara turned his head as her weight depressed the space beside his. His hand crept over the small knoll of her frame to embrace her softly.

"Should it be meant, my love," he breathed, his eyes unopened, "then we shall find peace in but knowing we did all which bore possibility. It is our way."

"Mes va'a, ka.... Mes va'a, ka."

"I didn't see you at breakfast this morning," Chakotay said as he fell into a pace beside the captain outside engineering.

They had finally reinitiated their primary systems, as the first plasma transfer had been gratefully successful. The captain had arrived soon after, personally overseeing the results, taking command of the deck's progress and making Carey nervous as hell on top of exhausted.

As soon as they left per the commander's reminder of the Doctor's update, Chakotay could see tiredness finally creeping into her facade. Her shoulders had fallen just enough and she had stopped bothering to tuck a stubbornly loose string of hair back in place.

"I had breakfast with the Allanois," Janeway smiled with an effort at mock formality. "They fed me until I nearly burst and then Anai whisked me away for errands in the city. We had a lovely walk, talked quite a bit."

"She seems very friendly," he nodded. He'd hoped the captain would do something to start coming to terms with their losses--and talking to Anai of Cezia outside of the stories seemed like a good place to start. Janeway had held her head high for the crew, of course, but he knew she would feel Voyager's loss for some time to come. So would he. His game face, too, had also been nicely in place since Havetsi first informed them of the Barrier, and more so that tiring day. "Did it help?"

She slowed before the turbolift doors, watched him push the panel to go up. "It's been helpful to understand more about her," she answered thoughtfully. "I like her."

"They're a good family, a good people."

"Yes. I feel bad about almost not letting her do this for us."

"After getting to know some of our previous acquaintances, a little suspicion is understandable."

"I'm still inclined to wanting all my information up front. Of course, Anai knows this." She grinned. "She says I 'bear little patience.'"

Chakotay snorted. The turbolift doors opened and he held out a hand so she could enter first. "Deck five," he ordered when the doors closed then faced Janeway again. "When I was young and listened to my people's stories, I remember the frustration I felt when they wouldn't tell me everything. Either they would introduce a problem then tell me what the animals were doing, or they simply wouldn't finish. He breathed a short laugh at the memory. "I hated that when I was young--and it can still be frustrating. In vision quests, I don't always find what I'm looking for."

Kathryn smiled, though she also stifled her curiosity of what his vision quests of late had been telling him. "I can see why it would. I was always the sort of child that drove herself crazy looking for the answers to just about anything. I like books with endings and questions with answers." She peered up at

him. "How did you manage?"

"The point was to derive your own meaning," he answered. "Or sometimes, there's no meaning at all--but you have to discover that, too. So, you could say I didn't like the stories very much until I learned to take the time to interpret them."

When I have the time to do that, it helps, too, he added to himself.

"Good thing I wasn't raised with your people," Janeway quipped and looked up to him. "I wouldn't even know where to start with all she's told us."

"She hasn't finished yet," he corrected her.

"No, not yet. But tell me, what do you think so far?"

"Captain?"

"Of what we have heard already: What are your thoughts?"

He shrugged. "I don't have anything to add to it yet, to be honest. I was interested that they began to explore their spirituality. Considering how B'Elanna was--how she and Tom both were--I was surprised until I thought about it more. They had to work from almost nothing; it let them discover parts of themselves they didn't expect to find. It's good to know."

Janeway grinned, and as she did, it increased of its own volition. "They did grow into that, didn't they? I should be more surprised than I am that they ended up together. But I'm glad they had that companionship and love."

"They'd been sharing a room for so long, something had to happen between them--good or bad."

She gave the commander a look for that. "You can't tell me that was all there was to it. I don't think it was just close quarters and that they were the only two humans there."

"Could you imagine those two here--on Voyager?" he countered, both challenged and pleased by the little romantic streak his captain had just revealed.

"Yes," she answered. "The way those two could behave, they were practically asking for it. They acted like kids in a schoolyard, boy taunting girl to punch him in the nose--and she'd really do it." Chakotay laughed. "Well, at least she didn't kick him in the shins and he didn't pull her hair during staff meetings."

"Or shoot spitballs?" Chakotay rejoined, easily imagining Tom pulling a straw up from under the table when B'Elanna wasn't looking. It wouldn't have been pretty. "Maybe you have a point."

"They were different but similar--and loathe to admit it here," Janeway concluded pleasantly. "But then, the longer we've been here, the more we've started to work together, maybe even think of each other as family. It wouldn't have surprised me to see them finding more equal ground. They seemed to have developed a good working morale. It could have become something..."

It was too much to think about, she knew. For a moment, she had gone on as if she was discussing a hypothetical, not that impossible thing. No, it would never happen there, the crew would never see it, share any of the funny or endearing ideas she'd just conjured up. They would instead hear about them from the lady who'd adopted them into her own family and among her own people, long ago.

He nodded as her face fell with her mood. But he said nothing. There was nothing more to say.

The subject tacitly closed, Janeway straightened and turned back to face the door. Suddenly, she imagined that maybe they should run a diagnostic in the lifts, too. They were too damned slow.

"Hello, Captain, Commander," said Kes upon their entry into sickbay.

Janeway managed a smile for the young woman, though it became less of an effort the more she moved into the room. Somehow, Kes could cheer her no matter how she was feeling. She regretted that they would not be able to talk a little more before returning to her quarters for a change of clothes and dinner on the surface--not to mention organize the pile of PADDs on her desk. She and Kes hadn't met since before they came to Desalia. "We stopped by to check on the Doctor's progress with the DNA samples," she told her.

"He has the information. I'll get him."

Kes had been organizing a series of PADDs when they'd entered, but put them aside and went to the office area. There, as she had left him, the EMH was buried in the data Kes had brought him several hours before. He detected company in the corner of his eye, but chose to ignore it for the data his programming was attempting to elucidate. Upon Kes' entry, however, he glanced first, and then straightened from his monitor.

"Captain Janeway and Commander Chakotay are here for the report," she said in her usual pleasant manner.

"Thank you," he said, unwillingly closing the file to speak with the two.

Kes returned to the main room just ahead of the EMH and listened as the Doctor told them about his findings. Having isolated the correct chemicals, he told them first that he would appreciate at least a small supply of the trisiptic compound that had helped keep Paris and Torres alive on Uillar, as it could also be used for other forms of radiation poisoning and as an inoculation.

With more analysis, he was confident he could replicate and use it on the majority of the crew with very few side effects. It was very good news, Janeway and Chakotay decided, very practical.

Kes agreed to herself, even as she uploaded the remainder of her needed information, pulled the chip and tucked it unobtrusively into her pocket.

Again, they had gathered, nearly upon the Desalian sunset, the family and the guests at Ara's house. That night, as planned, a full dinner was served on the yard, complete with extra serving boards and floorcloths for the large congregation.

The night would prove to be warm, which Anai promised would be befitting for that moon's tale. For the moment, however, the elder circled through her family, catching up with their days, petting the children and adding to conversations when it pleased her to speak. Eventually, she gathered from the buffet a meal for herself and Ara. Taking it to him then kneeling beside him on the wide, colorful floorcloth she had laid, she gave him a gentle peck on the temple and prepared his servings for him. He smiled and squeezed her knee.

As if by nature, Janeway had gravitated over, as had Harry. On his arm was Sam Wildman, just rounding with child. Both elders urged their company for the meal. Kathryn accepted and invited the others to take a seat. The elders curiously asked Ensign Wildman--"Samantha," she had smiled to them--of her stage and if she knew the child's sex. A few minutes later, they told Harry they were glad to hear the transfer went well. Their meal progressed slowly and pleasantly for their chatter and for the visits of other family members and Voyager crew. Meanwhile, the sun descended.

A toddler hopped into their circle, causing Ara to expend some energy and tickle the baby, earning her turn and full embrace. He accepted the attention with a warm grin, closing his eyes and patting her slim back with a gentle, knotted hand. Then, he returned to his food, giving the toddler the first bite.

"Ara, you shall starve unto the ancestors in such a manner," Anai commented lightly.

"Ah, but Lle'asdri bears hunger and thinness. --You would say as much."

"So I would, my spirit," she laughed and held her arms out for the child, who went directly to her, plopped down into Anai's welcoming cradle as if it was her given seat. With an expert hand, Anai fed the child from her own plate. Like a little bird, the bright-eyed girl opened her red mouth to accept each morsel, clinging to her great-great-great grandmother's robes.

Janeway watched this with a small, sad smile. Like with her garden, with her trips to the market, Anai looked so happy with that everyday duty and Ara shared it with an inward grin of his own. Old as they were, it was a shame as much as a comfort that they were so prepared for death. *That I might have been able to bring Voyager through the Barrier a day ago, or two days, or three--twelve, twenty, thirty years before on Desalia!* She wished she had known them before they had weakened so. Still, it was gratifying to watch the elders now, witness their unguarded moments while they still had some. So easily, she might have missed knowing them entirely.

Appearing in the garden to kneel behind her elder-mother and sneak a kiss to her cheek, Havetsi also joined them. She peeked over to pinch her baby cousin's cheek, say something silly.

Ara looked at her. "O'a?"

Havetsi laughed. "Tola! What curiosity you bear!"

"A foot lies among the spirits, Child."

She relented immediately. "It is promising."

Without looking back and still feeding the baby, Anai's face broke out into a wide smile. "A blessing, Havetsi--as are you to us always."

Seeing the curious faces among the guests there, Havetsi's eyes shone to explain: "An egg within me has been fertilized. --Should all progress well, I shall bear a child in eight du'ave."

Janeway felt her smile press her cheeks for the news. "Congratulations, Havetsi--and good luck."

"My thanks, good lady. I shall bear fair hopes as well."

"So," Ara asked, "when shall our newest Allanois be announced?"

"When it has implanted certainly."

"This is proper," Anai nodded.

"Yet let us not bear this blessing to Cera just yet," Havetsi said quickly, passing them all a stare, and then a mischievous grin. "I should like to reinforce the method--for the sake of certainty."

That time, Anai laughed aloud--and startled the baby still in her arm. The child opened her mouth again to let out a slow cry, and then a louder one. "Zschhi'i i'al asza'al," Anai coaxed, still laughing as she picked the little one into her embrace. "Le'asdri si allo vacld'i ye'i." Rocking her gently, patting the baby's back, she pointed a grin back to Havetsi. "Si vechnall ta'i hreda o'a zeshchra'i?"

Havetsi giggled and leaned up again to kiss her elder-mother. "Nali ka'i. Zh'chuo'i ra'i li monr... Yet it would please me so had you been able to bless my child properly. I should think its acquaintance would be desired."

After another minute of expelling her energy, the baby had quieted with a gasp of redecision. Anai responded by giving her another chunk of cheese. Then she looked at Havetsi. "Ab."

Obediently, Havetsi moved to kneel by her, and as Ara smiled on and winked at Samantha, Anai put her free hand on the younger woman's flat belly. "Tsa zha hi'alle vrollst, tsa'i monr'ra'll jisis." Touching her temple then Havetsi's abdomen again, she drew a slow breath. "Zhe'i hevrra ta'oll, nashill hevrra'i o'a tsa."

"Hevrra zhatsill tsa'o kletsau'o," Ara proudly added, "hzi'ova glimarr o'a tia pradtsi."

Havetsi couldn't contain her grin, and she bowed with misty eyes her thanks to her beloved elder-parents. "Zha hevrra," she responded.

Ara peered out to the small audience. They were both taken and pleased with the small ceremony, as they should have been. "Shall your blessing likewise be given? --Zha hevrra."

Janeway blinked away the little spell Anai had easily woven with her little prayer. "Tszha heavra. --Was that right?"

Anai giggled. "Kathri ka. It was well enough." Grinning again at the others' good but equally amusing attempts, she took Havetsi's hand and kissed it. She looked back at the progress of the dinner. "The time to begin again approaches."

Janeway blinked, the mood broken.

Havetsi also saw her family beginning to finish their meals. "Shall I have Drriha'ana begin the lighting, Nali?"

"Ka," Anai said softly, moving her gaze slowly to Ara. "Jisaj zha."

"Zhe ye'a salle'o," he answered softly.

She looked at Janeway, who had stilled with the change in topic--with the very reason she was there. "The painting be continued, Kathri."

The captain nodded with a sigh. "Yes."

I should be looking forward to this, she thought as they all began to find their respective places, milling

around in the yard until they were comfortable. The scene shifted before her, leaving her strangely hesitant. *I'd agreed to wait it out and trust her...but at the same time, I'd rather stay here, in this present. Leave the past to the past and move on as best we can...*

But she corrected the thought as soon as it occurred. She wanted to hear the rest of the story. But more, as much as Janeway knew that Anai had wished to tell them and their family of that past, to make that brutal and enlightening history live through her words, she reminded herself that Anai--and maybe even Ara, too--needed it. They'd remained alive to serve that purpose.

They still needed to let go, too, she realized, staring at the robed couple moving so slowly, yet surely, into their place. They had never let go of Tom and B'Elanna, all those years, even if it was the way to release a passed spirit in peace.

They broke tradition for them, for their debt. For their guilt.

Kathryn felt worse than ever that she still wanted a file on a PADD, her clean, cool, private ready room and a strong cup of coffee to read over.

Once they had let go of that past, they could let go of themselves, too.

She watched Anai help Ara to the space they'd inhabited two nights already. They seemed ready to begin the third, moving into place more quickly than before. As if on cue, Desalia's sun, already deep gold, steadily deepened to a rich red as it descended past the high stone wall.

I'm just too tired, Kathryn told herself as she numbly made her way to the place she'd taken before, lowered herself to a pillow and leaned against the tree. A wave of just that--exhaustion--flew through her head, but she fought it as she had all day, kept her facade pleasantly neutral as she breathed deeply, blinked to unlock her eyes.

A few moments after she collected herself, Chakotay took a seat by her, thankfully not commenting, though she knew he both noticed and was concerned. Nearby, Kes and Neelix settled into the same places they'd occupied the last two nights, too. Gladly, the sight of the Ocampan distracted Kathryn for a moment.

"Good to see you here on time tonight," she smiled.

"I paid better attention to the time today," Kes admitted, "and the Doctor was there to remind me."

"I was curious as to what kept you. I hope you were able to catch up on what you missed."

"I was," she said quietly, but nothing more. On the dais, Anai had reached over to take Ara's hand, pulling it forward to rest on her thigh. "Thank you, Captain."

The garden drew to silence. In the torchlight above, Anai patiently waited for the last of her audience to gather, caressing her bondmate's hand with her thin fingers. When the sun had completely faded from the horizon, she drew a slow breath and blessed the evening.

"It must be said," she then began, "that such a matter as fighting, combat of arms, was unknown to Desal. A world never yet disposed to violence would be wholly ignorant of war.

"Yet it was not a fight in itself that was required at the onset of our resistance. Far too much to build and learn, far too many to gather in strength, remained, as was time and stealth. Additionally, Desal did

as was always was our skill, to retain silence and perform the necessary with dedication, patience and, at that present, peace...."

6. World Weaving

"There is an understanding among Desalians, most ancient: Our spirits are ever free for development while within these shells we inhabit. From our birth, we are designed for growth, and our spirits develop accordingly throughout our childhood until we accept our beings' truth, either in the rite of adulthood or upon the first steps of the novitiate. After, too, we are still to flourish through our experiences.

"Though not all subscribed to this philosophy in full--some believe our spirits to be more perfectly set and fate merely brings us to our final place and understanding--it is understood that spirits may turn within the wind of fate which carries us all, as like the seed carried on the breeze, and may be implanted and adapt to soil unlike its origin.

"Like an accidental hybrid, one cannot ascertain precisely how the seed is to grow, less still in those foreign climates. And yet it is a blessing of the spirits and all life's wonders, however it appears, when at last the flower blooms..."

"Monr kraja tsa ye'o hza'oprisa; kra ne'o mahyull urr Desal tsa mechriva."

"Ka tsa'o manr llitsa," they responded in unison. "Hza tsa'o kraja al."

It began with a lie.

For over ten du'ave they had gladly lost themselves in the work they had wished for so long. Having rallied the Desalians at Azlre, they had begun the rewarding process of planning a rebellion against the Unar, beginning with a fleet that was ancient but workable--and a people much the same.

It was the stillness before the rain, they knew, and yet they enjoyed it for all it could give them. As they expanded their dealings and business, however, they were broadsided by a complication they might have predicted.

The laskeb trader had been genuinely grateful for their welcome, open to ideas and excited about the change in the Desalian ideal. Hurrying after the two in the gorge, he was suggesting several good ideas for getting their ships in and out of Cezia and offering some excellent supplies when they walked into Dviglar's main "base," which had been fashioned within the restructured hull of an old cargo ship, refitted to house what communications they could set up.

Then, when Tom and B'Elanna pulled their hoods away from their heads, the laskeb backed away, eyeing their unmarked and unfreckled skin, which denied them both Desalian and Antral ancestry. Their fairness excluded Sureshan blood; their fairness *and* lack of cheek ridges made them far from Koba. With their relative darkness and breadth of frame, they certainly were not laskeb.

"You are not of Irliae," he deduced with dread, staring particularly B'Elanna as he raised a thin-boned finger their way.

Thankfully, Miztri had been there; she quickly left her work to welcome and assure the man. "They were under conditions in youth which did not permit their markings," she explained, her dulcet tones like a lullaby sung to a baby as she touched his small shoulder. "Until they have borne suitable preparation to take the kraja, they must go bare."

The trader's pale green eyes narrowed further. "I have not heard of such need for preparation among your people."

Miztri shrugged, sighed. "Not all our own were of sufficient blessing to be always among the community of Desal, to be reared understanding the symbols we bear and the effects of them. Yet they are of Desal, my friend. More, we are all of Uillar under Hychar, and these children found a mass of his attentions, as you have noticed. You may not scorn them for an impressive survival."

The uncomfortable looks on Tom and B'Elanna's faces were enough to make the laskeb apologize. Behind him, Miztri closed her eyes in thanks to the spirits.

That excuse was not enough for the Antral traders, who had been driven from Sacezia in a hovercraft Tom had devised. Upon viewing the couple and though they had accepted the makeshift explanation, they yet chose to deal with Sashana'i and Aratra.

Finally, Sashana'i questioned their behavior and corrected them. "They are Desalians of Gahahol, a distant and ancient colony far beyond Gozhor--and had we our peoples' ancient records, this would be known. You behave as does Unar for your poor treatment of those who are equal among us."

What the trader did not know was that Gahahol was an obscure and unlivable planet on the far side of Irliae, known only for its scientific outpost--and Sashana'i blessed the memory of her great grandmother for it.

The small mistruths continued, however, giving Tom and B'Elanna all the more reason to perform their duties away from the more official business, the meetings and arrangements. They didn't mind that too much. Neither thought themselves diplomats, after all. Even so, they knew what the others had to do for them, and they didn't like that.

Worse, those not Desalian simply never listened to them.

It was an ancient ship--at least in their way of thinking of ships. Over eighty years old, it had required

a complete refit of all its systems. Its worn surfaces were replaced where necessary. Its battered warp generator and primary systems had already been taken apart and put back together with as many newer parts as could be found. Its corridors, once ivory trimmed with red, had been stripped of its dirtied softness for plainer uses still to come.

It was the way of the Desalian resistance, such as it was.

In the shadows of the corridor, Tom bent over his panels, growling at news coming through on a makeshift long-range comm. Despite the questions from J'vishi behind him, he continued to read until it was done. His short hair was grimy above his tensed brow; he bit the grease-streaked edge of his frown, shaking his head at the nerve of the Antral.

For every breath he'd taken in his life, it seemed as many times he'd told their agents to tell their "allies" not to blow their cover.

It was clear they didn't care what he said, but went right ahead and took down a colony power grid anyway. The Unar saw it as a malfunction, a miracle of either their ignorance or some higher force looking out for them. But Tom knew what it was: A plan to be saved until *after* they got their plans in order and at least a few of their ships off Cezian dirt.

An echo died and grew with each piece of bulkhead being put in place somewhere else on that deck, rustic laser torches hissed with heat, drawing a hazy smoke in the air. The smoke eventually stuck to the walls. Under his softly shod feet, Tom could feel the rumble of the work. Normally, that feeling was a comfort.

Just then, he dreaded to think that all their work would be in vain because the Antral were acting...a lot like he used to. That unnerved him as much as it should have. In another thought, he sympathized with his father more than he ever had, even if the admiral's work was largely political and performed in a relatively comfortable arena--always knowing Starfleet and the Federation were at hand or nearby. Despite that marked difference, Tom had definitely learned his father's frustration of knowing he was talking sense and watching people go ahead do the exact opposite...

"We may yet wait," came J'vishi's voice over his shoulder and he shook his head. "Unar suspect nothing. It shall pass."

"No," Tom responded in Desalian. "When Treska takes himself for service at Antral, he shall tell them to pull back and settle themselves before they give us away. Should the Unar discover the resistance--"

"Antral shall do as pleases them. Should we yet allow them the time--"

"No--now!" he snapped. "Unless you prefer Unar to take them all and continue on for us the following sun, Treska shall tell them to withhold their foolish cravings for another sun!" Looking at the woman, he sighed, apologized with a gentler stare. "Please, J'vishi. Tell him--for the sake of this resistance--more patience is required. There is no use in using our plans when they cannot be followed with action."

She took a breath, bowed slightly. "This is known, good man--and I shall see that Treska makes it known as well."

With a pat on his arm, she moved to B'Elanna, nearby at her own work and watching silently as Tom continued to slump and shake his head at the readings. "I should believe your mate bears tiredness, good lady."

B'Elanna nodded. "Yes, J'vishi. My thanks." Wiping at a smudge of soot on her cheek with the back of her hand, she offered a smile in afterthought, which was gratefully returned. With a small bow, J'vishi hurried herself out to speak with Treska.

She followed the younger woman with her eyes. Their friends did worry for them sometimes and likely for good reason. For the past year, the two ashna'o, or "master teachers," had been trying to teach--mainly by example--a relatively uneducated people how to build both a fleet and a resistance.

Certainly, it had been a challenge.

They'd had similar hard schedules in the past--just not as encompassing. It was hard not to show their strain some days, particularly after the news about how the Desalian policy of wait and undermine had greeted the ears of the more anxious races of Irliae.

We need the leaders meeting--badly, she thought, hearing Tom's snarl roll from his throat once more as he scrolled down another report.

Before she could formulate a comment on that, however, she saw Latsari hurry in from where J'vishi had left, throwing her thick, tawny braid over a shoulder as she hopped easily over a conduit casing. B'Elanna immediately straightened from her crouch on the floor.

"Don't tell me the comm manifold crashed again," she sighed, ready to go to it as she reached for her tools.

Latsari grinned at her friend. "How busy you have been, good Be'i," she said, offering a small bag of wet cloths. "We have finished with those components this early sun and have already begun to reinstall the data matrices. I have brought myself to tell you the primary systems should be functional by third sun, as Toma has hoped. He may begin recalibrating the navigational core at that time."

B'Elanna smiled--amused at herself more than annoyed--and took a cloth to wipe her face. "I would think our pupils are too diligent, my friend," she commented, switching back to her learned tongue. "You outlearn your instructors with too much ease."

"I should doubt that, good Be'i," Latsari smiled. "Our work is but what you teach, though it is learned well. Yet as you are our only trade instructors at that, there is little opportunity for dissent."

"I would wish there were another option," B'Elanna said, airing the rag to cool it again, and then washing her neck. "Not for only the work required at present, I would wish you had more to learn."

Latsari shrugged at that, taking her lady's soiled cloth and replacing it. "As you have said, options in this are not available, and I should believe we bear far more gain in this at present. Our toil at Uillar could never speak so to our minds and spirits."

B'Elanna closed her eyes against the feel of the cool moisture on her face. A few droplets rolled down her chin and neck, and she was suddenly unable to push away the memory of that searing sun, those brutal days when she and Tom worked with Latsari and Bolmra on the landing deck of the work row, nor the tearing in her lungs each time she coughed on that dust... Hychar passing along the barricade, watching them...

She sighed, blinked it away. Much as it made her cringe inside, she was accustomed to those images invading her quieter moments. Their friends from Uillar never minded talking about that time, and with

so many of their volunteers being survivors of that camp, the reminders had become frequent. But it was far more gain than inconvenience, since the Uillaran refugees had been the most easily trained and had some mechanical skill. They were also accustomed to working long hours on single tasks. More, many were good friends, with whom they had survived a great deal and could relate to better than anyone else in Azlre.

B'Elanna's natural impulses still tried to push those memories away, though.

"My thanks for the refreshment, Latsari," she said, placing the second cloth in the bowl.

"It pleases to see you improved by it, good ashna'o'i. It shall take the pain from your sight."

B'Elanna grinned. "I should think it would be slightly late for that. I am well enough."

Latsari peered over to Tom. "Shall I take them to your mate?"

B'Elanna shook her head. "My thanks, yet I shall," she replied and took another couple cloths.

Latsari touched her friend's bare temple--"Be at peace, good lady"--and moved away as quietly as she had come. Pocketing the cloths for the present, B'Elanna turned to finish the remaining installations there. She did want that to be done no matter what. For that matter, Tom remained unmoved on the other side of the corridor.

Sometimes she wondered if it was such a good thing that she and Tom resisted leaving anything unfinished. At times, their intensity worried their friends and elders, despite Tom's careful explanation that they had worked in much the same way in their former professions, despite any aches and pains or tiredness. The Desalians often observed that the two pushed themselves more than they should, that they should delegate more outside of lessons. The ashna'o consistently had difficulty doing that, though this was a surprise to no one.

Still, B'Elanna had learned when to stop. Her aching skull was an efficient alert to worse upcoming. Just then, it was just a dull pain around her right eye and in her temples with light flashes of sharper pain just below her brow, so she moved to finish her work on the grid with a few more touches of the jap'r'tolle--so the Desalians called it. She still called it a hyperspanner more often than not.

Once done, she moved behind Tom, who was still reading the reports, though more quietly then. She touched his hand and he gave her fingers a gentle squeeze, but didn't look up until he had finished the rest. She didn't bother looking. Though Bakali had been able to improve her sight with drops made from Brijan medicines and muscle therapy, B'Elanna knew her eyes were shot for the day--especially in translation. Instead, she pulled one of the cloths from her pocket and ran it slowly over his neck, smiling at his pleasant reaction. Tom loved it when she did simple things like that, and he easily relaxed under her attention.

"It can't all be bad, can it?" she asked when he finally clicked off the monitor and took her washing hand to kiss it.

"No," he said. "The Antral at Mihor Colony are being a pain in the ass."

"As usual," she shrugged. "Once we get this meeting going, finally meet their main representatives instead of sending our agents through them, we should be able to organize ourselves better."

"If we can manage to make them trust us, you mean." He took the cloth she handed him. "Thanks."

The corner of her mouth turned wryly inward. "Gidjo again?" He nodded as he washed his face. "I'll ask Sashana'i to talk to him tomorrow morning--or maybe Aratra. He knows Gidjo better."

He ran the cloth under his jaw and under his collar. "That's the problem, B'Elanna: We need to be talking to him. Sashana'i and Aratra might be the regents, but neither of them are experts in the nuances of the stellar equations he's playing with in the fields. I am."

"Then let him get himself blown up so we can spend our time elsewhere," she replied.

"If he had any worse a ship, I would have already."

She snickered. "It would be a shame to lose a good ship."

Finished with the cloth, he let her take it then pulled her into his arm. "So, how would you like a candlelight dinner, maybe some morrev wine and a warm plate? Get out of here before sunset for a change this week?"

"Mmm, I might like that," she said. "Do you feel well, or should we take the hover back?"

"I'm okay. The walk will do us both a little good, I think. We were here since sunrise."

She agreed with a squeeze around his ribs, which set them off, forward to the bridge. Passing and greeting Miztri, who was generally in charge of keeping the primary repairs organized, B'Elanna pulled her hood, not forgetting to grab a few spare ferranide batteries for barter then hopped out of the front hatch after Tom.

"Toma, Be'i, zharosp'llor!"

"Rosp llehaj," they responded, giving Bolmra a wave and a bow as they passed, repeating it several times with other friends before ducking behind the ship they'd been concentrating on for a full moon.

Before leaving as an agent, Cali had helped them literally uncover it and had renamed it the Korchau--the "ocean stone." Ironic, that: Cali had not seen the ocean yet. It was one of many ships they would be taking into another field altogether. But that space bound resistance would come later--when over thirty other crafts awaiting more repairs and upgrades to their allies' ships were done. Because of that, the resistance could only be active in its subterfuge just then. Soon...

Skirting under the low landing struts and around one of many presently inactive nacelles, they cut through a slice in the rocks. Then, walking easily into the field beyond the fair rock face, Tom and B'Elanna settled into a steady but relaxed pace back to the whitewashed city, looming just over a few rises of silver grass and below the crisp blue sky.

For that striking view and the quietness of that nature, they never came to complain about the distance or rely on the hovercrafts, even when they had to stop for joth herds and others passing by on the road that had been worn into the dirt for all its travelers. Rather, they enjoyed the peace between the work at Dviglar and the bustle in the city.

"Good children!" Bakali chimed, turning even as she treated a coughing, squirming child in the clinic's front room. "We are blessed to see you before evening meal. How fares your work?"

"Well," Tom said, crossing to give the elder woman a touch on the temple--and the sick child a playful tweak on the chin, making her giggle--before leaving with his bag of market goods for the washing room.

"There shall be kibrashuk this moon," he called behind him.

"Very well!" Bakali called back. "Bala brings your favorite, Be'i."

"Nido'ev?" B'Elanna smiled, already able to taste it. For the season, the greenish sweet potatoes were relatively less available. But it was Bala's allotment that week, so he would have three or four. "We would need to procure some chisak and kibull for the serving, then. Bala's cake was too delicious to make rare."

Bakali laughed. "Ka, we shall do that, Child. Shall you assist me now, however? Our dear girl Gesdani has contracted her fever again. Could you bring the prajirrek tubes?"

B'Elanna eyed the little girl, grinning knowingly before she retrieved the items from the cabinet. Born sickly in a labor camp before she and her parents were deposited in Azlre by an Antral labor ship, Gesdani would keep Bakali for hours if she wouldn't hold still. Bakali obviously already had just gotten her there, probably having carried her from the market where her parents worked, and hadn't even completed a decent scan.

"I should think you were wishing rather to live here, Gesdani, for your constancy to this place," B'Elanna said as she gathered the equipment. "You would avoid your schooling and sewing for your love of the clinic."

"Not so!" the girl laughed--then coughed. Slightly rougher, she whispered, "Though I should enjoy nido'ev fraka."

B'Elanna's full mouth turned up. "I may not wish to give away any portion, it is so good. Yet I shall sell a piece to you."

The girl furrowed her thin brow. "Sell?"

B'Elanna nodded. "Yes. Should you be as still as the stones atop Mecrisop, even for the birds which land upon them like Bakali's tools upon you, then I shall ask Rahna bring you and your own a fair portion upon tomorrow's evening meal when he takes your bread."

The child nodded eagerly then made herself indeed like those stones, much to Bakali's approval. The healer returned to her work, talking quietly as she did, so Gesdani knew exactly what she was doing.

B'Elanna heard Tom's chuckle behind her as she straightened from the treating table. Turning, she saw him leaning against the door to the washroom, his sleeves already wet and stuck to his strong forearms and smiling appraisingly at her. With his upward nod, she joined him to help clean the food.

"I didn't know you had such a knack for bribing children," he said, switching back to their native tongue. "I'll have to remember that when we talk to the Antral."

B'Elanna snorted. "I don't think potato pancakes will shut them up."

He stepped ahead to open the washing room door for her, muttering, "It might if we shoved them up--"

"Please, Tom, I would rather enjoy dinner."

His smile widened. "Did I say something?" he asked innocently and hugged her in his arm when she rolled her eyes.

The routine was easy when they were home early and did not eat in public, with Tom continuing the preparations alongside Bala, while B'Elanna and Bakali set their places on the floor. Since the steadier power supply had come with their selling repairs--thus keeping the city's replicators, energy grids and waste reclamation units working more steadily--even that routine was eased somewhat. With solar-powered irrigation pumps, there were more foods able to be grown locally. Their diet was just as it was and willingly so; they were accustomed to the small servings and, better, they now ate with the knowledge that everyone did.

On occasion, however, they did indulge in a small glass of wine, a guilty pleasure finally available with better access to the fruits growing on the north ranges. Adding to the luxury of such evenings, they turned down the lighting units and relaxed in the firelight to speak of their day. Some nights, usually second and sixth night, Bala and Bakali would choose to meditate with each other. Sometimes, Tom and B'Elanna watched or left; other times, they joined them. There was no habit in that, only mood.

That night, all four had decided on the quiet talk. Tom, B'Elanna and Bakali were particularly willing for their well-earned evening. Accordingly, Bala served them wine, his ever-patient ear and his understanding for the children. The problems at Dviglar--of which the elders were not ignorant--had been troubling enough to bring the topic again to the young couple's tongues.

Bala and Bakali's response was a temperate one.

"Irrlae is sheltered not only in space, but in its peoples," Bala told them. "In the times of our ancestors, our knowledge of each other was all but assured. Even in these relatively primitive times, we bear full awareness of our neighbors."

Bakali sighed. "Not for centuries, Children, had we known of any from outside the Barrier. So rare this is, only the fact among our elder word paintings confirm that peoples truly exist in that place--your birthplace."

"This is to our shame," Bala said, "yet this truth has bred a latent distrust. --Not hatred, for most within Irrlae did once practice much openness. The Koba are a rare difference. Yet since Unar swept away our freedom, I should believe that distrust of that which is not known would flourish."

"So what would you suggest?" Tom asked. "I wouldn't mind it at all in any other situation, but we need to work with these people."

Bakali sighed, leaning forward to refill B'Elanna's cup. "My children, I should think you would do well to delegate your responsibility should you choose not to claim Desal completely."

"Delegate?" B'Elanna asked. "Bakali, we still have to *teach* them in order to pass duties on to them."

"And we can't hide from them all the time," Tom added.

"As Bakali has stated," Bala said, "you must delegate or take upon yourselves Desalian citizenship sooner than you have planned. You may be able to sway Cezia for your being known here, and for the policy of Sashana'i and Aratra, their regents--who *are* what our people follow, in truth. The other races of Irrlae, however, are far more disparate, bear no organized leadership and would rather seek to take what you know as trade rather than work with ones whom they feel are unclaimed. It is a sorrowful truth, yet truth."

B'Elanna stared at him then Bakali, and then to Tom, who knew just what she was thinking.

Fortunately, Tom spoke first: "We'll see how the next few meetings go."

The elders simply nodded and did not speak on it again. It was an equitable change of topic--they all knew each other well enough to leave their thoughts for rest. Instead, B'Elanna mentioned Uslani's quest for cloth pieces for a scrap blanket twisting the next Tsi'omad, which she and Aratra would drop by on for a while if they had time. Bala brought up the need for a card of ferranide. He wished to replicate some more readers for the children. Tom promised to bring it.

"The nido'ev was most pleasing, Bala," B'Elanna told the elder some time later, after Tom had pulled her up to her feet and they all began gravitating towards their respective sleeping rooms.

Bala smiled and touched her temple. "It pleases you were able to share it with us this moon. My selfishness would wish you here always, dear Child, having been indulged by constancy once."

B'Elanna returned his gesture by giving him a kiss on the cheek. "The indulgence was not exclusive," she admitted then gave Bakali a smile and nod of goodnight.

Bowing his good night to the elders, Tom took B'Elanna's hand to escort her upstairs. A simple routine they'd followed for over two and a half years, he had not tired of it. Certainly as well, he was not tired of closing the ground door and turning to see B'Elanna already undressing, pulling at her gown ties, resting her hand on a shelf to unwrap her small, soft boots, her shoulder-length curls falling in her face.

When she'd pulled away her gown, he moved behind her, kissed her neck softly. "May I?" he whispered as he moved his hands around to the front of her bodice.

"Please," B'Elanna smiled. She loved it when he offered. Whether or not anything came of it, she thought it incredibly sexy, the way he turned each clasp apart, smoothed the stiff fabric away, brushed his smoothly callused fingers over her skin, bringing it alive again.

Turning her head back, she moved her lips against his as he pulled the garment away from her, tossed it onto the trunk. Turning her around, he kissed her again, and they pressed themselves to each other with all the comfort of well-learned lovers. In that kiss, however, she knew already that they were tired, as neither did much to spur on the other. It was a pleasant arousal in any case.

Not that he argued about it either way.

Minutes later, they spooned up against each other beneath their old, knotted blanket. The mattress needed to be aired, they knew, though they were used to the smell of the old fabric and slight mildew. At the foot of the bed, the warm mantel stones creaked without rhythm, and she rubbed her small, bare feet on his shins. He snuggled even closer to her, tasted her shoulder idly. She purred her goodnight, nestling back against him. Without much trouble, they drifted off to sleep with her holding his hand against her chest and his gentle breath upon her nape.

It was good, when they could have quiet evenings like that.

They knew they wouldn't have that always, however. Every morning they woke, took breakfast with their elders and met with the others en route to Dviglar, blending in with all the other robes and cloaks on the two-kilometer walk to the shipyard, they were reminded of their work and planned on future. All their routines would change soon, when the ruse presently at work in hundreds of Unar households, was finally brought to fruit.

But not just yet. There was still work to be done there, they also knew, painfully well.

"How nestled into the household she is makes no difference. Her release shall be arranged, Tridl. There is great need for her here. No Cali, no deal. This is the bargain *now*, and it shall not be altered."

The Antral trader held his breath, prepared for the worst. Though the very idea of a Desalian resistance had thrilled the blood of all within Irlae, their small group of leaders--the Allanois family, such as it was with those two highly unusual members of it--was not the easiest to deal with. Like many others, he had expected to have more power over the Desalians.

Be'i and Toma of Azlre in particular would have nothing of it--and even their regents were more progressive and firm-footed than they could have imagined. In truth, though, they did have the right to lay down conditions, having more knowledge than any that Tridl knew--which in itself made him question them.

"Be'i of Azlre, will you not consider what more she may extract--"

"Do *not* make me angry with you," she warned. "Cali returns by the Rritskara Tsaborr, or you shall repair this pile of Unar dung yourself--as shall the remainder of your sniveling, greedy people."

Her mate glanced up from his own work. "To put it with plainness, Tridl, remain at Azlre for the duration of your small, simple life or assist Sashana'i in arranging Cali's relocation. We bear painful awareness of the act of patience. Are you?"

"You would not give up your desires so easily," Tridl said.

"To make an example of you, we would," Tom said with a humorless grin. "You have not yet seen a true extent of obduracy--yet."

Tridl knew better than to tempt them. For that matter, there were hundreds of other Cezians prepared to poison the Unar well--a stop to that would be a stop to it all. Cali of Azlre was but another agent--though she had been a good one, his sources were saying. All the Desalians were, in fact. Their latent and excellent mnemonic skills had been an asset their underground sorely lacked.

Perhaps he should not have told them of Cali's successes in ingratiating herself into the commander's personal service. The news had sent Sashana'i of Cezia hurrying out the door without excuse and had only managed to make Be'i and Toma even more determined towards him. Tridl wondered why it disturbed them so, though, despite their connection to the woman. Copulation with drichka servers had always been common.

Bowing his head, he sighed. "I will have her extricated."

"And carefully," B'Elanna told him.

"Yes, Be'i," he said, reigning in his patience. "Carefully. We do not want to lose her, indeed."

As soon as Tridl was gone, Tom heard the echo of her growl across the deck. Were there a wall before her, she may well have hit it. "Tridl is an idiot, B'Elanna. We'll send Sashana'i after him tomorrow. --And

Cali will be just fine."

"I know that, but I don't like her there," she muttered. "I just don't, Tom."

"It never went over well with me, either," he reminded her. "But that was the plan--infiltrate, get and give information, get out--and a lot of other people's friends with children are doing that right now. And not all of them are going to be all right. Everyone had to accept that if they were going to work for this resistance."

She sighed hard, dropping her hands to shake her head. "I know. I was Maquis, remember? I guess I just wish I could do more. I don't like sending them without going myself, without knowing I can do something or work with them. It's too...executive."

"You are doing something--here. And you--we--are doing a lot." Tom dropped his tools for the meantime to go to her, run his hands over her softly sleeved arms. Looking down to her, he offered her a supportive smile. "Cali will be fine, and o'e tsahull, we *will* get through these repairs. After the meeting in the coming season, we'll start to see some action here and not just preparation."

"Though we still require our underground," she admitted. "I am also anxious for this meeting--if it can actually be arranged in the end."

"It shouldn't be so much their coming to Cezia if the Unar stick to their present concentration in Onast and Marsyho. As long as Tridl has to ship equipment out that way, it shouldn't be any more risky. The hard part will be making the plan--and making them be as patient as we have been."

She nodded her agreement to that then shrugged. "Well, after a year of this, I think we're ready to start something more...progressive."

His hands slid down to her hips as he gave her a decidedly more playful look. "Oh? Well, I might be able to arrange that."

Willingly broken of her concerns for the moment, she reached around and gave his buttocks a firm smack. "Or I might."

"Oh, so you want to play?" he grinned, just as easily distracted. They had been working on Tridl's transport ship for two days as it was, much less dealing with his report on the "drasks" adding to the Antral's doings on Mihor the week before. It was definitely time for a break.

So, he jerked her gown upwards and swiftly leaned down to grope the back of her knee--the only ticklish spot on her body, he'd learned with much time and practice.

He grabbed the right spot on the first try: She squeaked and nearly jumped right out of the circle of his arms.

"You just *ask* for trouble!" she protested, smiling ferociously at his boyish delight and stepping forward even as he moved back--then poised to make his escape. She feinted, and he slipped around and past her to the hatch of the small ship, chuckling mischievously. "Come back here, you worm!"

"You would of course require finer effort than that!" he called back in Desalian.

B'Elanna wasn't about to disappoint him, if only for the gauntlet he'd thrown at her. Running out of the ship, jumping down to the rocky ground, she darted out into the long grass after him, chasing every circle

he maneuvered.

"Your guts will give out before I do!" she called.

"Only if you can see me!" he returned and cut another corner to escape her.

Over the soft, silver knolls, she sped after him, laughing even as she felt more determined than ever to catch her jaunty lover and teach him a good lesson about teasing her. They disappeared in the grasses over the rise, leaving only the echoes of their banter behind them. The seasonal breeze masked the path they drove.

As the wind ebbed at the main entrance of the Dviglar base in-progress, a long four-seated hovercraft bearing drivers and two passengers stopped. From it jumped Aratra, and then Dalra, who strode around to assist Zeptra in escorting Lledri from the craft. As he dutifully unfolded a row of steps from the side of the craft, Aratra gave Sashana'i, who waited with Miztri and Bala at the edge of the gorge, a wink and a flick of his brows.

If Lledri noticed the young man's playful gesture, she gave no indication. The grey-braided prichava had rather been preparing to give her usual formal greeting to the Allanois regent, holding herself properly as her softly booted foot finally touched the pliant earth, her hand barely touching Zeptra's arm. She took her breath to speak in the warm Azlreian air, pulling a placid smile and bowing to tell her fair regent--

"You filthy bastard!"

Lledri spun at the curse. "By the ancestors," she breathed.

Sashana'i skipped up to embrace the prichava from behind. "My humble greetings this lovely sun, good lady Lledri," she quipped. "As fairly can be seen, my noble house bears its usual order."

From the knolls, Tom and B'Elanna appeared, still hot with the dart and chase and barely slowing. Her head not covered by scarf or cloak, her dark locks bounced nearly upright with every canter. His robe was but a kite in the breeze as he jumped down another roll and intoned, "Jhi sarull mes'va'i mrullo!"

"Tull mara'achk dosk ye'a--hotshot!" she rebounded and grabbed the skirt of her gown to gain some ground. She was very fast, but not in navigating those turns he pulled.

Lledri tried unsuccessfully to push down her smile at their antics--like two playful mountain joth, albeit rather frank ones. She glanced back to the girl still hugging her, wondering precisely where the two adopted Allanois had learned such colorful phrases. Yet she had to smile at their play, in spite of their disturbing the traditional greeting, due to all regents. She would have no spirit at all to have resisted the amusement completely.

As they unwittingly urged on their audience's laughter, Tom careened around another high mound in the field, almost disappearing in the wheat. B'Elanna was right behind him when he suddenly turned and caught her around the waist.

"Got you!" she announced as she threw her legs around him, successfully sending them both careening down into the grass with a loud cry, and then rolling down the back of the hill where they could not be seen.

The next thing that echoed up from those hills was an exceedingly pleased cry.

Lledri peered back at Sashana'i again. "They are not with child yet?"

Sashana'i shook her head. "They bear no desire for children."

Lledri's brow rose. "Perhaps this might change."

"Perhaps--yet perhaps not. Great love rests between them, yet their independence is most valued and the children already born to Azlre pain their hearts. Their present arrangement is content, good lady, and they bear no requirement otherwise, I would believe."

"This is truth. Immediate procreation is a tradition of the Antral." Dropping the matter at that, Lledri moved toward the others who had come to greet her in proper fashion.

When she finally turned to it, the sight of Dviglar brought the prichava to a pause. What was upon her first visit nearly a year ago but a yard of disgraced scrap was a busy, organized industry. Though many of the ships still lay around that open grave, they had either been stripped or cleaned and set upright upon their landing struts. Others more fortunate to be originally situated outside the well of rocks sat in the rocky plain beyond the gorge.

Some of the smaller ships had been grounded permanently, nestled into the ground and covered with living weed vine. Down the rows, which paths conformed only to either the natural rock walls or shape of the ship it moved around, she could see not a spare part nor scrap left astray. Everything had been given a home, it seemed. Many worked in the niches created by those ships, on parts and equipment Lledri knew nothing about but suspected were important, and a steady buzz of chatter rose from it all.

More people than she anticipated busily moved within the gorge, too, purposeful, though still as dust-stained as they had been when Lledri first visited that part of the continent. They would always want for regular rain in Azlre, if but to bathe, it seemed. They continued to ration their replicated water and use their dew collectors for irrigation only. Still, they did seem healthy and happy in their duties.

As she passed, they all greeted her humbly and with great affection, as was the way. She returned each sentiment genuinely.

Seeing the base, she was more anxious to see Azlre itself. The city was likely unchanged but for the people's improvement, though this would be a happy sight. Even the detractors, those who did not wish that Desalians to engage the Unar, enjoyed greater public services, and their resistance of the increased health and vitality it brought their good people had ceased.

Lledri smiled to think Dulla's designs and Watsha's prayers truly might have been intended. She had coaxed a great many citizens after Trisjorr's horrific fate and required some reassurance herself, and yet her people's rebounding hope and strength upon their regents' call to freedom was difficult to ignore. Desal may well have been meant for restoration, along with the regency, in her lifetime. In her most secret prayers, she had begged that dream.

Yet dream no more, she believed, smiling over to Sashana'i, who walked without affect and on her bondmate's proud arm. Healthy and strong, they would see great things before them. Desal's fortune was turned.

"Aliche'o!"

Sashana'i turned and snickered as Tom jogged easily up with B'Elanna by him. "I would have thought

you more occupied in the field just now," she teased.

B'Elanna rolled her eyes. "In a joth field, Sashana'i? We are not *that* lustful."

"Oh?" Bala clucked, earning a throaty chuckle from his bondmate when he reached to pluck a straw of grass from his spirit-daughter's hair. But he let it go easily enough. "We are to show Lledri the 'grid' you are constructing then take ourselves to be again in Azlre. Shall you join us?"

B'Elanna nodded. "Until Tridl decides to have Cali returned to Cezia, no other appointments press us."

Lledri's stare widened as she turned her attention to the young woman. "Our good child yet languishes in that lair of Prihar?"

"Yes," B'Elanna muttered as her eyes locked on a familiar form in the row, the short burgundy hair and sepia coat of the Antral trader.

Sashana'i blew a breath through her nostrils, her eyes narrowing slightly as she regarded the man. Only seconds later, she nodded. "I shall speak with him--once more--good Be'i. There may be a solution which shall please him, I would think."

"Thank you," B'Elanna said sincerely. "I would believe that Tom and I have enjoyed enough discussion with a wall."

As the young regent moved away, straight backed and smooth gated, Miztri was still curious. "Tridl yet shows hesitation?"

"Why should he change?" Tom replied sourly.

Miztri swallowed her immediate comment, but rather moved closer to her friends to hold their attention for a moment. "Your choice on how this shall be handled henceforth shall need to arrive soon--for all this and, more, for you. This disturbs too readily your daily affairs."

"We know."

Tom and B'Elanna looked at each other, neither decisive, neither quite comfortable, either. Drawing a breath, he gave her hand a tug so to bring her closer, whereupon he put his arm around her.

Lledri glanced at them, and then out at the trader, who similarly gave Tom and B'Elanna a look before speaking with Sashana'i. Raising her brow, she tucked her hands into the straight folds of her robe to continue through Dviglar and see what *had* been possible from the two.

She could wait for what answers she required--though she had already guessed what they were. Indeed, without her having to ask, she found out that the Antral trader Tridl had tried to test the "outsiders'" boundaries by trying to get more from one of their "agents" than any of them had bargained for. If anything proved Be'i and Toma were not born to Desal, it would be their reaction to that vain attempt.

Lledri only needed a few well-planned days in Azlre, following Tom and B'Elanna in their errands at the bazaar and speaking in her own time to a few of the foreign marketers, to find her original suppositions correct--that the couple's ambiguous origins and pre-occupation mechanical skills were indeed the source of their neighbors' distrust. That alone made Lledri decide that it was time for Be'i and Toma to take their places among Desal.

She found herself shocked to also learn of an equal discrimination among her own people, even among those who could not for reasons of health or responsibility participate in the resistance, yet supported it. According to them, Be'i and Toma were adopted foreigners, well-liked but uncommitted to Desal's spiritual health and truth. Their ways could not be followed without the decree of their regents.

It did not bode well, Lledri knew. Were it a time of planned peace, she would have roundly corrected all those people for their spiritual narrowness--in fact, she did correct some for their lack of gratitude, even if she too had questioned Be'i and Toma's citizenship upon their first meeting.

Still, she knew all the while that some conformation would be required, particularly considering the house with which Be'i and Toma were affiliated.

Desal needed as many Allanois as they might afford.

"Many ralkle have passed before me," said the prichava after a simple but well-presented dinner, as they all reclined from the floorcloth with a cup of wine. "Yet in my experience, good friends, within mere suns here, I have learned of some who may not trust our good lady and man. Not even some of Azlre itself shall put forth their beings, I should fear. Our philosophy of oneness may only travel a small distance with a Desalian spirit." She looked at Tom and B'Elanna. "There is no desire to insult you."

"We know," B'Elanna said. "Bala and Bakali have already talked to us about this."

"What is required is not a discussion, Child, yet..." Lledri paused, looked over their cautiously curious faces. "More consideration of your fate among us may be required."

Sashana'i drew her gaze to the older woman. "You wish them to bear the kraja," she said, not surprised.

"Ka," Lledri replied.

"Not yet," B'Elanna responded. "We've been through this before. Tom and I are still unsure if it would be right for us."

Lledri had expected that. "Child, I would understand your hesitance."

"It's not hesitance," Tom told her.

"Then what would it be, good man?" Lledri countered. "Why should you not wish citizenship when you have expressed no desire to leave Desal? Or have you planned to return to your homeworld eventually?"

"That place is lost to us, Lledri," Tom said with a wistful grin, glancing to Dalra nearby as he sighed. "It was a long time ago, and it's even farther away now."

Lledri furrowed her greyed brow. "What mean you?"

B'Elanna sighed a small breath. "It means the traders guessed right: We are from outside the Barrier. Our birthplace is thousands of light years away; we have no way of returning to it."

That successfully shook Lledri from her placid facade for more than one reason. "You are alien to *Irliae*?"

"We were crewmembers on a ship trying to get back to its home when our shuttle was sucked into the plasma field," B'Elanna explained. "The Unar found us and took us to Uillar. I am surprised you didn't suspect it already."

"The need to inquire had not been necessary," she replied. "It was believed by me, as others, that you were born among the distal Onast races. For tact, your precise origins were not demanded, as you are of Azlre now. Your true birth yet does not trouble *me*, as we are all of one creation, Children. I would not publicize your details further, however, yet rather enjoy your mysteriousness."

"Considering the good our 'birth' has done for us recently," Tom said, "I have to agree."

"It yet remains that you bear no recourse but to keep yourselves among us. How such spirits as your own had borne the life of a Cezian, in truth, was a curiosity of mine."

"Don't misunderstand," B'Elanna said. Leaning forward, she placed her hand on the prichava's. "We are here because we want to be. We might have fixed a ship and left a year ago. But Tom and I care about what happens to you and feel we belong here."

Lledri smiled warmly. "This is known, Child, and adored about you."

"Then maybe you understand," Tom said, "that this is about more than being Desalian. We left our 'origins' behind a while ago. And though we were still with our birthpeople, we both had wanted change. I admit we'd never expected *this* much difference, but we do call this place home now--and we're not sorry for it. So, it's not as if we had never thought about taking the kraja. We have, and we want to be considered citizens. But...this would be for good."

Lledri nodded quickly, but said, "Yet you allow us your Desalian names. What would your appearance matter in comparison to that which you hear more often than view?"

"We look at each other," B'Elanna said.

"You look into each other's spirits and see truth."

B'Elanna shook her head.

"Perhaps you might understand that other races judge that appearance," Lledri added, "and hold it dear. Were not a resistance formed, no one would pay heed to your race. To appear as alien beyond Irliae in these times, however, shall bring no grace to their understandably hardened beings--and to our own people's need of leaders who truly embody Desal. Our neighbors may even deny your cooperation for lack of trust."

"Cooperation?" B'Elanna grinned. "Lledri, they would not have anything to resist *with* if it weren't for what we have put together and fixed for them. Even the Antral bend when they see nothing gets done on their ships without our involvement."

"It would create unnecessary difficulties," the older woman insisted.

Sashana'i glanced up at Aratra then to the prichava. "Lledri, with the respect that is due a woman of your bearing, Be'i and Toma could simply be said to be of Tyroran descent and from Traeldis."

"And Be'i's scarring? Toma's height? Their way of speech is yet rudimentary. As such alone, they would not be considered Desalians of Tyror or other places Desalian."

Sashana'i drew a deep breath, seeing the unresponsive faces of her friends before her, and among the others, great tact. "Actions have been taken to protect them for the present."

Aratra winked at his bondmate. Tom and B'Elanna gave them both a look, but didn't ask.

"Yet their decision alone should bless such a fate, Lledri," Sashana'i concluded, unaffected by Aratra's amusement.

"I would agree," Bakali said. "Should it be meant--should Be'i and Toma find it is a part of their nature to do so--then it shall certainly be celebrated. Otherwise, we would be in better spirit to accept our continuance as we live now."

The prichava sighed. "Our own people practice the acceptance of all life, gentle elders--yet they shall not give their spirits' health to any, particularly having given it to Unar too freely and learning too well Unar's use of it. Our neighbors would certainly not and shall never bear trust in them as outsiders." Turning, she touched B'Elanna's smooth, bare temple. "It would not need hold you here, Child, should it be desired that you seek your origin someday despite its distance."

"Do you honestly believe we could change back to what we were just like that?" B'Elanna asked. "Lledri, Tom and I have so little left--not that we took advantage of what we had when it was available, when it was right in front of us. We did not have very...satisfied lives. But now, we see what might have been, and can be, but... I know I'm not saying this the way I want to."

Bala raised a finger at the two to catch their attention. "More loss of your identity is not desired, as you partially wish to redeem your former uneasiness with your actions here," he clarified.

Tom drew a full breath at that observation, not knowing whether to regret the many journeys he and B'Elanna had taken with their elders. Still, Bala had only spoken of that present conversation. Rather, his intent was to tell *them* what he thought they were really saying.

Catching the meaning well enough, Tom glanced back to Lledri. "Why is this so important you? If we just let it go, they'll probably come around."

"Being not born here," Aratra finally said, "you could not know that as an absolute, Toma. I would wish you chose your spirits' truth as well, yet Lledri bears her point well."

"I wish as well for Desalia to be restored," Lledri said in answer to Tom's other question as she traced the smooth, cool lines of her cup. "The spiritual traditions of our people have been my life's trade, on this insignificant planet given to base refugee status by Unar. Our only importance here is the mass of bloodlines native to the homeworld, our good regents' included, which likewise I would see restored to their rightful place and propriety. As we are presently, by your protestations, our spirits are endangered and must be defended.

"I resisted in my first thought this change brought by you, adopted Allanois. This freely is admissible without shame. There is, however, fear for all my people; I would wish our bodily life to be not one of constant danger. Yet we, despite our relative comfort here, enjoy no safety, nor do our ways, nor our purest spirits with exposure to Unar poison. Thus, our movement has been accepted fully by me.

"As you, Be'i, had told me, should it be meant, it shall be. If not, then we shall not have lost anything but numbers. They shall be welcomed by the ancestors should they bear spirits of truth and goodness.

"At present, I would wish that this alliance be successful. For more than one hundred eight years, since the beginning of the Unar incursions within Irliae, there has been relatively little contact between us and our neighbors but for the trade of our people to Unar in the past fifty-four years. This meeting in the next moon bears exceeding importance for beginning the struggle to reclaim Irliae's true way and to restore a proper Desalia that is humbled, yet bears the freedom to continue its growth in peace.

"You and Be'i are forward members of this movement--dawn was brought to our dark-bound people through your public plea for change, and that was brought into the sun with your sister's public reclamation of the Allanois Regency. Thus, we have now stood, ready to sacrifice our love of peace and spiritual conscience to answer your call. Yet more is needed as we deal with the prime powers of Irliae--the Antral, the Koba, the Sureshan, laskeb and Brijan, among the others sent to desolation by Unar.

"As you bring us to fight, Children, is it with unfairness your citizenship is desired before that truly begins?"

B'Elanna looked back to see an unreadable gaze in Tom. For a moment, she considered the floor, her own hands, and then finally the prichava again. "We shall give the matter thought," she said quietly, in the woman's tongue.

Lledri bowed respectfully. "My thanks."

They sighed throughout their quiet retirement that evening.

Her cheek resting upon his chest, her fingers idly tracing the pattern of the scar across his waist, B'Elanna stared at the shelves on the opposite wall without focusing. She felt his hand smoothing over her bare hip in slow, warm circles, but for being as lost in thought as he, she didn't move.

"She does have a point," B'Elanna said softly, breaking the loaded silence in the barely lit room. "It will only get worse, when others come for the trade. We haven't even dealt with the Brijan yet and they're *known* to be suspicious."

"Not to mention the Koba," Tom added, almost unwillingly for the reminder Lledri had unwittingly placed in his mind.

But B'Elanna followed that thought, breathing in Tom's rich scent, feeling her eyelashes brush his skin when her eyes turned down. "Padan took advantage of us because he knew we weren't from here. He knew we wouldn't act like Desalians--or many other people he knew."

"He smelled the fight in us," Tom agreed. "Llulo lla'ach tso'e."

"Knew a stubborn one when he met one," she translated loosely in agreement.

Sighing hard, squeezing her hip, he nudged her head for her to look up. She did. "You know I wouldn't mind as much as you might, B'Elanna, but I don't want to leave this all to you. You would be pretty pissed if I did."

She smiled briefly in thanks for that wit, but it melted quickly. "You would be willing to take the kraja?"

"Yes, especially if we need to."

She sighed, unconsciously turning her hip into his hand. He began to stroke it again. "It looks like we might," she finally said. Her gaze considered the line of his shoulder, flexing slightly with his moves. She blinked slowly. "I know we had talked about it a couple times."

"I think we were too busy to bring it up again," he said weakly, knowing they both knew better.

"I hadn't really thought about it," B'Elanna admitted, "until we met Okeleb Nazir. He left me wondering all the sudden what I am--half Klingon and Human or adopted Desalian refugee with one hell of a history sitting on her forehead. I thought I knew. Well, I do know who I *am*, but...I hadn't thought of us as outsiders for a long time."

"The first thing I thought about when he called us outsiders was how I felt when I came on Voyager--which I hadn't since before we left Uillar, I'm sure." Tom sighed, remembering the plain look of distrust on the man's face. "I know I have less to think on with that, but I've felt the same sometimes--when I remember that I was born human."

"So, do you think we would be buckling into their discrimination if we did this?"

"I don't think I'd call it anything that strong, though you could. The reason we have to think about it now makes it seem like that. But we've already let go of what we couldn't keep in this place and taken on what we needed to. We said it downstairs: This is our home now, and they are our people. This is just another thing we have to do to accept that, and we can get used to it like everything else. It can't be worse than what we've already managed, right?"

B'Elanna didn't doubt it. Tom had certainly gotten used to her injuries--had always accepted her as she was. Nor did it seem to faze him when they made love, even with the glowglobes fully activated. He stared at her as if she were the most beautiful woman alive. She might not have believed it for herself, but he did make her feel it sometimes. No, she *did* feel it sometimes. And that was only one thing among so many other changes they rarely thought about anymore: Their clothes and food, the languages they'd learned and were still learning, the everyday traditions and the general mannerisms and etiquette. All of it was becoming more natural to them both.

Staring at him still, she wondered what a little dye on their temples might make as a difference to anything else they were doing--except making it less troublesome.

"You're right," she said. "I mean, like Bakali said, it'll stimulate new nerve endings, but it won't mess with our minds. It's a mark of citizenship--and even if it's wrong they would need it to trust us, it wouldn't be anything we might not have done otherwise someday."

"Even so, we're pretty accustomed to being the outsiders." His lips turned up. "Sure you can handle blending in?"

Despite his light tone, she did think on it. "Funny," she said, "as much as I always wanted it when I was a child, it will be a little...different, won't it? --Do you think you could do it again?"

"I actually missed it, when I wasn't." He paused, nodded slightly. "The more I think about it, the less I mind the idea of knowing we officially belong to Desal. And maybe Lledri's right about their deserving it, too. They've been nothing but good to us, protected us, took us into their homes, been friends--plus some."

She nodded with her eyes. "Yes. They have. And we do owe them something besides a fight. We've

asked so much of their beliefs and ways--even if Sashana'i helped that." She sighed. "We could give that much, at least...right?"

He nodded, his hand drifting around the small of her back. "I think so."

With that, she placed her head on his chest again. Kissing it, she cuddled in and closed her eyes. "Then we'll do it."

The morning sun, just crawling through the misty hills of Dviglar threw shadows under the older man's heavily chiseled face as he considered the two--and their decision. "Yet bear you certainty that this belongs to your spirits?" Dalra leaned on the cart of supplies the group of friends was to take to the next ship under repair. "I should believe your decision is influenced."

Tom stared at him. "Dalra, I would have expected anyone but you to disagree. --Why didn't you say anything last night?"

"It was not my place." Looking to his friends, his eyes glazed with concern in the warm, white sunrise. "With her broken tongue, Sashana'i had made your callings, Be'i and Toma. Your birth names remain B'Elanna and Tom. This has not been forgotten. It is yet your address of each other."

B'Elanna blinked. It was very strange to hear him say their names. Even Miztri and Aratra, who had congratulated the couple only minutes before, looked up from their separate assemblies to hear the words pass the man's lips.

"But you have always encouraged Tom and me to be more Desalian," B'Elanna protested. "You have always asked us into your ways--shill kre'al ye tsa'o."

He laughed. "By my spirit, I would not say so much. Perhaps it was wished that you would accept ways which would be beneficial to you...and, yes, perhaps I have prepared you for a life among us," he confessed, "to accept our daily ways and our traditions. Yet identity among us lies in the kraja. Greater than citizenship, this is a bond with Desal--and this shall be felt more than you suspect at present."

"I understand that," B'Elanna said. "And Tom and I might have given it more time, but the resistance needs more than our word, like Lledri said. And more, we *do* plan to stay here, following your way, folding our bread and wearing cloth shoes for a very long time--the rest of our lives. So what would be the trouble in looking like something we might not be by birth but are by choice?"

Listening from her own work nearby, Sashana'i didn't ask. Her very spirit screamed it, demanded it, and insisted she ask the very logical question that yet would only have confused her friend. *Yet for Desalia...* Sashana'i fought her face as she was reminded of her knowledge and her guilt. *They are needed. I need them. Irlae needs their skill and spirit.*

Tom finished binding a row of components they'd just repaired and put them in the cart. "Dalra, we know what the kraja means," he told him with a steady stare. "You know by now we would never do this without respect."

"Ka. Yet it is uncertain should it be best for you."

Would they not wish for their origins, however? Sashana'i asked herself. Despite the troubles there, their strife and bitterness, would they not wish to be returned to their own? Certainly, their people

should wish them returned. They are needed both here and there, these adopted ones...

"Like B'Elanna said, it might just be the best for everyone. As for ourselves, though, you're right--we won't forget completely what we came from--tsa lullotsu ye'o cha wi'odla."

Dalra laughed again. "True! Stubborn as named by myself, as well."

"But that doesn't mean we can't be Desalian, too."

Reaching out, he patted Tom's shoulder. "My friend, it is merely wished that you truly knew it to be truth for yourselves. As you yet have never released all which you were, I bear concern for your most sacred spirits."

B'Elanna shook her head. "But Dalra, we do belong here, and we have let go our of former ways."

"Not fully. You would not seek vindication with Unar had you accepted our ways utterly."

"Oh? And how would you explain your regent?" she countered. "She was born here and wants Desal's resurrection. Tom and I want it not for revenge or politics. You know this. Or would you suggest we belong to nothing rather than accept what we have claimed--only because we weren't born here?"

Dalra conceded to that with silence, and held further argument behind a flick of his brow, a glance down to his hands.

Sashana'i finished her bundle and brought it to the cart. Drawing a full breath, she eyed both Tom and B'Elanna. "For myself and Desal, I bear such gratitude you remain among us, and that you accept yourselves in my house."

"Yet Dalra's concerns do bear meaning," Aratra said. "Indeed, the origins of *your* spirits cannot be forgotten, Be'i, Toma, no matter what they have or may become--tsa zjiva ch'gya'l tsa'o."

"Ka'i zhal tsani'o," B'Elanna smiled. "I think Tom and I have room for both incarnations," she then said to Dalra. "Thank you for understanding, though. You're concerned for our spirits. Zhachi va'e--you are sweet to think of us. But we've made our decision."

"Should you feel you are destined to this way, there is little but to see what fate procures," Dalra allowed with a gracious nod.

"We do," Tom replied, adding more lightly, "Or at least you would not get rid of us that quickly, friend."

With a more genuine smile, then, the older man finally bowed. "Then I shall make myself present with my bondmate at your ceremony, as you feel your continued challenge of my being is meant as well."

"Bakali says it's formal, by the way," B'Elanna grinned then gave a pleased Miztri a wink.

Yet for as much confidence as they showed their friends, they spent the day catching each other's blank stares then digging back in to their separate tasks so as not to return to the topic. They had decided and they weren't going to turn back. Still, Dalra, who had been respectfully quiet when Lledri had made her points the evening before, had made some points of his own. They couldn't help but wonder, if only to themselves...

But then, as if designed to spite their reformed doubts, after leaving their friends to return to their new communications center, they met yet again with Tridl, who immediately requested Aratra's help in configuring his shield frequencies.

They returned to Azlre with the humble yet sincere request for their elders.

"It should be said that the Kraja of Growth is as sacred and painless as the first touches of Bihla and Sa'alli. Our first markings are administered by our parents upon birth, our lines of life drawn each succeeding second year until the tenth year.

"The first circle, symbolizing the child's liberation from our mother's waters, is marked here, at the creases of our eyes; our father's earth is traced upon the ground of our temple, here. In growth, our following tracings are placed, as is seen, a delicate chain extending from our eyes, the seeds of our steps within our young lives. At tenth year, we are blessed with our full complement of kraja, a time of great joy and celebration amongst our beloved families. Puberty and the first donning of daily worn headscarves would follow approximately two revolutions past this dear time.

"Yet this is another ritual entirely."

It was a small gathering. Only those closest to those involved attended--completely within tradition even in normal circumstances. Also according to custom, the floor was dressed with silver grass rugs and cloths kept aside by the elders for finer occasions. Even the wall sconces were lit with oilstones, adding to the lush light of the mantel and hanging a sweet aroma in the warm, dry air. Small, bread-wrapped vegetables and cheese was piled on a plate. A decanter of mohrrev wine sat beside it.

Little Haviki fingered the two lines and circle she presently bore as she watched Bala and Bakali, dressed in their old finery, set out their kraja tools with pride. As they cleaned and inspected each part of the small, slender devices, they explained to the five year-old how the tradition began and how it had been preserved over time, even during the occupation. Meanwhile, while Lledri, Dalra, Miztri and Zeptra talked quietly by the glowing golden fire, a series of thumps and thuds sounded above.

Shaken from her curiosity, Haviki looked up to the closed hatch at the top of the ladder. "What are those sounds?" she asked her elders.

Bakali giggled before she answered. Had Sashana'i and Aratra not followed their charges upstairs, she would not need wonder. "They may be simply walking. The ceiling is thin."

Bala chuckled at his first response to that, but said, "Perhaps Sashana'i attempts to braid Be'i's hair."

"Why does Be'i's hair bear so little length?" Haviki then asked. "May it not grow properly?"

Bakali shrugged. "I would believe that many women of her birthpeople wear their hair upon their shoulders, as do some Antral and Sureshan women. It is part of their uniqueness, Child--which is to be embraced, particularly at this time."

"Yes, Nali-Bakali."

Another round of thumps and slides on the third floor was then followed by an echo of deep laughter--the men. Bala and Bakali grinned at each other, snickered as they continued the preparation.

"Deell weat eeht," said Sashana'i in her siblings' tongue as she grabbed the last row of stays on the back of B'Elanna's gown.

"Deal with what?" B'Elanna demanded, as she clutched the support beam. "I can hardly breathe like this."

"You shall sit straight and the fabric shall stretch."

"I hope so! --Damn!"

"This was made to be upon you," Sashana'i insisted.

"Made to kill me, you mean," B'Elanna growled in reply. "If you weren't so nice, I would--"

"You would yet bear the gentleness and mirth wished for in your heart."

"Even if it's about a facha wide now," B'Elanna returned and shot a stare back to the snickers coming from the bed. "Keep laughing and *you* will be wearing this dress to dinner, Toma Azlreat'a."

"Sorry," Tom chuckled.

When she blew out her breath, she felt the tug and her waist slowly contract. B'Elanna was certain those ties were going to grip her spine alone once Sashana'i was done.

Finally, the lady stopped, tied off the ribbons then turned B'Elanna around to boldly dip her fingers into her bodice and yank it up. B'Elanna choked, but didn't bother saying any more beyond a growl. It was a proper, ankle-length gown Sashana'i had dug up somewhere, and B'Elanna had insanely agreed to do everything right that night. *In for a penny...* she harped to herself.

Then she turned around to get her headscarves out of the trunk--and the men's laughter ceased instantly. Their jaws literally dropped. B'Elanna blinked.

*Well, maybe it isn't *that* bad*, she grinned to herself as she felt her ribs trying to readjust to their new form. "What?" she asked, even if she knew--definitely knew--that look on Tom. For the first time in a long while, she wished she had a long mirror.

"Wow," Tom said, lost for any other words. Aratra remained speechless.

"Well, don't get used to it, as this will never be worn again," she told him, teasingly as she played their reaction with turn on her heel, a precisely maneuvered bend into her trunk--even if that was difficult.

"Unless you take to bonding," Sashana'i smiled. "You have brought yourselves as far that it would not be a curse upon you."

B'Elanna snorted. "And wear this thing again? --Tom, don't you dare ever ask me."

"Sure, Chief," he breathed, his gaze lost on the wondrous curves Sashana'i had made of B'Elanna's torso

and waist. It made the sap green cloth and satiny embroidery look like water pouring over her hips to the ground, curling in at the slits on each side of the skirt, hinting at the sheer leggings within and pooling slightly in the back. Exquisite had been his first word. Though she did look a bit *too* tight for what he was used to--and certainly, B'Elanna had never needed any help there--she looked damned nice.

Besides, if he had to wear that silly headdress with clinking beads annoyingly tricking his ear, she could bear with a tight dress for a couple hours. He would happily remove both later on.

Pulling out the scarf she saved for "formal" occasions, B'Elanna wrapped it around her curls, tying it on one side of her head and draping it over the back to tuck the other side. Sashana'i appeared directly afterwards to pin a few rows of beads into that sheer cloth.

"Ornaments should yet be procured for your ears," she commented.

B'Elanna glanced her way, but decided she was done arguing for the night. Looking Tom over with a small smile, she shrugged. "Are you ready?"

Nodding, he was suddenly returned to the reason they had gone through so much trouble in the first place. With a deep breath, he pushed himself to stand and took the mere two steps across the room to take her hands. Staring down into her dark eyes, he could see every ounce of expectation and hesitation swirling in her mind, already busy with worlds worth of concern.

"Are you certain you want this?" he asked her seriously.

She nodded. "Va'oll?"

He nodded. "Ka. I am."

Their hands were yet clasped a bit tightly; their eyes were stubbornly set on the other's.

B'Elanna released one of those hands to take up the skirt of the dress that felt far too formal for such a private evening among friends. Though everyone else looked very nice--including Tom in his long fitted blue coat and an embroidered robe Bala had leant him--she couldn't help but feel they were overdoing it.

Tom gestured for their friends to lead them; once they were gone, he placed both his hands on B'Elanna's cheeks, tipping her head up. Leaning down, he pressed his lips to hers, felt her mouth part easily upon contact.

Slowly, he took in her taste, letting his fingers float down to her exposed shoulders. She drew a deep breath, purring softly. Parting, he met her eyes, gently squeezed the muscles under his fingers. He knew that at such a proximity and by that time of day, she probably could only see a big blur, but he knew she could at least feel his closeness, likely knew what he would say.

But instead of speaking, he simply took her hand again. She gave his fingers a gentle embrace.

"Monr kraja tsa ye'o hza'oprisa; kra ne'o mahyull urr Desal tsa mechriva."

So, in that ceremonial clothing, dressed and ornamented more properly than any Desalian might have been in those times, they braced a breath and knelt before their elders and the audience of those closest to them. Lit in the crackling firelight and warm scone light, they drew their eyes up to those older ones, which smiled back.

"Ka tsa'o manr llitsa," they responded softly, in unison, glancing to each other. "Hza tsa'o kraja al."

Sashana'i held Aratra's hand, holding her own breath as they watched the elders of Azlre gladly perform the ritual kraja ceremony for the children's sakes. They believed that Tom and B'Elanna had come to their decision cautiously and sincerely, had chosen of their own will.

Bala and Bakali gently touched the recipients' temples, searching for the correct places to begin. They then traced the lines, finding the correct nerves and memorizing them, upon the left temple first, and then the right. Finally, the elders took up the kraja tools.

"The circle of birth," Bala said quietly, "of the mother's womb and her waters released unto the new spirit set forth into life..."

I did this.

Watching her friends, hesitating slightly, remove their scarves and turn their heads to accept the markings, Sashana'i trained herself into stillness. *They were made as such by me, to Be'i and Toma. As Dalra spoke, so correctly, I did so with a broken tongue...*

The others in the room seemed pleased at it, glad to see them take their proper places among their people, proud to see Be'i and Toma accept their citizenship fully. Even Dalra was reconciled, not that Sashana'i had expected otherwise from him. Certainly, he would have *more* right afterwards to correct them, Sashana'i knew with some amusement--and some satisfaction.

Yet seeing B'Elanna's deeply lit eyes close as the marks were carefully plotted, as Bakali seemed to need to decide how to navigate the edge of B'Elanna's temple ridge, the grin slowly faded.

"...trailing out upon the land as does the seed, which born, springs forth into the air..."

Hope was denied by me and now through my influence their nature of birth shall be dissolved as well. How might they ever return to their own when they have become Desalian? How shall I be cursed when my selfishness has denied them their origins unto eternity?

The elders began to draw the dotted lines, the first across the bottom of each temple, running along the cheekbone, symbolizing the child's bond with the earth it lived upon. In succession, each line angled higher, denoting the child's growing spiritual awareness.

It had been a good decision, Sashana'i knew, sustaining their lives, though she was not a scholar and had used her grandfather's powerful last memories to aid her in the act. Not even bearing the title and training of a novitiate, however, and not having the two's permission, it would have been seen as an unnatural act worthy of severe rebuke, had anyone but Aratra discovered her actions and the scholarship still been a division of their government. There had always been firmly adhered-to rules about Desal's use of their learned telepathy.

It was necessary.

B'Elanna had said such words before, Sashana'i knew--and knew she shouldn't know.

Yet it had indeed been necessary in her eyes--and she would not have changed her fateful decision if she could. More than that, too, she had indeed taught them the ways of Desal, supported and encouraged them as she also allowed their passions and temperaments to inspire her and those around her. To her shame, Padan understood her all too well. In their slow recovery and adjustment, they had needed

support and guidance--and Desal certainly needed to witness hope again. The results were precisely what Sashana'i had designed.

Upon meeting them in Dalra's overhang on Uillar, sensing their passion for life alone, she had felt her own hope resurrect itself from within her desperate spirit, from behind her scarred facade.

I assisted in their being influenced--and in their power to influence. Yet for their painful former lives, made petty in the sear of Uillar, what would be the crime in their never returning to that place of violence and isolation? And the temporal variance caused by the Barrier, which would be worse? Unawareness of time's speed here, or knowing the impossibility of returning, thus frustration?

The last beaded lines were drawn nearly upright--not quite vertically, as one still within their body would never be completely of spirit; the reed of life was yet able to be bent by the wind of fate.

"...until the day we shall meet our beloved ancestors, we shall yet retain closeness, taking their blessed guidance into our spirits and to the earth, our own, our home, in this gift of Bihla and Sa'alli."

Desal, their destiny. My debt to the ancestors shall be great, Sashana'i concluded as the final tracings were neatly filled. They shall never have resolved that which they left behind, their comrades, their families, and their beings. In their own spirits, they may indeed find peace as Desalians. Yet those left behind shall never be completed in them, nor shall their needs be met. There shall not be balance without completion of the original path....

This made her mind turn in a completely different direction. An interesting matter within their memories, a curiosity that perhaps she might recall again....

And yet, she could not bring herself to tell them about the Barrier, nor of anything she knew or had suddenly conjured. At that point, with little to do about it, there would only be another terrible loss of hope that Sashana'i--and through her, Aratra--had allowed. They had watched this on Uillar, B'Elanna and Tom's gradual release of faith for their desperate need to survive--and after, their need to make something of the life they had won in surviving. At the same time, however, they had also witnessed the two's happiness and growth since coming to Azlre, their reclamation of desire and stronger sense of self following their feelings of acceptance, belonging and love. Knowing them as intimately as she did, Sashana'i knew precisely how important those things were to them. It had all been worth the sin, as well, as Desal was at last resolved to be free.

"Toma, Be'i, Allanois alya'o Ceziat'o. Zhalla'evrrla ostull."

My original plan must continue, she resolved, allowing herself a smile when she saw her friends return their headscarves to their proper positions then regard each other, curiously at first. When they stood, they thanked Bala and Bakali for the gift they had requested.

They did look proper and attractive--but that was her Desalian eye interpreting the change.

Still, it took little for Sashana'i to accept their choice. While her realized debt was increased by the journey her sworn siblings only slightly understood but had chosen to take, she no longer feared it. Apparently, fate had blessed their way and her way of bringing them into the fold of Desal. It was meant.

Because of her, it had become meant, and she would continue to ensure that.

So, to begin that journey with them, Sashana'i was the first to move to her feet, embrace B'Elanna and

then Tom, and welcome them as Desalians.

"Blessed way, my siblings," she smiled, embracing them in her softly robed arms.

"Sashana'i said we would feel it," B'Elanna mused aloud, wondering at the look of it on Tom, still deciding if she liked it.

It was...interesting.

After perhaps a bit too much wine and more food than their stomachs were accustomed to, they had finally bid good evening to their friends and taken themselves upstairs. As she had expected, Tom gladly took the pains of unlacing her from the gown, baring her skin with not a few kisses and his gentlest touches. She returned the favor, un-layering him piece by piece with expert hands.

Looking up to receive a fuller kiss from her mate, however, her eyes diverted to the new distraction there, having already almost forgotten about it. He did the same. Laughing quietly, they settled on retiring for the time being, letting the meal and the wine digest more peacefully.

Lying on their sides, they stared at each other for some time, making themselves used to the look of it, not to mention what else had come with the outward qualities.

"Not like a sensation as much as... Well, I know what you mean," he said several moments later.

"It's like...tseb n'rril..." She paused, searching for words in two languages. "Like it's connecting with..." She shook her head.

"Something or whatever?" he said, grinning slightly.

"Ka." She regarded him again. "Does it look strange on me?"

"I think you look great in blue."

"Tom..."

He shook his head of his grin. "It looks fine. Different, but you're still you. It's not strange, just...mir elld."

"Do you think it will change us, though?"

"You were there when they told us about the neurological effects."

"I didn't mean that--not really. I was thinking about who we are."

"I believe them when they say our spirits will remain unchanged. I think we'll keep changing as we choose to."

"Will we?" she asked. "I don't know about that, Tom. I think they meant more when they said we'd have to decide what we represent--who we are."

"I think we have made that decision," Tom said. "Since Bala and Bakali permitted us to start doing something progressive here, we haven't fought very much about anything."

"What if things stop going on our side?" she asked.

Tom shrugged, grinned. "Then we begin meditating with our elders and take the kraja."

B'Elanna laughed. "I guess so. Maybe I just didn't expect we would...*feel* this, you know?"

"Yes. I know."

Tentatively, he reached out and, almost pulling back, he placed his fingers on her temple, tracing the delicate pattern there. She breathed deeply at the touch, and even he felt... He didn't know what to call it at first. Maybe it was just the strangeness...or more, an odd presence, a sixth sense...

The threshold of her soul, he realized, feeling his chest and gut tighten, his pulse speed. *I'm on the edge of what they'd call her spirit. So close...*

Feeling his touch bring alive a line of nerves that radiated throughout her, B'Elanna reached out and placed her own fingers on Tom's markings.

They shivered; their gazes locked. If they tried, they could not have broken the contact.

"But I don't think it's so bad," he finally whispered, feeling the room around them fade to them alone. Suddenly, he found he couldn't speak. He didn't try.

Her eyes reflected the same focus, and for all their trying to blink off the effect, the room continued to blur away. They were not trained so far in Desalian ways and were not bonded. Their physiology was different. Yet they knew somehow that in their contacts they were creating an uncanny awareness between them, like when they meditated with Bala and Bakali. Something had been created there that night.

But it was incomplete. It held nothing but a sensation of connection. For whatever reason, the nerves that had been touched with the kraja tools were very alive indeed, though they lacked what it required to take that a step further.

Oddly, it wasn't terribly frustrating, only...

The reaction continued to quiver through B'Elanna as Tom adjusted his touch, stroking the indigo marks so gently she only felt the sensation increase. Now it was a warm, comforting feeling, and she grew both pleasantly tired and desirous of bringing him as close as he could be, not necessarily for intimacy, but some new instinct their connection welled in her, that made her need more, as much as she could have. She barely could say what that was, however.

More, she knew Tom was feeling the same thing.

They moved mutually closer, pressing easily to each other, kissing gently, the touch uninterrupted. Their breath and contact deepened, and soft moans grew from their throats as their bodies warmed together. They were sharing...

The world around them drifted away and they slowed themselves unwittingly. Despite their unfinished discovery, the fading conscious world around them won over any further action and moved them into

another realm they did not resist.

Within but a minute, they were asleep.

"Be'i and Toma of the Allanois House," said Miztri, a satisfied grin upon her lips when she saw the Sureshan underground leaders immediately lower to a knee.

"My thanks, Miztri," Tom said, suppressing a laugh with a cough.

"Our greatest honor," said one of the Sureshan, "is to be among this house of like-minded souls. I am Medrove, Suresha's chosen first speaker, and we offer ourselves, as ever, to our mutual assistance."

B'Elanna bowed briefly to the three darkly cloaked, bronze-skinned men and one woman that had come then remembered to touch her temple. "Good visitors, please be welcome and make yourself upright and we shall begin this sun with the supplies you have procured."

"We will respectfully follow your guide, Be'i of Azlre."

"My thanks," she replied, gesturing them to follow as Tom started them off to the main bay of communications.

Though the greeting itself had become easier with practice and guests who did not startle at their appearances, those introductions were still awkward for B'Elanna. She didn't like the bowing routine, which had increased considerably with the publication of their Desalian rank. She knew damn well she hadn't earned them practically lying at her feet--even if her sarcastic side appreciated it.

"I would like to also meet your siblings," said Medrove, maneuvering himself to walk beside her.

B'Elanna pursed her lips and glanced up to him. "There shall be introductions as the time permits," she replied. "At present our work remains--as do Sashana'i and Aratra. I would suggest we tend to ours first."

The man blinked at the young woman's manner. "You have a rather determined manner for a Desalian."

Tom looked back at them. "Precisely when was your last meeting with a Desalian resistance, good Medrove?"

B'Elanna snorted under her breath as she sped their pace.

Medrove understood the humor, too, and allowed himself a chortle at that irony. "I think we might have much to learn in each other," he said, "such as the repairs you have made upon these ships."

"We would learn from watching and listening," Tom said. "Would it please you to see our other work while Be'i cares for the power inputs?" Upon their acknowledgment, he grinned at her. "Does this find agreement with my dear lady Be'i?"

"It pleases," she replied wisely, not mistaking for a moment his bloated manners. With a tender stroke of his temple, however, a seductive blink, she managed her playful revenge. "I shall await you at the

cargo, my blessed mate."

He screwed up his smile for her benefit--silently thanking Aratra for getting him in the habit of wearing a full coat even on the warmer days--then gestured to the Sureshan to lead the way.

After they faded off into the far rows of Dviglar, she allowed herself that laugh. Tom would definitely get her for that one--and she was anxious to see how he would. Certainly, their lovemaking since taking the kraja had become...intriguing.

For the mean time, though, she did want to start on those subspace inverters sooner rather than later. It was finally possible with Tridl's deuterium and plasma. She was relieved that Tom was willing to hold the "delegates" at bay for the while--and that they were letting him do so.

For it all, her smile remained fresh as she made her way back through the path to where they'd beamed the various canisters. Still feeling the touch she'd given him as well as he likely was, she finally decided that she liked how the fine indigo marks looked on him.

And maybe she could get used to the bows.

"It is wisely said that a telling is unlike experience. This is plain.

"It was also deemed wise among many, as we have learned, not to seek too much of the latter, as it would arrive of its own volition."

How the past year had changed her.

She knew with great pleasure that she had always been a gentle girl, a good Desalian in her patience and generosity, taught well by her parents. Re'ad and Faji of Azlre were respected weavers in the square, who gave their only child all their love and their sense of right action and spiritual sense. Her mate l'efa had loved her for all the qualities she gained through them. He told her this, wished to bond with her, to share her gentleness, morality and simplicity, and to create a family between their empty houses.

Her parents had been among the ancestors many years. Sold to Desal's spiritual benefactors, she saw them again only to escort their remains to the public pyre. l'efa, too, went to service in order to afford the life he wished his lover to have. Like the good mate she was, she promised to pray for his good spirit and let him go.

They were to be bonded when he returned. Apparently, it was not meant to be.

She might even have gone with him into service had she not been with child. His child, whom she bore within a slip of her life and nursed nearly three years; she had little to give her otherwise. She, meanwhile, grew gaunt and sickly, lived on the spare supplements Bakali pressed her to take. Though the supplements could have been seen as a selfish indulgence, remaining among the living for her child was acceptable, so she did not complain for long.

It was when she could not give any more of her breast to the child that the bloodied ones had come to Azlre, among the throng of haggard Uillaran survivors. It was then that her world began to change, beginning with the day she hurried to her clinic duties only to witness Sashana'i of Cezia, regent heiress of Allanois, *demand* the lives of her friends, her adopted siblings, from their prudent elder Bakali. Before that day, she had never known one of her own to be so forthright and handle fate so proudly. Among others, it was whispered that perhaps it was simply a regent's right, which Sashana'i and Aratra inherited. She could sense it was more than that, but said nothing of it. The affairs of regents, after all, were certainly not hers--or so she thought.

She had been content for lack of any promise but for life and showing her daughter right direction. She had watched the two outsiders and her regents from a safe distance, even when she assisted them. At the time, she thought it a good thing for her child to know of such intelligence and breeding, progress within an otherwise humble life. Yet they had challenged the remainder of her seeming ease while giving practical easement. In their very ways, they questioned all she had known, believed and practiced without thought.

Perhaps that was the matter of it--belief without thought, which she realized painfully the evening the adopted Allanois publicly upset her people's current practice for the uselessness it would prove for Desalia's future. Before the clinic in the square, to all who could hear, they exposed the Unar for all the evil they were--and called out Desal's permitting that evil. To add to that, their own regent promptly announced her full agreement and made her people's right to war an *edict*.

Certainly, little else might have shocked the young mother as roundly. It struck her far more than l'efa's death did.

When she looked upon her child that evening, watched her sleeping in her tiny cot, she found spirit stir in a way it never had. Only days before, she had blessed l'efa's journey to the ancestors with all sincerity. Though she had felt proper sorrow for missing him, she had accepted the cause of it as she had her parents' passings, and then accepted that she had not been meant to be bonded to the man she loved.

After the horrible destruction of the Trisjorr district, then witnessing the passion in the square, however, and then looking at her beloved child--all she had left, the last of her humble family--she knew that Unar was *not* Desal's benefactor.

They would take her child and rape her as swiftly and unfeelingly as they had any other.

She had almost allowed that to happen, and she felt shame like she had never experienced, shame for a sin she never thought herself capable of committing. Be'i's accusation had exposed her, too: She too had almost been as those corrupt leaders, had almost led her own child into a designed desolation.

She remembered the words spoken in that first ship they took to repairing:

"So, Toma, now we have come to reclaim Desal and lrlae. How shall we proceed? We bear nothing."

"Not necessarily nothing," he replied.

"But they have a point," said his mate, frowning. "We are going to need far more to fight them on their own ground."

A bright smile grew on the fair man's face. Kicking back to lean against a bulkhead, he looked at his

friends again. "I think we have all we need and more for that--on their own ground."

The woman stared at his expression, almost backing up a bit, but then looked interested. "Okay, what?"

"We need to spit on them--in their own house."

Realizing something within his words, her smile gradually matched his.

"We need to be like the vermin--mice--crawling in their woodwork and eating at them from the bottom up. The Bajoran resistance did it somewhat--and we can do more, because they're definitely not expecting it."

It was a good thought--an easy concept for everyone to understand. Sashana'i and Aratra were outwardly glad to see they'd come up with a way to pick at their enemy without violence, to give the resistance time and information. Even Dalra of Maha'aje approved of the idea.

"Let us plan how to nibble their bread, then," said the last of the Allanois.

And so they did, and meanwhile they planned and prepared with many who had agreed to fight the Unar.

Seeing many others go to that clever duty, she too volunteered. They at first did not accept her, but she informed them she truly wished it, would sacrifice a half year with her child in order to bring about change. She added that with more food, Unar would find her pleasing and accept her into their household.

They agreed--but only on the condition that she would do only as much as needed. No more. She agreed.

Almost a half year later, she kissed the floor of an Unar household as an official dragged one of her people past. The drask was to be "reassigned," apparently. Placing her fingers to her smooth, exposed skin, she blinked a silent prayer for the young man and hurried to prepare Onruk's wine.

Onruk had come to prefer that she serve him. In her months within his household, she had quickly come to master her arts. She knew precisely how to carry his chalice to his place, exactly how far to fill his glass, where to look and what expression to display as he tasted it.

The taking of tialuo wine was--she learned--a precursor to their afternoon meditation. Considering how much wine he took, she could see why he would remain with stillness and contemplation. She served him in good health, filling the chalice to the correct point while he finished his business for the day. To this, she listened intently while yet maintaining her pleasantly ignorant face. That too, she had learned well. When he drew a particular breath, she bent to refresh his cup.

His grey eyes searched her in her work. "Tell me Cashul," he said quietly, "what was your name at birth."

She paused only for a moment to think. Onruk sometimes became bored with the reports and engaged her in smalltalk. Only half of the time she answered truthfully, but that time, she decided to give him her true name. "Cali, good commander."

He leaned on a single finger, his elbow on the arm of his desk chair. He peered over her thin sarong-

wrapped body, her dark hair, straight and not errant in a single strand, was braided so tightly it shone, masking somewhat her fair, plain face and light blue eyes. She was cursed by the markings upon her temples, being Desalian. Were they removed, she would be a completely handsome drask.

"Cali. What meaning has that among your species?"

"Pleasing girl-child, good commander."

"Do you believe your namers were correct?"

Again, she paused only as long as it took to formulate an answer he would like. "I would be unable to judge, as it would require my commenting on my own nature, which is not the way of humility and selflessness. I should not wish to accept that poison, however. I beg your correction were I to seem the same."

Onruk was of course pleased with her response. In his occasional prods, Onruk had found that she was excellently initiated into the way the Unar wished to see their drasks. It had taken much time and effort to make them need to sell themselves to service; more to train them properly and create a way of things that would be followed. Idly, the commander wished all his drasks could behave with such advancement as that one did. This in turn spawned an idea.

"You have been isolated, Cashul, to keep you pure. Servers must bear a particular cleansing, as you know. Still...I would like to see your way given to others. You will commit yourself to the training of other drasks in this house."

"Yes, good commander." Her face went unchanged.

"You do not see any joy in this advancement?" he queried.

"Any work performed to the standards laid out by our benefactors would bring joy and completion, good commander."

Onruk could hardly bear his calm. The woman was bewitching him, possibly corrupting him with every word. Her humility and precision, her soft voice, slightest smile and fair and downturned eyes... She was even beginning to speak Unar with great proficiency. He would have to dip again from the well from which she came, when he had the funds, if only to see if she was not truly unique. For the present, however, he did need to test the boundaries of that one. It would be interesting to see exactly how far she had been indoctrinated.

"You will serve me wine and your body in my chambers this evening, Cashul."

"Yes, good commander."

"Leave."

She did, properly, unemotionally, just as she told herself to, over and over, not flinching, not crying or fearing... She turned to return the decanter to the kitchen for proper cleansing.

It was truth, the fact that life as a bound drask in an Unar household was an easier life. Their health, much required among the fastidious Unar, was seen to. Were they a particularly pleasing drask, their safety would also be a concern. Though the women's clothes were more like shoulderless dressing gowns, they did have it and it was clean and new. There was also sufficient food and water.

Many drasks who survived the purchased year returned to service, were eagerly traded for currency or simply remained in a household when it was desired. As those drasks knew nothing of the past year's developments, Cali could understand this.

The Allanois all had spoken truth. Unar knew precisely their own intentions for Desal, among others. What chilled Cali the most was realizing how well their scheme, worthy of a feast of Prihar, had trapped her beloved people. How well the Unar had indeed trained their submission, taking advantage of Desal's guilt and spiritual wishes! Again, she felt the shame that she too had allowed it once. She had almost committed her child to such nothingness, kneeling upon the stones and touching her little neck as those beasts passed her by. The others within the household had been her child, once....

The others of the household. She was to be trusted with them.

The tiniest smile escaped her. Thankfully, it was unseen as she slipped into the kitchen.

Unfortunately the evening had to come first. For the first time, she did not mind it as much. With her usual prayers flowing through her, the knowing bond with her ancestors and her purpose purifying her and repelling Onruk's spiritual stench, Cali did precisely as he asked.

The next morning, she awoke without an indicator, powdered herself, dressed and left her closet as she always did. She did not dare leave any other way, nor did she dare vomit, scream, cry or wish for death for the repellent recollection still spinning through her nauseated spirit.

Rather, her purpose somewhat distracted those impulses.

Objectives for her day posted on a small monitor outside her door. Often, each day was the same, though they were all to read it. Sometimes, there were exceptions. That day was an exception, as she had hoped. Minutes after reading her orders, she wrapped herself in the proper coat and--after kneeling for the passage of several officers and taking their steps to her neck--Cali set off through the west exit for the laundry.

It was not a busy walk. Unar streets were generally not crowded, its people more inclined to go only where they were required to go. Women of Unar remained in seclusion since the Plodischik sect overthrew the old order shortly before Unar incursions began in Irlae, so had said the elders when they advised her. Only when she arrived that Onruk's household did Cali see that it indeed was true. Children, too, remained away from "Gozhor's breath," as it was said, leaving the streets rather dead to life but for the occasional officer en route to another's home. The dearth showed the effort Unar made with their cities, to make them as clean as their bodies should be. The architecture was light grey and straight-lined, with no particular decoration, courtyards or even trees.

She was glad there was little distraction there, actually. She made her way around the alley to the steel structure of the laundry in little time.

Her contact was called Apprahol by the Unar. He was approximately thirty-five, slightly greyed and plain in appearance and seemed a well enough trained and humble man. He gave her a plain stare in greeting, did not touch her personally as he removed her coat and set it aside to be washed.

His service at the laundry had taught him all the proper procedures in the treatment of a drichka server assigned to train those under his eye--mainly clothing deliverers. This one, quite a perfect seeming drichka, had special orders directly from Commander Onruk and so he was doubly careful, even as he peered askance at her.

For her part, Cali gave him nothing but a standard Unar greeting and followed him to the corridor that led to a series of staircases. As they began to descend, however, her escort remained near, seemingly lest she fall down the sharp declines. A hiss of steam echoed below and he held an arm behind her. In the corner of her eye, she saw him glance behind them then to her.

"Allanois," he said quietly, to her ear alone.

Cali did not look at him.

"There are no listening devices here and the steam shall carry away any errant ears which are likely not here," he told her. "Unar think nothing of their drasks' minds, but what they desire to believe."

"Which would be their undoing, should this be truth," she finally said.

"I have served five households in my tenure," he told her. "I am Aprra of Ci'avvas, Ivvisa, and the way is known to me. Upon my spirit, good lady, I do not deceive you."

She drew a deep breath of the steamy air, glanced up again. "I am called Cali of Azlre, Cezia."

He looked up the steps as they rounded another turn then slowed their descent. "Allanois," he repeated.

"Bear among you spirits who doubt Desal's contrition should be continued?" she asked.

"It would be said that contrition is yet required, our spirits in need of humility and patience--and yet the poison of Unar is well taught in this place. There shall always be some discomfort in the extent of discipline and demand upon our way."

She blinked away her vision of l'efa. "Particularly by Unar, who bear no right to serve us our redemption."

"Allanois," he said yet again, managing to not sound too pressing. "Please good lady, this manner of talk since your arrival must be understood or quelled. You have whispered to others of the houses of our blessed regency--yes, it has been brought to me. It circles through the air like a whirl in a canyon. Yet the inappropriate curiosity may well be a danger to those here."

Cali's eyes remained on the steps. "Sashana'i of Allanois," she stated, "descendant of Yusi, lives, and she, beside her bondmate, has claimed Desal as her spirit's responsibility. We are therefore absolved for any resistance to Unar to free Irlae from the bonds of Unar. It is agreed by our elders and by the prichava of Cezia that Unar have manipulated our beliefs and work to slowly erase our spirits' tradition and truth. As was their approach upon Desal, their method was intended as gradual, as not to be noticed. Yet the plan has been exposed; it shall boast only failure, now."

She had practiced the paragraph several times in her walk to the laundry, yet she had to force her voice not to tremble as she said it.

Aprra felt a quiver meet her quick and quiet words. For all his surprise, it took much of his control not to respond immediately.

"I seek to inform those of Desal of what shall be," Cali added, "and it shall be brought among us, Aprra. I have been sent to both teach and warn as well as spy, as have been many others implanted into service. We all shall warn you of the impending danger as we teach our responsibility to our children--all

children of Desal--as the poor regency was for us. Their mistake shall not be repeated. Rather, we shall learn from it and sacrifice our own spirits if necessary in order to cleanse their way unto the future of Desalia. This fate may be, should our prayers be truth. They *shall* be made truth. It time for the sun's rising upon our blessed people has come."

"By my spirit," Aprra breathed, having never heard such ambition for Desal and yet *sense*. It was both thrilling and frightening, and more than tempting. Not even he had considered the idea in his years, and yet hearing it, he wished he had.

"By *all* our spirits, good man. Are those in your guidance learned in our finer handwriting?"

"I would believe they bear knowledge."

"I have procured a stylus. I shall require material to write upon." She looked up him, offering a slim smile. "Shall we teach our good citizens, good man?"

He let go his breath in a half-laugh, then, shook his head as he considered the thin, plain woman beside him. Aprra had been under the service of the Unar since his twenty-fifth year to provide medicine and food for his family, which had given him quite a bit of perspective on the Desalian condition--and a selfish wish to survive, if but for his family. The last time he saw them, two of his brothers had been sold--for no return income--to pay for an "incursion" of debt.

He had seen their gaunt faces all too well and felt the sickness of his homeworld, the latest in a near constant growth of plague influenza, common in that world's wet, temperate cities. He had sold himself to service again to bring some ease to that, though he knew he would not ease them sufficiently enough that they would not suffer. Yet he had accepted that, knowing there was little more to be done.

But just then, looking to that drichka's stare, so alive and certain he felt her energy enliven him. Her spirit truly spoke through her eyes as she promised Desal's return. If that spare lady could speak with such strength on behalf of their regency, once all but passed on to the stars...

So, Aprra smiled back, albeit briefly. "We shall, good lady."

She returned his expression, bowing her thanks.

"Yet it should be asked," he said wisely, "why you would threaten your own spirit for this--the skirting of Prihar is a thing no Desalian desires, in spite of their regent's sacrifice."

"I, good man, have borne a child of Desal. For her, I shall give all belonging to me, as nothing more can be claimed by me."

It did not explain her completely, but he accepted it for the moment. "I should think your daughter is very pretty."

Cali's eyes lit with a blink. "I say without conceit she is, if for only that she shows the brightness and joy of our pure, white sun of Cezia. She has been the only truth in my life. Without her, I am not fully a person."

"Who cares for her at this time?"

"My dear friends Miztri and Dalra of Maha'aje, survivors of Uillar. They left it in the company of Sashana'i and Aratra of Allanois."

"Uillar?" Aprra straightened. "So it was to that land of poisoned fire the Allanois were taken. And yet they withstood and returned with purpose and purified spirits prepared to reclaim their realms?"

"Ka, and with the assistance of Be'i and Toma, they have continued their path with equal resolve," Cali confirmed.

"Be'i and Toma?"

"I have not mentioned them?" Cali's brow drew upwards. She thought quickly how to define the complex couple--then how to inspire as they had inspired her. It was not difficult to formulate her way, however, and in a fashion that would find Aprra's and the others' ears well. "Their story shall be told as well."

Ten suns later, Aprra put the coat back onto Cali's shoulders, staring at the smooth line of her shoulder before covering it. "I suspect we shall not meet again, good lady."

"I suspect this as well, good man," she said softly, smiling at the feel of his warm breath on her skin. She would indeed remember it with fondness.

Had she thought to try, she might not have resisted him, even while they knew that wisdom had not guided them that moon. The Unar would prefer their prize drichka server remain as "pure" as possible. Of course, she had ceased respecting Unar policies some time before.

Rather, she had missed the simple and natural sensuality l'efa had given her during their time together. She had certainly never felt that when the Unar used her so brutally at her consent. For his part, Aprra, who had been supportive of and helpful with her purposes there, had only known brief trysts. He had worked diligently throughout his life. He both made her admire and sympathize with him.

They had spoken of these things in the long evenings without duty, when all the others had taken their retirement. He had first come to her cubicle, asking if she was well in her arrangements. Like any full-minded Desalians, they took to talk, sharing several hours in each other's histories.

Each sun was filled with her "training" of the others, who were at first wary, yet eventually accepted and became even more curious of that development among their people. Cali gladly wove the stories for them, reassuring the safety of their spirits at every turn. With each day, she implanted her hopes into them and the plans of the resistance. In her later prayers, she thanked all her ancestors that they had begun to hear her with less and less complaint.

She and Aprra met again for more of their own stories, after the others had retired. Those tellings gradually moved into the present, where he mourned her loss of innocence with true tears for her. She dried them gently, assuring him they would never have her spirit, that though she had felt humiliation in their terrible manner of copulation, hers was yet a body that would heal. She was embarrassed, but not ashamed of herself.

She did miss the joy of true intimacy, however. Staring deeply at her, he admitted the same and smiled when she did.

The evening before she was to leave, she was reminded of it once again in Aprra's arms, a slow, sweet

indulgence needed by both. They touched, kissed and moved together, smiling gently into each other's eyes, treasuring the pleasure they knew would not be theirs again soon.

The next morning, the drichka called Cashul scrubbed with the powders while her clothing was properly cleansed.

She left at the precise time she had left the household, one Unar week previous--but not without ducking into a corner to bestow one last kiss to Aprra's willing lips.

"My thanks, Aprra," she whispered.

"And mine, Cali."

He caressed her temple. She returned the gesture and kissed him one last time.

Only hours later, Aprra was at the dock to receive the newest workers, recently purchased and renamed. Holding the manifest in his hand, he read off their names and memorized their faces with each humble, responding nod. That complete, he led the small group inside for cleansing.

As he adjusted the stalls, he glanced back and said quietly, "Is there much heat in the sun?"

All within the group grinned thinly, withholding more with a bit of practice. "There is," said one, "and it shines much as Allanois silver did, in ralkle past...my friend."

Aprra nodded and briefly touched his temple. "I greet you in our desired peace, friends," he replied and activated the bath.

He had been watching her since her return.

This was not good.

The others had arrived, she had heard in the whispers through the house, and so she knew her time there was almost at an end. Whether by Onruk's curious displeasure with her or through the resistance's mysterious method, she would be rid of that place soon. A part of her breathed with unashamed relief, another worried for those who remained.

Yet her work was done. She could leave with the comfort she had done all she could, far more than she promised. She yet thought about who would be Onruk's next favorite, what he might do to her that he would not do to his mate... Of course, they would never do such things to their mates. Unar mates were paid visitation only when conception was desired.

Little wonder their men sought out whores, she thought. Unar culture had made it so, just as Desal had made its own victimization with Unar's assistance.

Cali sighed away such thoughts, however, and moved along with her normal duties, returned to her since her "success" at the laundry. She was not praised for this task, nor did she expect it. The fact that she still lived and was a drichka server told her they appreciated her work.

Yet he was displeased, suspicious. She felt it.

Indeed, their laundry servers were far more efficient, she noted with some certain satisfaction as she returned their unobtrusive looks. Matters were as difficult as ever just then, yet soon their freedom would be assured. Her eyes on the floor as she moved to the kitchen for Onruk's afternoon wine, she kept her face perfectly neutral as she dreamed of Haviki taking the scholarship someday--in proper fashion, in the silag with gold and white robes and beads in her hair, praying for her spirit at the foot of the ancestors.

It was what sent Cali there and sustained her in that terrible house.

It was what made her stay kneeling as one of the servers were taken past, crying, begging, trying desperately to loosen the collar they were clutching.

Cali's hands shook under the tray, but she remained in place. She prayed for the lady's spirit, knew her as Etsenri. She had been new, a girl from Appra's homeworld, Ivvisa. Etsenri was young, however, and would likely be sent to a labor camp. Though not a desirable transfer, it was better than what other things she knew Unar were capable of.

How did Unar develop such corruption? she wondered, surprisingly for the first time as she paced up the sloped corridor to Onruk's office. *Certainly, they were once a well-minded people. Would any redemption be possible? For as great as ignorance and complacency is, Desal never sought the injury of others... How does a person, much less a people, *choose* to do harm without provocation?*

She was confident she would never understand, which was both troubling and relieving.

As she entered, silent upon the rough stone floor, she saw the form of Onruk in the corner of her eye. He was staring at her.

He was once a small boy, she mused. Was he loved? Did he play? Did he ever dream for things aside from his people's desires?

It did not matter, however. Onruk was a man there, and he had just minutes before sent young Etsenri away without pay or promise. He certainly would not feel remorse for his decision. Nor would he ever care to recognize her pain.

"You have corrupted yourself," said Onruk, low and regretful.

Cali barely paused in her work, forced herself not to react. The high commander liked to generalize about Desalian filth.

"For your work in the laundry," he continued, "you have been among the impure and should be cleansed. I have decided that your filth will be extricated completely."

Cali did pause that time--froze, in fact.

He noticed that. "You would resist this?"

"I would wish to know what you intend."

"Why should you wish that, if you are compliant?" he asked, truly interested.

Suddenly, her promise to Be'i and Toma rang through her ears--and for the first time, she obeyed it. "Desalian filth includes identity among those of my birth, which is the limit to my compliance."

This was certainly not pleasing to the Commander, who moved steadily towards her. "You do not give yourself completely?"

"I give all of myself to the point of my identity as a drask," she said, reigning every nerve of patience she possessed, "as I would not be anything, not even bear life, without that which made me what I am--even a drichka."

"I see," Onruk said. He eyed the beautiful drask, could see her trembling deep within herself. He had indeed touched the core of her being--there was nothing beyond it.

There, he knew, was the last kernel his people needed to tap in those creatures--their spiritual core. He knew well that drask, no matter how perfect, would stay upon something. He had hoped for otherwise, but his comrades had been correct about that one after all. They knew in their impartial minds that she was a trap to his better sense. Now, he could see it, too.

As she finished the wine pouring and set the decanter into its proper place, he watched her face return to normal and her body relax.

"Put yourself against the wall, Cashul. I would have you now."

Cali paused only slightly, but did as asked.

Onruk followed her. "Do you want this?"

Cali bit down on her cheek. "I would have what pleases you, and that would be a gift unto me."

"Save your spirit?"

She drew a breath. For all she had pretended, she could not make that one lie cross her teeth; she could not betray her nature that grievously. Her mind could not even formulate it, even if she wanted to. That was the one step she could not take--and fate could bring what it may because of that.

For that matter, he was already displeased with her.

So, she was softly honest. "Yes, good Commander."

Without warning, his hand shot out and grabbed her thin, pale arm, ripping her around to face him.

Cali's breath stopped as his light grey eyes glowered into his. She thought to run, to faint, to cry, to scream, to...

Onruk's bruising grip tightened further, until she blinked.

"You *do* feel more than you would ever tell me," he snarled.

"I live and breathe in this corrupt body, Commander," she managed through short breaths. "I am imperfect and shall always be. Your purity, great as it may be, may never be my own, nor my humble spirit."

"Upon *my* command!" he snapped. "Your spirit and body belong to *me*, drask." As his hand rose, he called for his assistant.

Cali felt her tears betraying the glassy stare she had held for too long as his yell still echoed in her ears, saw his hand coming towards her. *I am passed--oh my Haviki, I am in sorrow for your loss of me, though I pass with truth in my spirit...*

Through the corridors of the lower level down to the front hall, the screams echoed, bringing every server there to at least some pause, whether within or outside the shell of their being. The sounds of punishment and correction were common. However, they also knew who served Onruk's tivaluo: Cali of Azlre, the one who had come as though from the very ancestors, whispering words of blessing and redemption. Yet having never heard that voice of hope any louder than a whisper, her screams, released fully for their ears--forcing them to listen--shook their eardrums and chilled their very spirits.

Then she was seen stumbling into the hall, thrown down and then brought forth as a young officer dragging her bleeding and crying down the slope to the great corridor like any other. Her fine drichka sarong was torn; her body was purpled with impacts. Her hair, once glossy in its braid, had sprung loose and wild around her trembling frame. Held by her thin neck, she struggled to keep her feet under her, but lost her footing with each long step. Her braid-waved hair swept the ground each time and she didn't try to pick it up.

"You may beat and rape me, yet you may *never* take my kraja!" she gasped desperately. "Never my truth and my spirit!"

In her horror and pain, Cali saw her fellow citizens on the floor through her swollen eyes. She was passed, she knew, passed onto the realm where Unar would never touch her. For her words, they would have her body's end. Her strength leaving quickly, she knew her work was most certainly ceased...

The others still lived. Those there yet would be there, for their future...

"You may take all but my spirit!" she rasped, crying for her next breath. "All...but my being! I pass unto...my blessed ancestors, never into...*your nothingness!*" Her lungs crushing at the force she employed, her head dropped.

In that one outward resistance, those in the hall knew well her purpose still lived. Unar had tried, but failed, to grasp her being.

She resisted outright--resisted Unar for the sake of her eternal spirit and for all those who heard. They would remember her like that.

Each drask brought the steps of the Unar to their necks. Not a few forced themselves not to look after the scene.

At the edge of the hall near the door that would take the unconscious drask to transport, another server glanced around with his eyes alone, still kneeling on the floor. As soon as the officer and the woman had passed completely, he pulled a small tube from his trouser pocket. Unobtrusively, he put the tube to his lips and shot a foreign object from it with a quick exhale.

It buried itself in Cali of Azlre's leg.

He then took out his cloths to clean the bloody trail the drask had left in her departure.

Grabbing the skirt of her gown in her fist, Be'i of Azlre sprinted from the market upon first word of the news. Her mate, Toma, was close behind, his robe snapping in the firm, warm breeze. They skirted around the still and slower people, all preparing for the Rritskara Tsaborr festivities only just beginning, festivities they had been helping prepare for while cursing Tridl under their breath for breaking their deadline and endangering their friend.

Tridl, however, had sent the receiving trader to Cezia with his charge and with instructions to speak to the two. He hadn't finished his sentence when they dashed away. Barely paying attention to the stares and questions from friends they passed, they made it from the bazaar to the square in less than ten minutes.

She didn't even think to lose her breath after she burst into the doors and skipped to a stop on the smooth floors of the inner clinic.

Bakali greeted her with a quick nod. "Be'i, send Toma for the pah'nad tray from the replicator. It shall be required for her care."

B'Elanna took the required second to snap into that thought before looking behind her. But Tom had already heard and turned back for the square.

Her long coat and robe set aside and an apron tied over her fine gown, the elder bent over the bloodied young woman and continued to laser stitch the wounds that had been left open for what seemed like days.

They looked all too familiar to B'Elanna.

"Our good Kedra had been able to inject the homing apparatus into her leg upon her reassignment," Bakali explained, placing her wrinkled hand on Cali's dark, tangled hair as she considered the next wound. "The Antral trader paid ninety kibo for the whore, he has said."

"He shall be paid twice that, for Cali," B'Elanna said, moving to the table.

If she had ever forgotten she was angry with Unar, how her gentle friend looked just then, knotted with bruises, her slinky sarong torn and stained upon her thin frame, was a brutal reminder. She recalled as well the vast pain and illness at Uillar, the humiliation Sashana'i had had to bear to save them, the cold of every dead child and adult they had pulled from the Trisjorr district, every passing ceremony she had politely attended and for those pitiful laborers tossed back from their year's service like garbage to be disposed of. She even remembered her own waking upon that table, the pain Hychar had beaten into her.

Now Cali, so sweet yet so determined to assist, had joined those memories.

She recalled her cold desire for retribution with a clarity that actually shocked her. It had been more than a year since she had last felt it so strongly, felt that buried rage. But then, she knew she couldn't be angry every day. If she had learned anything there, it was that her energy was better used elsewhere until her need for vindication *could* be directed. She still felt it, though.

"How may I assist?" she asked her elder.

Bakali looked up, managed a small smile to try to soften the young woman's steeled expression. "Cali shall persevere, Child. The other laser scalpel may be employed to remove that clever apparatus sent to her."

B'Elanna tried to return the grin without much success. "The 'pea shooter' had been Tom's idea," she said and reached back to tie her cursorily wrapped scarves in a knot. Finding the spare scalpel, she returned to remove the beacon. She and Tom had constructed it late one night, giving it to Sashana'i to plant with one of the new agents going to Commander Onruk's household. Some strange instinct told them it would be needed. She was glad they'd listened to it.

Leaning down to her work, she growled to feel her hands shaking. She pulled a deep breath and tried again, staring at the small wound in Cali's terribly pale leg. But then she glanced to a nearby trail of dried blood on her shin...

"Damn it," she muttered.

Bakali finished healing another laceration and put her own instrument aside. Moving around the table, she smiled wistfully to see B'Elanna turn her face away. Bakali knew B'Elanna did not like to give certain emotions an audience, but Bakali also knew she was the elder of them and had enough determination of her own to not give the young woman her moment. Placing her warm dry hand on one of B'Elanna's crossed arms, Bakali turned her easily and eased her within her embrace.

"Gye, my child, indulge me," she whispered soothingly. "Your conscience had been distressed too long for our Cali."

B'Elanna willingly gave up. Pulling her arms apart, she accepted the old woman's embrace and allowed herself to sigh as she closed her eyes. "I'm sorry. I have thought a while about her coming back safely. I never used to be like this...not as this."

Bakali giggled. "Must you always be reminded?"

"No," B'Elanna grinned. "I know it is different now. I know I'm not the same person I was before."

Bakali pulled back enough to do just that, regard at arm's distance the petite, brown-haired girl, her dark eyes, full, red mouth and markings slightly teal upon her fair olive skin; dressed just so for the day in her scarves and blue gown. Sashana'i had even given her a bead chain to wear around her slim waist. "I should think you look different, ka," the elder smiled, "yet your eyes still shine into your intent spirit as it ever has. Your smile yet warms the room when you wish it and shows your gentleness, which you yet attempt too stubbornly to mask."

Nodding to Cali, B'Elanna said, "There won't be time for gentleness, soon."

"There is always a time for gentleness, Be'i, and for love, tradition and oneness. Rather, these things must not be forgotten when we must act otherwise. This was your greatest mistake in your former world, Child, a lesson you have learned well among us. You must never feel shame for your care. So now, we must give love and gentleness to Cali, who shall be well, do know."

"You know what they have done to her, Bakali," B'Elanna countered. "She has that to recover from with everything else. I have done little in comparison--living in comfort here, even being so happy and busy in my work, with Tom, with you and Bala. She did what I never could."

The elder nodded solemnly. "Ka. It is but her body, however, which shall be ill used in life, as we are designed for use. --Not designed for rape, Be'i. This is known. Yet these risks were well known when she asked for her duty and committed *herself* to it."

"That doesn't mean I have to like it or feel all right that I wasn't in her place."

Bakali touched her temple gently. B'Elanna's eyes drew up to meet hers. "Acceptance and passivity, Child," the elder stated, "is not equal to the misguided notion of our enjoying our fate. Rather, we endeavored to regain our spiritual heath and left life's turns to fate--as you have, too. Do you forget your own life's trials and terrors so easily? Your selflessness is good spirited, child, yet too great a demand is placed upon yourself--and too much of Desal's acceptance is used as a base of comparison. This impossibility which scorns you much be released."

B'Elanna immediately looked down. Something about the woman's gentle correction had worked well on her somehow. "You know me too well."

Pleased, Bakali patted B'Elanna's cheek.

"Bakali," Cali whispered.

Both women moved back to the head of the table, where two swollen eyes had opened and began to focus. Bakali laughed with the simple joy of Cali's consciousness and took her scanner back into her hand. "Rest, good lady. Your wellness shall increase when we have completed with you."

Cali closed her mouth to wet it then breathed again. She felt the bruises in her lungs, but ignored it for the sheer wonder she felt just then. It was a blessed dream, seeing the familiar ceiling above her and Bakali's sweet, old face, her sparkling hazel eyes, her pretty smile.

"Haviki?" she asked.

"Your dear child remains with Miztri and Dalra among the tsaborr festivities, good Cali," the elder told her, "and shall please you well with her goodness. --We shall yes, good lady, heal your outer wounds before bringing her, ka?"

"Ka. This would be preferred."

B'Elanna took her hand and rubbed it. "You may not know the gratitude we feel for your arrival home, to Azlre," she said in Desalian, smiling down to her friend.

Cali's eyes diverted to the other woman above her. Examining her curiously, her small smile grew through a sigh. "It was thought for a moment," she whispered, "that I had not been brought among the blessed spirits. Yet it is believed I have to see Be'i so properly of Desal--and with such perfection in your speech, I would not have known you but for your dear face. My sweet friend, you have become truly of our own?"

B'Elanna laughed quietly. "Ka, it is truth."

"As Toma?"

"Ka. His handsomeness is greatly improved, you would think."

"I should believe this," Cali smiled and squeezed B'Elanna's fingers.

"Yes, Cali?"

"I bear information for you--much which shall used well in our resistance. A great deal is lies within me; it shall be written immediately should you--"

"Vaa, there lies a far better time for that," B'Elanna said, caressing the knots in her friend's hair as Bakali pulled another tray to the bedside. Hearing the door, she smiled to see Tom coming with the medicines Bakali had ordered. "Look who has brought himself."

Tom's face immediately brightened to see Cali's open eyes--not to mention B'Elanna's obvious relief. "Zh'vi," he said, setting the items down on Bakali's table--"Should more be required, please ask"--and then bending over to look at the patient. "We see you well, finally home, good lady," he said.

"My thanks, good man," Cali happily sighed, eyeing his temples, scarves and fine holiday clothes. It was very good to be with her people again, more so with those pleasant surprises. "All I was sent to perform has been completed, you should know."

"Tell us later," Tom said gently. "On this sun and for at least several more, you should heal and make Haviki spoiled again."

"If Miztri hasn't done so well enough," B'Elanna grinned aside to him.

"Gye, yet I must--"

"Cali, you are unwell," B'Elanna said, training her relief into firmness without much effort. "None shall be assisted among us, not even your daughter, should your healing be disturbed. Our elder agrees?"

Bakali nodded to the young woman as she continued to prepare the instruments and medications she would need to use. In addition to the beating she had suffered, Cali had many of the common injuries endured by any pleasing female in an Unar household--which were treated poorly, she noticed. "It shall require but a few hours to administer your immediate treatment," she said. "I should think your memory would not be affected in the interim. Be'i and Toma speak wisely."

"Only for that we never bore the same practice," Tom quipped.

Cali heard it, and didn't mind. Pulling B'Elanna's hand to her chest, she looked at them both. "My most grateful thanks, for procuring my freedom."

"You would thank Sashana'i for that," Tom told her. "She made most of the arrangements with Tridl Himad."

"No," Cali whispered and met B'Elanna's eyes. "For it all, my friends. Bear you any conception of what you have done among us? How our beings have been changed? Our spirits freed?"

B'Elanna shook her head. "Your freedom belongs to you alone. Toma and I would have acted regardless--"

"Be'i, you and Toma have been our inspiration. You have saved us. --Please, my good Bakali, allow me this moment, for I must speak. I have borne my thoughts through so many dark suns."

The elder lady gave her a look then a small smile. "You are weakened, yet do as it pleases, Child. I shall wait."

Cali returned her attention to B'Elanna. "Your words, this cause, Be'i and Toma, has lit a fire in my once barren spirit. It may not be stopped--and with the blessing of fate, it shall not be stopped, the fire lit in me or the others I have brought this light to. It brings fear, yet it brings hope, and I shall not be placed into the darkness again. I thank you for this--for I have seen how destitute our people might have become.

"I was beaten for refusing to relinquish my spirit." Cali nodded to Bakali's returned attention. "Ka, my elder, everything had been done for Onruk by me, yet would not give my spirit, nor my identity among Desal. He claimed it and I refused him humbly. For this, I was bloodied and reassigned."

B'Elanna's lips pressed hard together, opening again with a puff of a growl. "Beast."

"Yet it was proof of your claims, Be'i. This is what Unar desire. They *do* wish our spirits to be of their making. This was a curiosity of mine, good friends. To know its truth gives me more resolve than ever."

Tom coughed a laugh. "For you alone I should think they would be defeated."

"Indeed, upon that thought, I shall spend my convalescence writing each detail of his wickedness and open tongue. --Ka, a great deal of him and Unar was learned. My friends, I shall also bear my words in open council to strengthen our way among those undecided. Should I be required to fight, as well, to sacrifice myself to this completely--for *that* hope, I *shall* give my very being. Ka, Toma, Unar shall never bear our spirits, or our children's. Prihar is of Desal's conscience. Unar are *not*."

For those assured words, Tom's brow rose, as did his eyes to meet B'Elanna's over the bed. They accepted that change in her with a blink, a nod. Looking to Cali again, he offered her a genuine smile. "Our thanks to you," he said, "for doing what we cannot."

"Your bravery and honor was shown without exception," B'Elanna added.

"The sins of my predecessors have been redeemed," she told them, her blinks growing slower, her hoarse voice fading into a quiet satisfaction. "I have done...what I could."

"More than that," B'Elanna told her, watching her eyelids flutter.

Cali saw B'Elanna's concern reappear and acknowledged that with another blink. "Bakali, I would take sleep soon, I should believe."

"Ka, Child," Bakali told her softly, administering the first anesthetic. "Allow this to be. Another time for the other matters shall await you."

Cali looked up into her friends once more, feeling her quickened heart calm, and not only for Bakali's injection. Only to see the ones who had brought her so alive as true Desalians was a blessing in her mind. As she had gone, they had come.

There was a pleasing balance in that, she thought.

"I should...wish to see my child," she whispered, "when proper."

"You shall," B'Elanna whispered, caressing Cali's hair again as her eyes slowly closed.

They straightened as Bakali began her work, staring at each other again. Their relief, a part of another job completed, hung in their gazes.

Placing her hand on the laser scalpel she'd put down before, B'Elanna took a breath. "Tom, when we're finished here," she said, reverting to her native tongue, "I want to find Tridl's agent again, before he leaves. I want to push the leaders' meeting up, if possible, before the rains. It's time to make this happen."

"Stage two it is, then," he said, feeling a small, sure smile creep to his lips.

"Sometimes, it was not about fighting at all," Tom said from his flour board on their one planned day off.

With the Tsi'omad dinner that evening, they knew well it would be a waste of time to go to Dviglar, so they remained to help the elders twist and stuff the bread they always brought to the tables.

Their work remained a topic. With Cali recuperating and the Irl'lae underground meeting in but another third moon, they had yet to organize their own base, departments, leaders, agents and captains. For all their repairs and training at Dviglar, it had been a last minute thought. The six there--Aratra, Sashana'i, Tom, B'Elanna, Dalra and Miztri--had always been looked to as leaders in their own right. Yet their precise positions had not even been settled.

Several nights ago, B'Elanna laughed about it when they realized their omission. "Some Starfleet officers we must have been!" she said. "We are in charge of this operation and we haven't even given assignments beyond repair duty!"

"Well, you can't blame me. I only had a field commission," Tom replied lightly.

Nevertheless, the week after Cali was returned to Azlre, they invited their friends by for a little "briefing session." But not five minutes into it, they'd already hit a snag trying to dole out the captancy of the Merraj.

"With a good ship and knowing how to fly it well, there were times we needed only disable the other ship. Killing is not always a necessity."

Dalra narrowed his eyes at that. "Yet Unar may well destroy themselves for that disgrace."

"That would be their choice," B'Elanna said.

"Made by our disgracing them."

Miztri sighed. "My bondmate shall obviously not take the field. --My spirit, this is not peace we are speaking on, but the effort which must be made *for* a future peace."

"Yes, good Miztri. Yet the concern of many remains, that this blessed wish could become a poison to our people and our future."

"At times, good man," Sashana'i pointed out, "one must take a little poison to cure the ailment."

"With no guarantee that the disease shall be eradicated--nor assurance it would not perpetuate upon survival." Seeing Sashana'i's eyes darken at that, Dalra looked back to B'Elanna. "Leading Unar to their

own destruction is yet destruction of them."

"It's still their choice in the end," Tom said more firmly. With a sigh, he continued, "Plus, having a ship with a few tricks up its sleeve can be good--and can avoid much of that violence you so fear, Dalra."

"How is this?" Aratra asked, unstopped in his kneading below his grin. He already knew, of course. But it would not hurt for their elder friends to know of it.

"In the Maquis," B'Elanna said, thoughtful to recall a time that had become so strangely distant to her, "we did many things I know you would not approve of. But we also used to divert ships by leaving false ion trails, sent ships on auto pilot to divert them, holo-projected ship readings and shadows--sometimes we even projected a ship itself so we could slip around them." She grinned at Tom. "And sometimes, even an overconfident pilot could do some good."

Tom laughed. "As long as the engineer was able to keep up."

"Though they would be destroyed in the end by you," Dalra maintained. He did not need to be reminded of how they were when he first met them. "You would take on that rebellion you spoke of never finishing."

"We would know better because of that time, Dalra," B'Elanna said. "Yes, we did destroy them if we needed to. We did what damage we could to keep ourselves alive and to protect what colonies we could--what was necessary. At the time, I had no problem with it."

"And here?" Dalra asked, a bit alarmed at her quiet words. "Shall such brutality be used?"

"We won't require the same methods here," she said honestly, "but I will tell you Dalra--and it shouldn't be a surprise--the Unar in my eyes are no better than the Cardassians, if not far worse. And if it does become necessary, I will treat them the same. I bear no fear of sending them to whatever eternity they believe in as they have sent countless Desalians with far more suffering than a phaser blast will serve."

"Agreed," Tom said. "I have no fear of fighting them on any level. Maybe I'll do it with more perspective now, but if it becomes necessary, we will use whatever we can."

"Then you would become no better than Unar."

"I would always know that our aim is to free people, not enslave them and wipe out their identity," Tom returned.

"Which is more than what the Cardassians were doing at Bajor--or the Federation in the colonies," B'Elanna noted. "There, it was just politics and power. Nobody really cared about the beliefs at work, as long as they got what they wanted."

Tom stopped the breath Dalra took with his hand, flour-covered but steady in the air between them. "You have to understand again that things there were very different. There were two large bureaucracies pitted against each other, each very powerful and having already fought a very long and bloody war. The Federation wanted to avoid that at all costs--and the colonies suffered for it when the Cardassians broke the treaty and attacked them anyway, probably trying to get them to go along with Federation's offer to leave the region. The Maquis *had* to be forceful if it was going to anything to defend those peoples. At the same time, there were a lot of politics and underhanded policies at work, on everyone's side. It's a long story that's hard to explain, but to put it simply, everyone wanted peace, but everyone wanted it

either on their terms or thinking their terms were better."

"It is little surprise these peoples remained at war," Aratra observed.

"The point is that the fight here is different," Tom told him. "This isn't about politics and bad treaties. It's about the Unar's good timing in Irlae and using your beliefs to work against you, which is what we will use against them in return. When the Unar figure out what we're doing, though, that will change, and there will be violence. --War isn't supposed to be easy or clean, Dalra. That's why we agree to sacrifice our spirits at least a little."

"Toma speaks truth," Miztri said. "Dalra, my spirit, discontent and impure action to some small degree must be accepted in order to cleanse the way. It is not for *ourselves* we fight, after all."

Wiping her hands on a towel, B'Elanna leaned over and grabbed a datapad she and Tom had devised of salvaged monitor parts from a junked ship. To their surprise, pre-occupation Desalians had only used them for long-term data and histories, but memorized their everyday data and literature as a rule, committing the information in a detailed log once or twice each day. She and Tom had begun to practice the same skills, but still needed the visual reminders. Squinting down to the screen, tapping some information into it, she gave Dalra a nod. "Fine--someone else will take the Merraj. Would you prefer communications?"

The older man smiled. "I would. It is work I know I could be well with."

"Even if it means tracking the Unar and telling us where they are?" He sighed, nodded. But B'Elanna nailed him with her gaze, forcing him not to turn away. "I do not want you there if you would be hesitant about it, Dalra. There is no shame in saying no, but thousands of people will depend on you for your information--all of Desal and our Allies will when this war grows thick. Running the communications center will not be simple or a position for the complacent. I want to depend on you and know I can, but I still need to hear you promise that you will perform your duty fully."

Dalra paused at B'Elanna's typically strong words. Since the beginning of the change among his people, he indeed had been cautious, but supportive, had helped in all the work, even if some of the "upgrades" had concerned him--namely, weapons development.

Like at Uillar, those willful children were playing a dangerous game and wrapping him up in it...though he could not say they needed to prod him too sharply into action. They had indeed survived Hychar, possibly the most wicked man Dalra had the misfortune of meeting. They had survived with determination and pride, and they had come away improved in manner and spirit as a result. Similar stubbornness had made life on Cezia better for all.

Now they wished to free all of Desal. In this, he did believe they were acting both selfishly and selflessly.

Even so, they were yet like small tempest storms, which cropped at nature's whim yet brought life-giving rain. They had shown how the fight could yet be achieved without spiritual darkness, but the act itself was more than discomfiting to him. Dalra could not take that great a risk within his spirit, though assisting people to remain in contact and to preserve their safety was something he knew he had experience with and liked to do. Eleven years on Uillar had definitely proven that. He could manage leading them to violence in the balance.

"In assisting your communications," he said, "my responsibility to our resistance would be obeyed

without diversion, Be'i; I would act as you would instruct me."

B'Elanna nodded. "Then you will be in charge. Cali will be your first assistant. I will teach you the rest of what you need to know starting at sunrise."

Miztri took a quick breath. "My friend," she said and straightened to meet B'Elanna's dark stare, "I shall take the Merraj." In the corner of her eye, she saw Dalra close his eyes. She steeled her breath and continued, "I would wish to be clever more than act upon necessity. Yet all that is needed to be done would be done, should that necessity arrive."

Tom grinned wistfully at that, knowing what discontent the woman was putting upon her bondmate. Still, Dalra had always understood that Miztri was different that way, had long accepted her need to act and now would have to again. For that and more, Tom felt indebted; he made a mental note to do something for them. For all the trouble he and B'Elanna had brought between them--whether or not they'd ever been blamed for that--he knew he owed them a lot.

"We start training tomorrow, then, too," Tom finally said, "and find you a fitting co-captain. You need to know all the maneuvers--and if we're lucky, we should be able to take a ship out for practice someday soon. For a holo-simulator, you would have no idea what I would do."

B'Elanna grinned at that latest slip of phrasing and tapped another bit into her "plan" log. "Maybe we can work out a stable holo-matrix with some of the scrap replication parts."

Tom grinned. "Have I told you recently how incredible you are?"

"You might have, but you can keep saying it," she joked.

Tom squeezed her knee. Looking at Miztri, he gave another nod. "We'll start on the maneuvers and calculations first--you and whoever else we have in the class."

"What you believe is wise, I shall trust," she agreed.

Tom and B'Elanna returned their attention to Aratra and Sashana'i. There, Dalra gave them a hard stare. "Not our regents as well," he breathed.

Sashana'i raised her chin. "Desal shall become accustomed to *working* regents once more. It is meant--and shall be, as we cannot in good conscience send others to fight and remain static here."

"My dear friend," Aratra continued before Dalra could reply, "should it be meant that the regency must pass to another family, then it shall be. This is for the spirits to bless and fate to choose. Yet the last of the Allanois shall not be remembered as preferring self preservation to serving beside their citizens in our most difficult era. We shall fight, Dalra."

Unable to argue with them, Dalra gave his slow assent. Sashana'i bowed her head respectfully in return, and then looked at her siblings. "Yet I should believe Aratra would claim the prime captaincy," she said.

Aratra rubbed her back. "This was always your preference, my spirit."

B'Elanna laughed and tapped the PADD again. "The Korchau?" she asked Tom, who nodded. "Okay, Aratra, that will be yours."

"It would be my preference to remain with the engines, as I would bear more use there," Sashana'i added. "A co-captain should be procured."

"That should not be a problem," B'Elanna nodded. "Tomorrow, we can go through our list again with everyone there. Tom and I will need nominations to fill the other nineteen ships we have in repair now and more for the rebuilds following those. I think Gihetra and J'vishi would both be good suggestions to start. They've both said they wanted to."

"Ka, they have," Miztri said. "I should believe that many of Uillar would wish it. They have both shown excellent promise, as has Sollve'a."

"Definitely Sollve'a," Tom nodded, "and Nivilla."

"And what of yourselves?" Dalra asked. "Shall you take nothing of your own?"

Tom grinned. "Sashana'i wanted us to have the Azallis, so we've taken that one."

Dalra was surprised. "Yusi of Allanois' ship?"

"There was little difficulty in convincing them," Aratra laughed. "The ship has long intrigued them, and it has been lovingly tended by them."

B'Elanna shrugged. "It does have some great capabilities. We never did have the heart to take it apart."

"It befits," Sashana'i nodded and got back to their humbler work. They had been talking so much, the bread had begun to rise again. Bala would likely have the coal plates outside ready soon, so she rubbed the roller with the canvas to dry it before pulling her stack of bread sheets back before her. Looking over, she spied B'Elanna, who was concertedly typing into the PADD again.

How much like Toma's early memory of her does she look just now, she thought, smiling at it, but then stifling her diversion. They still had the rolls to complete, after all, and to make that point, Sashana'i plucked a button of dough and threw it at her friend, laughing to see it stick to her cheek. The others laughed, too, breaking the serious conversation with the ease that they had earned as friends.

B'Elanna shook her head and peeled the glob off. "Snotty little brat," she smirked and popped the dough in her mouth, put the PADD aside. Their work could wait another day, after all. They had that bread portion to prepare in the mean time, which she did gladly. She had always looked forward to Tsi'omad community dinners, though she still didn't join in with the usual music and dancing. Nor had she ever told stories of her past, except that one night. Tom didn't either.

The food and community, the chatting and visiting and the healthy fire were what she and Tom really enjoyed. It was a memory of comfort from Uillar that had become a simple pleasure on Cezia, much like many things had in her life.

So, taking up the segments that Tom had started to roll again, she easily twisted them into coils and then stuck to on a small rectangle of dough, tucking the corners down and setting them aside on a stone. As her mind easily cleared to the simple work, she smiled to the tune that Miztri had begun to hum to pass the time and Dalra joined in accompaniment.

She knew the words well by then, a story of birds navigating the lake to feed upon the life swimming in it--an erotic poem when interpreted correctly. She and Tom had heard it many times before they

realized exactly what it was about. Realizing the exact nature of it left them grinning for hours.

Almost against her will, B'Elanna found herself humming too. At least she had the comfort of hearing Tom unable to resist as well, albeit under his breath.

Shrugging to herself, she pulled off another string of dough.

As she and Aratra sat to watch the square that sunset, Sashana'i accepted the greetings and wishes of good fortune with all the formality her position afforded her. Teeming with citizens of Azlre and Sacezia both, from the simplest herders to the many weavers and laborers and even soon to be resistance fighters of their humble city, she bowed with great honor to those people, touched the faces of the many thin, dusty children who gathered to greet her before moving on to their evening meals.

Since that dramatic evening in the square, more people than ever made the effort to greet their regents personally rather than bow in passing, making the words to bless her and Aratra's way and presence, rather than the equally respectful acknowledgment of family alone. Upon her arrival in Azlre and without her asking, they had resurrected the old way with regents with an ease that showed their need of strong leadership all too clearly. The more she and Aratra claimed and requested, the more they responded, the greater those displays of affection grew. It made her love her race all the more, blessings and failings together.

It was for them she had done all that she had, whether by her own doing or through others.

Much had been done, and yet it was only a precursor.

We have given the city good replication service and sanitation, she knew, and yet so much more is needed. We yet live in the hollows of our true ways and our poverty must never be considered true health. I shall not rest until it is all restored, now that I see what a little good may produce.

She was anxious for Cali's story that evening. Her friend had promised to tell all of her experience in the house of Onruk. It would be a good thing for her people to know, Sashana'i believed, particularly as it would come from Cali's very changed perspective on Desalian contrition.

There were so many things to remember and to press onto them. That would have to wait, however. Their lives would soon grow uncertain again for the war to come. Power, though much improved, was rationed so carefully that even the replicators might run for ten revolutions without their needing to refresh their supply. The children, the ill and the very poor enjoyed the great bulk of its benefits. Not a single citizen--not even outworlders living in their city--complained.

She continued to watch those people of Azlre, preparing for their meals, so simple in their routine, so relatively comfortable. With some progress, health and activity, Azlre had become possibly the finest city in all of what remained of Desal. It was difficult to consider what remained around them. Between the two cities of Cezia, there were only about two hundred eighty thousand people.

Desal, they had learned from recovered Unar reports, amounted surprisingly to around five billion people, encompassing Desalia-Four, five colony planets, several moons, outer planets and countless Unar, Antral and Sureshan households and labor camps. Even with the high mortality rate among Desalians, the Unar population was less than that. When she thought of it, she shuddered at the enormity of what she

had so wished for, hoped for, had finally taken on.

I have claimed myself regent, symbolic guide, in ignorance of the size of my ultimate responsibility. They on Cezia alone have shown their extreme hunger for such inspiration--or they certainly needed my word to accept their desire for resurrection. Yet I bear not the experience of even a regional summit. Shall the remainder of my people be as open to me? No, they shall. It is the way to look to the regent as the symbol of unified desire and loyalty.... Oh my tola, what have you had of me?

She had tried to understate it with her lesser work at Dviglar; Aratra had too--and gladly. She had designed, in fact, that Be'i and Toma become the more progressive leaders in their movement simply because she lacked the personal experience and rhetoric for the fight. She and Aratra could assure outsiders and rally Desal with their name and heredity, but she knew she could not show the force and wit that her siblings would.

What shall I do with them, with my dear siblings, when all is done? What shall become of them when my purpose is completed?

Still, Be'i and Toma seemed to have little difficulty taking on their varied responsibilities, particularly after accepting the kraja and adjusting to the resulting effects. Rather, they were natural leaders and good teachers, easy to follow in both respects. They were uncomfortable with the high respect their positions afforded them, however, and even their excess of work and dedication did not convince them to accept the privileges of their rank. Knowing their full lives as she did, she understood.

At least her siblings had assumed their proper postures when needed, though everyone knew it would ultimately rest on the regents alone.

And then what shall I and Aratra do with it?

Seeing the face of yet another approaching child, Sashana'i pulled a smile consciously to her lips and greeted the boy.

"Hevrra," Tom breathed. He could find no other word when his eyes fell over the preliminary report little Haviki had been sent up with before her bedtime.

Cali had recalled even more than they expected she would.

B'Elanna, sitting by the open window to brush her hair, looked over. "What?"

Tom shook his head numbly. "If this is accurate and we get our ships working in decent order...B'Elanna, we can do some serious damage. They have gyakl. Nothing."

B'Elanna put her brush aside. Closing the window to a crack, she crawled onto the bunk with him, hiking up her gown as she turned to get up against the wall. She then curled up at his side under the light to look down at the characters on the small PADD.

"Increase the display font?" she asked. He complied with a tap and she began to read. Her brow flicked upwards. "What arrogant bastards."

"Their tactical perimeters are set up according to the sect domination with neutral space they actually obey," he explained and scrolled down so she could see the maps he'd first reacted to. "Incredible."

B'Elanna shook her head as she squinted through the details. "For a race bound by cleanliness, they've got the sloppiest fleet configuration I've ever seen."

"Probably because they just don't expect anyone to fight them now outside a sect scourge. Even the the Kramesi, Dajidians, the Zagrahan and the others--they never even had the technology in the first place. Forget about the Far Barrier races. But it looks like the only problem with underground ships doing anything before was that the Unar picked them up only at random."

"The punishment was enough to scare them all," B'Elanna noted.

"With a good sensor array and some signal disbursement, that won't be a problem."

"It'll be an advantage. We should still be careful."

"Ye zal. We won't be able to afford losing many ships in this one."

"Now if we might convince our neighborly 'friends' of that."

Tom grinned. "Too bad you won't let me waste a perfectly good nido'ev pie."

She snickered and read the next page as he scrolled it down. Descriptions of household details followed the tactical information.

Skimming through, B'Elanna recalled earlier assumptions that Unar had a rather bureaucratic setup, which degraded after the military joined purposes with their religious council--and more so after the war, like Dalra had often pointed out. Sixty years after overtaking the region, "presents" went along the same lines as uprightness in their society--it was highly commercial, highly dependent on appearance of control. Losing face there was a disgrace that people could not recover from easily, if at all. It was frighteningly Klingon in that respect, B'Elanna thought, though she understood the Unar all the more for it.

Little wonder Hychar gave up his escape route just to come after me, she realized.

She wondered if there were very many like Hychar, so bent on the destruction of a myth that might injure their appearance that they could bring on their own destruction for it. Dalra said they would--and B'Elanna knew too well the Klingon tradition of self-destruct before capture. It was an interesting thought with their predicament there, though a disturbing one.

"Tom," she said, reading and thinking at the same time.

"Hmm?"

"We are going to fight again soon," she said quietly.

"I know."

"It's been a while--for both of us."

He drew a deep breath, rested his cheek against her hair.

"I know I want this. We have wanted this a long time. But...I liked not fighting. I got used to it. As much as I want to make every guilty Unar pay their own retribution for what they've done here, I don't want to go back to how I used to be."

"I don't either," Tom sighed. "I guess we have something to hope for, then, don't we? Not having to fight again." Scrolling down another page, he let his eyes drift over a list of Unar ships.

"What about now?"

He looked down to her, hearing her genuine concern. Her face showed it, too; her dark eyes stared longingly into his, wanting an answer.

Putting the PADD aside, he took her fingers from his chest and gave them a tug. "Ab," he whispered, nodding towards the floor flap.

It frustrates and still it bears use...

From where they knelt in the center room above the clinic, they saw the shapes and colors around them fade to white as they rose quickly beyond it all. The newer couple were accustomed to this part of the meditation, but they were too intent, too troubled at the moment to appreciate that first transition into the shared conscience with their elders.

It gives strength, yet as are all things, there must be balance, Children, in order for peace to possible. The very downfall of Desal was brought on by imbalance.

But when you are living in the heat of battle, how do you not become overly accustomed to it?

That is a mark of maturity. You bear this capacity. You are called children more as an endearment, it is believed, as your maturity among us has been achieved beneath our warming suns.

She looked out to a star field of Cardassian ships, felt the darkened, ailing Maquis ship buckling in the throes of the battle. A passive observer, she knew she could do nothing. It was but memory, and yet she felt the heat, saw herself screaming and punching at controls that flickered and sparked, damned should she let them kill her. He looked and jerked to go to the conn, manned by himself in a far worse condition.

It is not this which is cursed, the elder told them, her youthful spirit's soft hands on their shoulders as they watched the memory play out before them. This is survival, which, though selfish in some respects, is natural. Her bondmate pointed behind them and they turned into another place on the hissing ship.

She was screaming still in the blackened corridor, smacking the wall and cursing a dark man, her face coiled with fury. The other argued and she struck him, sending a spray of blood from his mouth. Far away, he drank from a flask and got on with his repairs in a corner alone. He looked at the violence, but turned back, ignoring it. Watching themselves, they flinched, but could not turn away. This was who they had been.

Youth is long and painful among your kind, a time of testing and failures, and traps for weaknesses. The stages of your life are undetermined and thus one among your birth may spend a lifetime in

childhood. You yet bear the capacity to learn, to grow, to release the bitterness you acquire.

And repeat our mistakes.

Unconsciously. It is why we travel here, so that your unconscious mind is made more aware, and you see your spirits' truth.

They wanted to leave that place, did not want to see themselves like that. It's the past, long gone. We don't belong to that anymore.

You must, should you lead this fight faithfully. For necessity, that which you gladly left behind must be brought forth once more. This, Children, is truth. You must see what you know is truth here, in sight and deep within.

The memories of themselves showed only their hard faces, blank for inability to feel beyond the primal or immature, frightened of more, angry at all but especially at themselves for having allowed it so stupidly. And bitter to those who took them there, they blamed them outwardly while knowing...truth, very deep, far away. But how do we not go back to it if it's always lurking inside us?

You may be of Desal now, yet this shall always be a part of you. Always. There is no avoiding your birth and upbringing. Rather, you should use it, learn your errors--and that which was not your doing--and allow your growth from them. Release your pain and anger, cease to blame and to expect the impossible from yourselves and open your clear eyes to *your* spirits. Do not fear--they are pure, despite what others may ignorantly say. You would not be here were they not. We trusted your goodness and were correct. Trust our spirits now.

You are trustworthy. --We're not always so sure about ourselves...and maybe sometimes we don't trust anything.

The bondmates touched them, caressed their hair; their young faces shone with adoration. This must be learned, and to love yourselves, else all you have done in the lives you were blessed with shall have been in vain. Even your learning here, noble as you have become, shall be meaningless without acceptance and balance of your true natures. It shall merely require time and awareness. You are good, even in guilt, even in insecurity and particularly in imperfection.

They turned and saw themselves alone. She had sent the other away bleeding; no other approached him. He had disappeared soon after to a place far lonelier than even there--by choice, for he did not wish to see himself as anything better than what he felt he deserved, death being too good for the failure, wanting, yet sabotaging and bitter for his own choice. She had railed upon him as any other and moved on, claiming friends only to remain within a shell, cursing the world to secretly curse herself then deny it, walking away and away, yet wanting, dreaming...spinning in those contradictions...alone.

The fight became all of yourselves. This stemmed from you alone to give you the same. Yet you bore too much youth to know there was more to this fighting than what you saw before you. You bore too much pain to recognize how you perpetuated it in your own defenses.

In the smooth lines of another ship, their uniforms straight and clean, their faces much improved, she hunched over a panel, cool and purely efficient. Somewhere away, he tapped calculations and diagnostics, bored but busy. They left those stations. She fidgeted and finally decided to make herself public with an aura of belonging, knowing better each time she had enough static time to think. He went out immediately and called all the shots in whatever diversion he chose, calling on and keeping up the

game, any game, so not to think. Each was a stray spirit, with others close but apart from them. Alone not in body but in spirit, for fear of appearing as they knew they were, fighting the truth which remained. The view shifted to the hot ground of Uillar, where in the line he picked her up and kept them going, where she steered him around a carefully watching guard, catching up with their friends. Their eyes found each other's.

You grew, yet by nature and experience. Within yourselves, however, you are yet children, seeking, wanting, desiring.

They looked at each other, seeing what they had always known before. Yet now we do know there is more. That other life's failings are a thing to be avoided, even if we have to use it.

Not to be avoided. The antecedents must be learned. The Uillaran sun faded back to the Maquis ship. Reappearing in her elder form, she moved to comfort the bitter young woman in the corridor, who stiffened at first but allowed the embrace. Your conscience would not allow a poison. Bear trust in your instincts--not your minds, but your spirits. You have grown to know the difference. You need only listen and not feel fear of your truth. The elder man likewise went to the inebriated pilot on the floor and covered him with his discarded coat, stroked back his mussed hair. The young man looked up in numb disbelief then grasped the hand.

They watched themselves accept the kindness, knowing they saw a projection of their hurting selves respond to the acceptance and welcome the chance to accept their possible liberation. They understood; they saw it clearly, transfixed. They wanted it. I want this. I do want this.

Take what is known and what has been learned in your times of pain; use it now for all the good that is within you and all the maturity and self-awareness you have been blessed with. This is all you can do in life--learn and employ that wisdom.

They watched their bitter forms fade into themselves truly as children, tear-streaked, clutching, crying upon the shoulders of the gentle elders who comforted without letting go or trying to placate. They felt their hearts sink, feeling it...knowing it as truth. Truth.

The elders looked back to the witnessing couple as they continued to embrace the youths. We shall return to this path and its sources upon next sunset, children, should it please.

They breathed, swallowed, nodded slowly, still staring longingly at their projections...themselves. Okay.

The dark ship they stood in faded away to the plain of light.

"Rebna, more speed must be practiced!" B'Elanna said tersely, watching him so carefully replace the instrument that she nearly swatted his hands away without thinking. "You know how to do this!"

"Is this incorrect?"

"It is should ten Unar ships be preparing to blast your humble spirit to the ancestors and the remainder of your crew with it."

B'Elanna took up the panel in her hands and displayed it to all who had attended her lesson. Grabbing at her own waist kit, she whipped out a laser and pulled the old panel off and replaced, reconnected, sealed and reinitialized the small grid in less than a minute.

"*That* is how this must be done," she said evenly. "With precision and speed, unless you would rather disassemble hulls at a labor camp while Unar use your mate as target practice of one sort or another."

That image was enough, but she softly added, "I wish not to light your pyre too quickly."

"Just do it," Tom said, giving Miztri his hand. "Look, we have no other way at this point to get past what you already know."

The older woman sighed and placed her finger into Tom's palm then reached up to touch his temple. "Concentrate carefully on what you wish to show me."

Having already consulted Bala on his dilemma, Tom already knew what he needed to do. Closing his eyes for an added kick into his memory, he pulled up exactly what the woman--and in turn, the other trainees there--needed to know: Every simulation he had ever run, every escape from the Kazon--which weren't the best but were the most recent memories he had. There were a few field maneuvers he remembered, too--namely, a few tricky runs he'd pulled during his short time with the Maquis.

They would need to know more than everything he knew. Undoubtedly, they needed experience, too, but just then, it was the only way to give them an edge.

If anyone ever told me then that I'd be doing this now...

Concentrate, Child, for I do not possess the ease of this as do our good elders, came Miztri's firm thoughts into his mind.

Forcing himself not to feel too much shock at hearing the older lady's voice in his head, he did as asked--starting with the Kazon.

Miztri's eyes flew open.

"This is meant."

"I cannot!" Sashana'i felt herself color like the evening sun before the large congregation in the row at Dviglar--many of them in equal shock as she for the outrageous proposition set forth by the regents' sibling. "I understand you must teach by example, yet...Be'i, you must not ask me."

"You must, Sashana'i," B'Elanna insisted. "Imagine me as Unar--as Maghet. You bear memory of our friend Maghet."

Sashana'i swallowed. She remembered Maghet all too well. But though the last memory of the beast brought her guilt and anger to the fore again, and brought forth her friends' memories of hatred, too,

bearing a memory and *using* it were two very different things.

B'Elanna exhaled a slow breath. Having gotten herself ready for some sparring, she then had to remind herself not to become too carried away, especially in front of that contingent of Cezians, whom she was *trying* to convince that personal violence in defense was not a sin. It was hard enough trying to explain it logically in their language as it was.

"Sashana'i, should your life be in danger, the ability to protect yourself is required--as is known well, I would think." She looked out at their wide-eyed but unmoving audience. "This is equal for everyone. Should you be unable to run, you must preserve your life. The Unar shall simply take your lives when they believe they can--which they have. There shall be no resistance without an adequate defense, particularly should it be taken to the ground, where they would be within physical reach."

"This is understood," Sashana'i said, "and I would watch you carefully. Yet to practice upon my own sister cannot be just yet."

"I suppose a simulator shall be required," B'Elanna sighed. She hadn't expected Sashana'i to spar with her, even if she'd hoped she might for example's sake. Arguing over her hair or her dress was one thing--combat, she knew well, was entirely frightening to a girl who sold her body more peacefully than she had sent Hychar and Maghet to their respective hell--or at least Sashana'i never spoke of it. Instead, B'Elanna had noticed a certain paleness come over her when Uillar and the scourge were mentioned. B'Elanna understood the expression--guilt for the necessary--and didn't push it.

"Just now," B'Elanna continued, aiming her stare out to the others again, "it must be remembered that you are leaders on your ships. Not only do you protect yourselves, but you take yourselves from Unar to help another crew close by. These are all your people, and death cannot be accepted when lives remain within your power to protect. There shall be another time for that philoso--"

"B'Elanna," Tom said blankly; when she turned, he threw his fist directly towards her face.

B'Elanna's arm came up immediately. *Nice to know I haven't lost it*, she grinned to herself as she deflected the blow and twisted his arm around for the advantage he easily gave her. "Thanks," she breathed into his ear from behind.

"Just don't go for the ribs," Tom warned, grinning at the shocked reactions around them.

He just hoped they'd watch carefully--and to that point, he turned sharply out of her grip to reclaim the advantage.

"You all will be present at this meeting," Tom said to the intimate group of "officers" they had gathered on that warm day in the new communication center, which had been unveiled only a week before and configured to each of the ships they were working on. Relaxing into his native language, he likewise leaned back against a panel, his elbows on either side of a relay display that was not yet operational. "We realize you have never been involved in anything like this before."

"There have been accounts of peaceful meetings, long before Unar," said Sollve'a.

Aratra nodded. "They were ones of the day of rich trade."

"Well, forget about them," B'Elanna said bluntly; then she retracted, "--at least for now. There's something we all have noticed with these peoples, is that they will see if they can get the upper hand over our intentions. They see us as weak-willed and pacifistic. They will want to fight now--we must remain firm and give them good reasons to stay at bay."

"I have asked Be'i and Toma to conduct the preliminary arrangements," Sashana'i told them. "Yet we should indeed use care when working with them afterwards. Even in success, the Koba and Brijan would use suspicion as their first instinct--Antral, overconfidence. This is their nature, yet this can be untoward to our goals."

"It can rush something we need to wait on," Tom agreed, "like we learned when the Antral decided to have their way at Mahor. We have to reinforce our patience on them. We'll only have a few months in this ruse--but one idiot can ruin everything too soon."

J'vishi smiled at that. "You have become quite Desalian, my friends, as you choose to wait for Unar."

Tom chuckled. "We haven't cursed you yet, have we?"

"Only occasionally," Dalra replied with a grin.

"Well, at the time, you deserved it," B'Elanna returned, her own mouth upturned. She looked at the others again. "Tom and I will be taking the initial flights to inform the other colonies of Desal," B'Elanna told them, "as will Miztri, Latsari and Bolmra, since they have family elsewhere. As soon as the Azallis is complete, we'll be going."

"But if the Koba or the Antral or Brijan start fighting now or rousing their suspicions," Tom said, "we won't be able to do that--nor get the word out to the remaining peoples in Irliae. As you know, there's more than our six. To have as many peoples as possible working with us will be important."

"I bear curiosity," Latsari said, feeling their cautionary words stir her breath, "when this fight is to begin."

Tom shrugged. "When it feels right, when we think we're strong enough--or if we have to. Sashana'i, Aratra, B'Elanna and I agree that we should collect as much data and supplies as we can. We might not get that chance later. For that matter, you all still have a great deal to learn."

B'Elanna met all the eyes in that room with that. "Trust me, my friends, when the fight does begin, you'll wish it never had, more than even tradition had ever warned you."

"You might even think about the simplicity of being a drask again," Tom added.

"I doubt this greatly," Cali responded. "I would never again desire the dress of a drichka server upon this body."

"True," B'Elanna conceded, though only to a point. "You have been very brave and selfless, Cali, but you haven't been in a protracted battle, either. That kind of stress and exhaustion is different. Thoughts you never had before can overcome you. Some people become addicted to the strain after time."

"That stress can bring out every temptation to weakness," Tom continued. "If you go into the field and become locked in a fight, you *will* feel it. You have to prepare yourselves and your crews for this."

The group in the room nodded soberly. The two showed no more passion than in their daily manners.

However, their friends also knew the ashna'o did not make professions lightly.

"But in the end, it is worth it," B'Elanna added, "should you always remember *why* you do it."

Taking her next breath, she reminded herself of the same.

She walked the half circle that she could around the small, bulb-shaped warp generator, wiping at the stain of soot on her brow, even as she wondered why she bothered. They were all dirty with several hours remaining in their diagnostics.

Skipping a step over Aratra's legs, which were sticking out of an open panel, she went to her console. "Miztri?"

"Be'i ka. Ibrras pola'it zha."

B'Elanna nodded quickly, looked over to Tom. "Bring the primary reactors online."

"You got it, Chief." He grinned at her and the readouts scrolling upwards. Translating the numerical symbols in his mind, he nodded. "Bringing the drive online. Primary reactors working up to kleti'ibrapol and increasing at a rate of kli'avebol ov fis. N'cholost a zha magra'es ticiar pa'al."

"Zha," she said with a happy sigh. The Desalian version of a warp core, squat in comparison to ones she'd worked on in the Federation, began to take on a glow she'd once considered a home of sorts. It was almost surreal, the welcome she felt, especially when she recalled how long it'd been. Even the energy it minutely distributed throughout the little engine room thrummed in her heart. A beep from her console snapped her back to the readings, though.

It was just a field dispersion spike. Nothing unusual--particularly in an engine that old. "I'd like to see if we might get it up to ytakave mihin magretchi al," she said as she manually reconfigured the intake relays. "Miztri al mehirr bi'ullu skratci o'a is?"

"Ka. Ytavebol rapoliv fis."

"Toma i'isra cholost magriv anos al a'o."

"Ye'a zal, *Chief*." Looking up again, he gave her a wink.

She giggled and shook her head, tapping in the next line of commands on the panel. "Bi'ulle vro'a ye'a."

Bala joined Tom on the step to share the view of the sunrise. When they awoke at the same time and there was cheese and fruit enough in the pantry that they did not have to go to the market, they often found themselves waiting for the bread cart together. If it did not come in enough time, they would venture off to find it. Rahna liked to stop and chat, they knew.

Of course, they liked to chat with him sometimes, too.

Tom offered the old man a small grin of greeting. Bala returned it, touching his temple lightly. Tom's habit was not strong, yet, which among others might be considered rude. Still, he would gain it when he was ready. Bala was in no great hurry to see the boy change for appearance's sake. He had undergone enough for the present and continued healing in spirit, as did his mate.

The gold on the horizon could not be seen from there. The dusky buildings hid the view, which both men knew was quite lovely when seen from the fields. They yet did not move to it, but enjoyed the cool, misty air and the squalls of birds high above, en route to the grasses, most likely. There was nothing for them to eat in the city.

Aratra walked across the square with his usual quick pace, straightening his headdress even as he loosened it, bowing in his usual manner once arriving. They greeted each other in kind, and he joined them to watch the sunrise. Crouched on the ground, the regent fiddled with his scarves until they were right. Tom grinned. Even he hadn't had as much trouble with it as Aratra did--and he didn't even like wearing them.

To the north, the sound of thrusters echoed through the buildings, a low rumble that never failed to pique Tom's nerves. That was the laskeb ship they had planned to upgrade, he knew. The next few ships to sneak into Cezian space, upgraded already for stealth, would carry those arriving for the meeting.

But that was later.

The gold turned white and the sky slowly warmed to azure above them. The sun would grow hot that day. Heralded by creaking solar mechanisms and copper bells hung from the handles and clanging their walking page melody, Rahna appeared with his bread cart. All three men waited patiently for him to serve another group before standing to greet him.

Two floors above in the filtered dawn, B'Elanna climbed down the ladder. As always, she was careful. She still tended to lose her balance when she was tired. Safely to the stone floor behind the hearth, she went straight to where Bakali was. "Blessed sun, my nali," she said quietly, using the traditional greeting as casually as she took the morning floorcloth from the chest.

"The sun blesses us both, my child," Bakali smiled and pulled a stack of napkins from the shelf. "New ones should be sewn soon," she sighed, seeing tatters beginning to grow too large for her preference. "Better these be taken to the empty pile than worn past usefulness."

"I shall bring chips from the storage for payment."

"My thanks."

Turning, Bakali noticed the girl wore her green knee-gown and brown patterned leggings again. It would likely be another day in engines, as that clothing did not show its grime as easily. B'Elanna had been wearing that peculiar combination more often over the past year. Bakali noted to herself to see about procuring more choices for the girl when next at the bazaar. She knew her charge would not replicate them. She was understandably obstinate about conserving power. *Among other things*, Bakali grinned to herself.

More, she had stack braided the sides of her hair and pinned the length against her nape, an old Desalian fashion when added to several more ficha. B'Elanna did not often bother with braids unless she was planning to be head first in one system or another. It would be a busy day.

B'Elanna smoothed the floorcloth upon the flagstoned floor, admiring briefly the dotted, curving patterns in the faded weave. She knew that the cloth was almost fifty years old, made by Bakali's girlhood friend Ye'alli before she and her bondmate succumbed to influenza, which had swept through Azlre one unusually hot year. Bakali treasured that cloth. B'Elanna could understand why. The passed lady was both dear among Bakali's oft-shared memories and very talented.

The kettle steamed behind them, and Rahna's greeting echoed up into the small front window. Bakali kneeled beside B'Elanna, who glanced up, offering a small grin. The elder touched her temple affectionately then began setting the cloth with the tattered napkins she had folded. She wondered how she and Bala had lived so long alone without missing so much.

It was the life of the humble, she answered herself, as much as the change had been a blessing. She did adore those children so.

The men came in as they always did, pulling their simple purchases from their canvas satchels. Before taking his share to the mantel, Tom crouched down behind B'Elanna to nibble a kiss on her neck. As she smiled, he slipped a yamek fruit into her hand.

"Zha'i brrle, mes'va."

"Sixty-four years. Unar claimed occupation of Desal those many ralkle, and yet the dearth had been longer for the leaders who brought themselves to Cezia Prime but two suns past the start of Rallesh-- Desal's first month, as you may name it, of our world's revolution around our pure sun. Symbolically, some among the arriving contingent knew, this was a time among Desal of the pause preceding regeneration, a time of spiritual contemplation and civic remembrance. At Azlre, it was as well the hot sun before the rains.

"At the time of the gathering, all were applicable."

As he had since earning that trap of a ship in his people's disgrace, Novren Pridalar touched down on the closest corner of the Jirra gate landing pad on that refugee world's second city, popped the hatch, grabbed his gear and gestured to his crew to start refueling his ship with what little power they had stolen to make the journey in the first place.

"That would be unnecessary," said a young Desalian man as he entered the Antral's craft and bowed deeply. "Our citizens shall care for your ship and perform the required modifications."

Although Novren held no particular love for his ship, he didn't hide his annoyance to see three more Desalians had come aboard with their equipment and without his permission. "What modifications are those?" he demanded. "I brought myself and my people here without injury, did I not?"

A fair young woman with holes in her scarves slipped in and pulled a palm-sized electronic pad from her pocket. She handed it to the Antral. "I greet you in our mutual peace, good captain," she said, perfectly mannered but with an expression that Novren had only heard about in the Desalians of

Cezia--she looked him directly in the eyes and almost seemed *amused* to explain herself. "I am called Latsari of Llatso'a, bondmate to Bolmra and primary assistant to Be'i of Azlre. These systems are what were scanned by us as requiring immediate attention. Our modifications are a gift, unless refusal would be preferred. Should you accept, however, you can be taught what you shall require to maintain equal status with the systems Desal's ships shall bear."

Looking at the list, Novren bit the inside of his cheek. "You may proceed," he muttered and flicked his fingers to his friends. As he stepped into the hot Azlrean air, he unbuttoned his coat and looked around to see the crafts that had come with him receiving the same treatment. That mitigated the embarrassment.

Whether or not the Desalians' intrusion was unwelcome, however, no contingent could be very angry at those poor people. It was generally agreed that Desalia had paid the price for its laziness and passivity in tenfold. They all but welcomed the Unar to trample their people and lands, lay waste to their recourses and women and subject them all to sub-person status.

Even the Antral and Brija fared better in that respect, though they too enjoyed no workable technology but what they could steal or what was so "generously" doled out to them. Their women were never subjected to the status of whores because of the Unar's curious physical reaction to them, and they were at least given the right to earn their way outside of household service and labor camps. Even so, they had no history or records but what they could remember, no true freedom to speak of aside from what was inside them and no hope for recovery but what their pride could demand.

For three generations, their pride had been in vain.

They waited, pretending enough of a seeming servitude that they were instead assigned to sell Desalians--sickeningly passive and accepting for some insane concept of contrition--to those beasts. For Desalia's inaction three generations before, this might have been seen as a payback. However, such revenge left no satisfaction.

Had they been any more populous, any stronger initially, the Antral and others might have been able to fight back. Yet their people had been so dependent on Desalian resources and technology that when the Unar swept dominion over their remaining neighbors, took over all of Irrllae's free space, and then when Desal finally fell, any hope of effective resistance fell with that.

For that matter, Antral, Brija, Suresh and Iaskeb were all much closer neighbors to Unar--and rebellious as a trait. Thus, they were more carefully watched. The Koba, close neighbors to Desalian space, were xenophobes invaded by Unar. To that day, Koba preferred to work in the shadows--changed and angered exceedingly by the Unar, yet quiet and sly. So the Irrllae underground became known for its ability to bribe, for its stolen replicators, medicine and rations--and sometimes stolen drasks. But it did very little otherwise. If anything, it held the stalemate.

Meanwhile, Desalia rotted alive.

But then there was a stirring within Desal, which began with the trade of several unusually healthy Desalians to a six-month service at the Unar stronghold on Antral. To those traders, they began to whisper words that lit a fire throughout the stagnant underground.

Desalia would rise, they promised.

That alone was enough to gather agents willing to go to Cezia.

Small and insignificant to even the Unar, Cezia was said by those Desalian agents to be a new secret base for their resistance, overseen by Azlre's elders, blessed by Cezia's spiritual protector and, most importantly, publicly decreed by the young regents, who had reinstated themselves to power--a true, progressive power, spiritually sound.

Indeed, it had been rumored that since the purging of Uillar, the refugee city of Azlre at Cezia had taken on some rather ambitious Desalians. The exact nature of this change was conjecture for some time. Some had said that there were outsiders of Irliae among them--though in the end, this was disproved. Simply, a hardy group of Uillaran drasks had become mechanically proficient during their incarceration and lived to apply it elsewhere, and the camp had in fact gained some rather resourceful laborers.

One report at a time, they learned its truth: Desal truly did have skilled workers among them, primarily in the form of two mutilated, non-native Desalians called Toma and Be'i, those supposed outsiders. Mysterious, bad-tempered, strangely-spoken and technically adept, they indeed aroused suspicion. Those close to them protected them and named them Desalian--though still foreign.

As finally confessed by the blood regent, Sashana'i, to Novren's agent, Tridl Himad, the two were of Gahahol, a distant and classified Unar base created for technological development. After the Wichut Sect scourge, which brought down that base, the two prodigiously trained youths had been sold to several labor camps, dismissed often for their unappealing facades and unacceptable attitudes. Finally being thrust onto Uillar to die, they were adopted by the Allanois and taught the Desalian ways their birth parents could not impress upon them.

Though an incredible story, it had to be truth. Desalians as rule, after all, did not lie. They retained stillness rather than betray the air, as an old saying went.

It was also a sad story that the two preferred not to recall, the regent had said with deep regret. Discovering their Desalian roots had been an enriching but painful process for the two--who had experienced pain enough in their young lives. But in that revelation, it seemed that they also had found purpose--and shared it and all their knowledge with their people. With that and the regents' new policies, the resistance had finally become viable.

The Irliae underground could not have been more pleased.

"I greet you in our mutual peace, good neighbors," said a young Desalian man with a long, mended coat and rich brown skin. "I am Yorlla, student to Be'i and Toma. I shall take you to Trisjorr. There, fresh water and food shall be served to you, should it please, and there, the meeting shall start."

Just a year and a quarter past, Trisjorr had been annihilated by a random Unar patrol ship. The relatively impoverished district and some surrounding facades had been left as rubble, it was said. But that was not what met the representatives when they were led through Azlre's bazaar and through the narrow streets to that designated meeting place.

Some of the rubble remained, but that vast open space instead housed an enormous stone park, softened with daknal vines growing over the white building stones and semi-succulents burrowed in pebbled corners. The stumps of one former foundation now served as seats for those who gathered there and tables for simple refreshments. Through those makeshift paths, the visitors were brought, their chosen leaders receiving the greetings of the Desalians there. They came to a center of sorts--a circle of rubble foundation with the remains of an ornate mosaic floor inside of it, presumably the ground floor of the building that once stood there.

At one end sat a group of Desalians, as humble and casually placed as the rest, but obviously bearing some rank by the manner in which they held themselves. Two elders, draped in heavy white robes and scarves, were elegantly seated on the stub of one broken wall, each with their feet tucked under a hip and curiously wise expressions. A well-ornamented, middle-aged woman--the prichava, presumably--stood beside them with her hands folded on her ribs; a stolid, greyed man held the ground just behind her shoulder. On the other side of the elders stood a short, round-eyed woman with intricately braided hair and scarves, and embroidery on her coat skirt and sleeves. On her arm stood a well-postured man a hand taller than the woman with bronze-colored hair and a slight grin beneath his relatively simple headdress and well-stitched beige coat.

The regents, they learned upon introduction, Sashana'i and Aratra of Allanois.

"Our gratitude for your bringing yourselves in the face of such danger to you and your crews," Aratra said as he bowed to them. "In this time of our people's rejoining, let us know that regardless of what words may pass beneath this sun, we should yet be a unified force for the resurrection of our true way."

"Regardless?" smiled Novren, who had lead the others in. "Do you foresee trouble, Aratra of Allanois?"

He grinned back. "I never spoke of trouble. Do *you* foresee it?"

The elders shared a glance, though they managed no other expression for the wry child.

Four more entered from the side, a straight-backed pair chatting with a lady and a small girl, then striding across the center of the court. The woman's lightweight cloak hood was pulled like a deep eave over her brokenly scarred forehead. Her dark eyes did not waver when they pointed their way. The man's narrower stare observed the guests with an indifferent air, and yet it had an undeniable sharpness, too. The man was about as tall as a typical Antral.

They bowed formally, as the others had done before. As he straightened, he tucked the end of his headdress behind his ear.

"Our greetings and apology for our lateness," Tom said. "I am called Toma; my mate, Be'i."

"We greet you," Novren said, gesturing to the others. "Syl Medrove of Suresha, with whom I believe you are well acquainted; Eneprae of Brija; Vabrinir of Koba..."

Tom nodded deeply to the third, felt B'Elanna's hand twitch in his.

"...Acilg of Iaskeb. And I am Novren Pridalar of Antral."

"Our fair greetings to you all," B'Elanna said, giving a nod as well to the "lieutenants" who flanked them but needed no introduction. Being uninvolved in the actual dealings, they remained properly aside. "Shall our respective places be taken, then, as we begin?"

Novren was pleasantly surprised. "You are rather quick."

"Why should otherwise be assumed?" Tom asked, leading B'Elanna back to a foundation stone where they could sit.

Sashana'i crushed her smile as best she could. "Good neighbors, in light of my lack of technical expertise, I have reviewed these dealings and desire them to be conducted by Be'i and Toma, who as my siblings bear full right to barter. I, my bondmate, our good elder-parents and prichava shall hear their

words as our own."

"But how could *they* have gained such ability and knowledge to build this fight we desire?" Eneprae quietly demanded, her eyes pinned on the two would-be Desalian resistance fighters.

"Knowledge and technology banned to us were given them in their training," Aratra answered simply. "This is known, good lady, and accepted. I see no need to have to explain it to you *again*." Grudgingly, the Brijan woman gave a shrug and silenced herself.

Speeding them back on track, Medrove looked at the other captain. "You will be much impressed by their directness, Novren. Their plans are excellent. I am very confident in them."

Novren lowered himself against a nearby stone, hiking up a boot so to rest his arm upon his knee. His knuckle rubbed with seeming thoughtfulness across his pale brown jaw specks. "So, you would not find peace in your ever-beloved Desalian passivity."

"Your sarcasm is unnecessary," B'Elanna replied. "Desalian ways bear purpose and practicality in fair times."

"But obviously neither in bad."

"The past is that, Novren," Tom told him, etched with firmness as he caught on to the other man's tone. Fair for an Antral, the grey and berry-haired man sat in a deceptively relaxed position, a small phaser noticeably holstered on his thigh. *Do I know the type--or I did*, he smirked to himself, cocking his head to continue.

"Your attempt to sway Desalian guilt would be ineffective here, good man. No guilt remains to be had of us. Should you feel your people continue to require retribution for your inability to fend off the Unar yourselves, then we shall discuss it past our present work, when we have assisted you in attaining your freedom, and you in ours."

"Thus at present," B'Elanna said, her own mouth curled slightly at the corner for Tom's slice into Novren's pride, "we shall tend to our business and not our long bruised feelings."

Novren shared a look with Medrove, who shrugged away the manners he already was accustomed to. Novren pulled his chin up to remember Tridl's reports of how difficult the two could be. He had put it aside as the trader's usual excuse making, but now he saw its truth. "I have heard your histories, Toma and Be'i, and yet I still wonder where such passion and arrogance in a Desalian might have been etched."

"That would not be your concern," Tom replied, purposefully cool. "What shall be discussed is how we are to proceed with Unar."

Acilg nodded. "It was known you were displeased with the occurrences at Mahor."

"The risk was too great," Tom acknowledged.

Novren blew a laugh. "It was a perfect opportunity--"

"To see our many agents sacrificed and our resistance made useless," B'Elanna cut in. "How by the spit of Prihar are we to oust Unar when no reliable information against them is brought to us? How might we fight effectively when Unar's houses are strong and their sects are not in a cleansing? Information from Mahor is required to know how we might pry their fingers from our nether territories. They have become

errant in their complacency, ka, yet this bears no guarantee they would fall easily once we have roused them. "

"They will not fall at all if we do nothing," Novren countered.

"We intend to act," Tom told him, "yet not until we bear ships able to defend what we attempt to win. Unar are sloppy yet bear resources and capabilities not to be ignored--*our* capabilities and resources, Novren, stolen from our peoples long past. You have received our communications on their strengths as well as their weaknesses. You cannot argue it."

Acilg was the first to agree. "They have remained in power for a reason," she said.

"Thus our stealth must be our better guide," Tom concluded. "They must be weakened from the inside before the exterior is taken on--which is what has been begun." Tom glanced a grin at Cali, who nearby had straightened proudly at the mention. "Their well is corrupted--the word has been spread through nearly ninety percent of Unar households, with the remainder in the works."

The Koba leader grinned. "Yes, even our women are poised with intent in mind and await only a signal to act." Vabrinir, ostentatiously more respectful, nodded as he addressed them. "Unlike your people, however, our women will gladly snuff the lives of those beasts."

"Should that be their choice," B'Elanna said. "Yet it should wait until our ships are prepared to bear the brunt of that decision."

"And when will that be?" Novren asked.

B'Elanna met his eyes without blinking. "With adequate trades on your part, we shall complete our small fleet in two du've. Very soon, we shall take ourselves to the other colonies of Desal with the word of our resistance, to strengthen the suggestion we have heard your own have already implanted among some. --A worker deposited here informed Sashana'i of this."

Acilg licked her lips. "I admit to my weakness for their knowledge," she said. "I would hope this did not inconvenience or dishonor your purposes."

"On the contrary," B'Elanna answered, "you have saved some time. We bear gratitude for this. However," she gave Novren another look, "reckless endangerment is the suicide of a fool."

Novren did not respond but with a small grin, letting his hand rest on his well-armed thigh.

Tom noticed it--and the sudden tensing of his elders and Lledri nearby. He had to stifle a snort for the maneuver, though. That phaser probably wouldn't cut blanket scraps.

"Those weapon holsters itch, do they not?" he observed, raising his brow nonchalantly when Novren returned his attention unmoved. "I should believe it would be tempting to rub that hard spot for lack of any other firmness below your skull."

The Antral's hand balled into a fist. "Who insults whom now?" Novren demanded, his bright blue eyes flashing white in the sun. "You would play as many games as the Unar!"

"I believe we have all learned their lesson well," Tom replied pointedly. "Should you have brought yourself here believing my mate and I were unaware of your agents' tests for us, know your error now. Their attempts to sway us and procure any change in Desalian policy but what would be agreed upon by

our own council, all of it you may consider a misguided venture."

"It is our wish to work together," Sashana'i intercepted, holding her trembling fingers beneath her robe while meeting the stare of the Antral. His weapon had unnerved as easily as it had the elders. "Yet I shall not endanger my people's spiritual welfare for merely the sake of Unar defeat. This has not changed. We shall fight, willing to give our lives. Yet brutality, deception and feelings of superiority, ways of Unar we have resisted, shall not be ours. We would not welcome it in you, either. Toma has brought to this sun your natural selfishness--yet I would beg, good man, you think on a higher purpose in this matter."

"We do not spite your feelings," Tom added. "Be'i and I have felt it ourselves, the humiliation and the bitterness, the need for vindication. Much was required to keep us from the fight. However, the fight concerns far more than our small circle, as is known." Turning slightly, he nodded towards little Haviki, who sat upon her mother's lap with rapt attention--and a coy smile for her yeshalla.

Novren and the others did agree to that. "Indeed," Medrove said quietly, "we have children on all our worlds whom we would wish to see freed and fed."

"Much time has been spent with desire," B'Elanna said and pulled out a small PADD from her cloak pocket. "Shall we not waste the chance we have earned for ourselves, then? More than sixty years have passed us. What shall two or three du'ave matter should we find ultimate success?"

"I agree," Acilg said and looked at Novren. "As I have said before, my friend, we would be better to turn their game upon them--our cleverness would be better than thrusting our heads fully into their fists."

Novren grudgingly nodded. "But we will not wait forever," he told Tom. "Our underground is anxious. Now that there is a chance that we will bear interplanetary support, we too can begin striking from within the Unar infrastructure."

"For that purpose," B'Elanna said, standing with a hand from Tom, "my mate and I have devised a small plan for your inspection. Considering our talk just now, I believe you might find appreciation in it." Moving across, she placed the data PADD in the Antral's hand.

They peered together at the data there--then looked up at her. "Desalians have conjured this...brilliant ruse?" Vabrinir breathed then looked over Novren's shoulder to see it again.

Watching them review it, B'Elanna said more quietly, "At Uillar, I and my mate were beaten to the edge our lives for simply doing what Commander Hychar knew we would. And yet, his very being was defeated by my corrupting his face with spittle. This remembrance brought on what we suggest this sun."

Acilg understood. "What of the officers?"

"Some ores have been collected in our hills," Tom said, giving Dalra nearby a nod. The older man brought a bag forward and revealed the reprocessed gold within it. "Officers may be bribed. I know this from experience, as does any here who have had to buy their way out of Unar quicksand. For now, this is payment for the supplies we require. We only request you bribe them well."

Novren continued to stare at the small screen. That piece of technology was nice enough--he knew he would like one for himself--but the wicked cunning, the underhanded method of using the agent workers to implant suspicion and sabotage Unar databanks and power grids, a few ships to incite the idea of invasion and border transgressions. All of it made perfect sense, and though it was pure deception, a

Desalian could easily commit to and carry out such a plan. On the resistance's part, it would be bloodless, with little risk of losing any ships.

Better, it would work.

A slow, wide smile grew on the Antral leader's face. Looking up, he found the plain stares of Toma and Be'i. "You wish to devise our own sect scourge?"

"No," Tom said. "We shall assist them in rousing a scourge by their own means."

"Not particularly a pure route, this," Bala stated, finally choosing to address the group. "However, it is known no route to war would bear perfection. Should we be mice, we would of course behave like them: eat within the thrush of their nest before biting through the rope. I would remind you your place in this, however--your spirits' remaining purity, your selfless intent. This indeed is a dangerous task you engage in many manners."

Tom nodded, knowing the full meaning in his elder's seriousness, also knowing he and B'Elanna had just barely skirted the elders' and Lledri's limits with their plan. Only necessity had saved his discussion with them. "The only way an initial advantage would be gained would be through these means, good elders. Their own degradation must weaken them, allow them to unleash their poison upon themselves. It shall give us the season required to assure our own positions and capabilities."

"While we yet remember never to assume it ourselves, their poison, which you know too well," Bakali warned.

"Your wisdom in this is sincerely accepted, Nali, Tola," Tom responded with a bow. He had promised them already, but he knew the public acknowledgment wouldn't hurt, either.

"While they busy themselves," B'Elanna continued, "we would also occupy ourselves by borrowing from their supply lines."

Medrove grinned. "Perhaps borrow a ship or two as well?"

"Increased tractor power is required," B'Elanna nodded, "and all your vessels require improved shields. I and Toma shall teach you to utilize them to their capacity."

"I would prefer our more innocent workers spared from their assignments first," Aratra said. They looked at him. "We would do a disservice to allow the untrained among us to fight battles there. I am willing to serve in that respect."

"You shall not, good regent," Lledri argued. "Your passing would be Sashana'i's, and our regency is required in tact."

"She speaks truth, Aratra," Bala said. "Your captaincy is dangerous enough a part in our cause."

Grudgingly, Aratra acquiesced. "Yet I would ask that our specifically trained agents remain within Unar walls, along with those who are willing to learn our cause. The others should of course be 'reassigned,' and as many as possible taken from those lairs when our resistance truly begins. We shall require that our people are no longer held, particularly when we insult Unar finally."

"We can arrange that," Novren said. "Supply your workers and we will see to proper replacements. As for the clearing of the houses, I would agree. Our supplier ships may make a routine sweep when the

Unar distract themselves enough after they have begun--granted we have the transporter capacity."

"You shall," Tom stated.

Eneprae, silent throughout those dealings, finally cleared her throat to catch the two odd Desalians' attentions. "They will not always believe this ruse we project. As you have mentioned, it would only allow us a season."

"Yes," Tom said. "Yet that is another plan. When we are discovered, we shall carry through the bulk of our resistance. Time and advantage is our present purchase. A true war shall follow, where we would act as we must to procure our goal."

"You would commit such violence?" Eneprae queried, peering askance at him, then at his strangely browed woman.

"Should it be meant, then it shall have to be," he said. "We but follow the path laid before us."

"We are willing to sacrifice our spirits for the possibility of freedom," added his mate. "It is less for ourselves than for our people's future, good lady."

His tone was somber; her eyes were solid. But Eneprae understood, and finally she saw the Desalian in that man and in the woman's equal thoughtfulness. She had suspected them as untrue at first, yet their humble obedience to their elders and acceptance of their unfortunate necessity relieved the Brijan woman's mind...somewhat. Enough, anyway, if intent alone was sufficient cause to trust.

"Then, good man, we will truly pray--for all our souls. And yet, it would be the good fight, yes? For the future of Irlae and those within it?"

"Yes, good lady," said Tom with a bow.

The Brijan woman returned the gesture. "Then I should like to see more of what you have devised...my friends."

The leaders, elders and onlookers all shared a look, all of expectancy, relief, resolution and hope. With the Brijan won over as well, there indeed was little else to do but explain the rest and lay out their plans. It did not go with complete ease, but it did proceed.

Finally.

He felt his eyes mist.

Sitting by him, she watched him in a sort of otherworldly haze.

It truly *was* otherworldly in those first few moments. Having expended a good deal of energy transporting the Azallis to the new landing zone, they had taken another couple days checking and rechecking, installing antimatter and reinitializing the warp drive. That morning, they had walked to the new landing zone on the backstretch of Dviglar, running through ship's procedures one last time with Miztri and Givadra and their crew, and then with Bolmra, Latsari, Plicta and P'llaja'i, their "senior staff"

of sorts. Personally trained and as competent as they could be without any actual experience in space, their final preparations had gone smoothly.

But when they finally activated the inertial dampers then the planetary thrusters, they stilled with the sensation of being in a functioning ship again.

It was indescribable.

A few hours before, they had bid farewell to their elders and their friends. Parental in their embraces and kisses, Bala and Bakali offered their prayers for safety and quick return. In nearly three years, after all, Tom and B'Elanna had not left Cezia and had always been with the elders. The children dutifully promised to be careful--and to bring coneflowers from Llatso'a.

The silvery grasses of the Azlreian plain blurred below as the Azallis smoothly rose into the upper atmosphere. With a few taps on the conn he'd put back together by hand, Tom turned the small ship with a grace he didn't think about until after he'd done it; then he readied them for escape velocity. He blinked to clear his eyes and his mind, but the heaviness within his quickly beating heart remained. A half-year longer than they'd been on Cezia was the last time he'd been at the controls of a conn. The last time he flew a ship, he was a different man, a man he wasn't sure if he even knew anymore.

B'Elanna watched Tom as they entered their final coordinates. The layout of the central control panel, which sat in the middle of the bridge like a tilted conference table, made it easy to see everything he was doing and vice-versa. She drew a small breath to look over Bolmra and tell him, "Bring the impulse engines online."

The young man nodded, excitedly triple checking every readout he had only practiced on before. "They are online and working at full capacity, Be'i."

Reaching over, she gave Tom's thigh a light squeeze. "Take us up."

He nodded, his eyes pinned on the hazy atmosphere, already able to see the star field, feel the slight tug of speed in his gut. Somehow, in all the swirls of thought and plans and feelings, his mind cleared and he felt himself relax. Even as he thought it was odd how he could do it, his breath slowed and his eyes focused. Then his lips turned up a bit.

She grinned, too, to see that old look on him. In his faded, loose attire, with his markings, he appeared as any other Desalian. But that expression, that centeredness: Indeed, it was good to see again--probably as strangely pleasant as it had been for her to get the engines of that ancient ship working. But then, it was for such different reasons, and she worked with such different intent, a changed perspective--changed everything, really.

Despite the danger ahead and the suffering bound to happen, they relished the hope, the promise, the fulfillment of a dream, starting with the simple joy of raising a ship from its once intended grave.

Drawing a cool breath, B'Elanna let her stare drift out to the viewport. She heard Tom tap a couple more commands; then the engines, system by system, begin to hum with their purpose. She looked down to her board. Everything was operating just as it should.

Tom blinked once more. "Breaking orbit...now."

As they broke into the black space beyond Cezia, they closed their eyes.

"It was said in tellings after how they came to the four other colonies of Desal with words of the Allanois. The lady and man of the regents' adoption made themselves tall and bright the shadowy Llatso'a, and with their lieutenants' introduction, they made known to all on that plague-ridden world the new health of Cezia.

"Proud and generous nobles as they must have appeared, they and theirs engaged their audiences utterly in their passion and experience, made them love Desal as perhaps they might not have before, and offered as much of their blessing as they had brought with them. For the audience's own suffering, far greater in sickness and dread of the sun than Cezia's had ever been, the food of promise and health was distributed widely and well.

"Indeed, when other ships took themselves from Cezia in the short time following, to Maha'aje and Saha'eten, the response to hope was like crystals in the dank well, shining within the dung of their present being. Incomplete--as not all, as on Cezia, would believe Desal was cleansed. Yet the words were well heard. Desal would make war for freedom and their regents would bear their spirits: This thing of air became a most precious jewel in most ears, indeed.

"Traders of Antral and laskeb took the news and a group of Cezians to Ivliisa. There, over that mine-raped world, once lush with flora and art, the news spread like a warm flower over the stagnant pools Unar left at its convenience. Upon Ivliisa, known for its liberalism when once a colony, far fewer pains were taken to develop that purer species of Desalian belief: Self-defense of their ways alone grew the seed of resistance. They sent their gracious and humble thanks to their regents, however, for their blessed spirits--and a good number of bright youths to train on Cezia.

"Our blessed homeworld, Desalia-Four, however, would need remain within the valley of its people's most desolate moon, a land of too many owls to allow any rodents, whether mouse or hare or burrowing squirrel. Sadly, the blessing of sunlight and air would be spared upon another sun...many suns. Too many suns.

"Meanwhile, in the nests of Unar, the freer prey partook of the floorboards and nibbled in the shadows, its belly remaining quite empty well past its heavy meal..."

The Koba drichka remained in her place, just as she was supposed to. For six years, the beast had somehow not tired of her, had never been moved to take on his own woman--who probably spurned him for his ineptitude, Iblas often thought.

She could barely feel his entry anymore, so numbed was she to Tronuk's force within her. He wrapped her black hair around his fist, adjusting her position as he forced his filth into her long, tawny body. He no longer needed to command her not to speak.

So, she remained still and dreamed of all the ways she might kill him, imagined his organs and entrails splayed out in many various ways, whatever her mind could conjure. She envisioned him screaming in torture and pain. Where others went mad, her hatred kept her alive, retained her sanity and helped her

hope that somehow, someday, she would see her sweet Padan once more, be mother again to their child...if they still lived.

Only of late, she had been given the hope of having that opportunity, and so her plots of murder twisted into tangible plans.

"I beg interruption, Commander Tronuk.*"

The old Unar grunted, but withdrew without much more complaint, leaving the Koba drask on the slate to address the comm. "Your input, officer?"

"*The Metraksb borders have been infiltrated, Commander, and the sect brings complaint upon our territory.*"

"We have not made these incursions," Tronuk growled.

"*Our neighbors do not agree.*"

"Bring our own defenses to the fore and line them up around the Gozhor perimeter. I will join you presently."

With a heavy snarl, the old man took to his closet and, minutes later, was dressed and ready to depart for his office. When he left, he flicked a finger at a laundry drask. "Clean the whore and return her to her chamber."

The drask took the footstep to her neck and hurried in to care for Iblas.

But the Koba whore had already sat up. Dressing herself, she waved away the regenerator. "It begins?" she whispered, a bit hoarse but anxious for news.

The drask activated the hand-held tissue healer anyway. "Yes, good lady. The mice eat tidily at the borders, as all the rodents of Irlae do. We shall take ourselves from this lair soon."

With a long breath, Iblas straightened with the feeling of her insides healing and the hope returning to her. "When may I kill that demon?" she asked. "I would like his blood on my hands when I return to my people."

The drask blinked at the typical thoughts of violence, but did not address them. It was a Koba way, after all. "Should it be wished still, it may be done soon. I would rather have you spirited away from this house, however, when the signal is received."

Iblas stared hard at the door. "We will have both."

Aprra of Ci'avas barely contained his grin when the laundry handlers came back that morning with the news. The sects were rousing themselves for action and Onruk was livid. In the last sect scourge, Aprra recalled, Onruk had made himself absent many moons defending his properties and territories.

In ancient stories, told in Ci'avas when he was a boy, Unar sects were divisors of philosophy; each

"region" would come together to discuss and debate those varied beliefs. At one time, it was peaceful. After the rise of the merchants, the military and religious leaders, who melded Unar society into a single, authoritarian force, those regions took on space and those debates turned into small, interior wars. Though not utterly damaging to Unar, it certainly would weaken them for a time.

The resistance was making good use of that. Cali had taken her information well to them, and now, in Onruk's house and many others on that Unar colony, they were making use of it. It was surprisingly easy.

Aprra smiled to think on her. He had heard news from new "workers" that she fared well upon her return and continued to work for Desalia's resurrection with the talent and spirits of the Allanois adoptees and their true regents, their close captains and allies in the cause. Frightening as it was, it was also invigorating, the thought of freedom and life, their pure-spirited continuance after their terrible contrition, their hope. Cali had borne that hope to him.

In his guiltiest conscience, he felt a great satisfaction that the monster Onruk was about to step into the trap.

Perhaps not so guilty, however, he thought as he followed his workers into the cleaning chambers to scour out that day's washing tubs.

Meanwhile, he waited but for the signal. The expectation alone stirred his spirit.

Soon, he knew. Soon.

The dusky, wet work row lit with a burst from an Unar ship's thrusters, like a torch flash, fading quickly after. The atmospheric boom echoed as the evening resumed. As the sorted array of Antral workers peeked up from their troths, they noticed other Unar moving quickly for the hangers.

This was highly unusual behavior, particularly on that obscure and somewhat quiet labor facility--thus, all the more noticeable.

"What do you think of that?" said one man as he continued to shift his gloved hands through the murky water.

The woman by him glanced dully at the view again without stopping her work. "I do not know." In her troth, she spotted a bright object and extracted it.

"Could it be a scourge?"

"I bear memory of scourges," said a Desalian man as he collected their trays. "Yet it was recent. It would be too soon for another."

"It would, but it is," said a fourth, a young woman passing by to offer drying cloths to them. "The shift ends now," she told everyone loudly, her eyes meanwhile shifting to see no guards on the row. "You may return to quarters."

Along with the others in that detail, the three stood upon the command, but immediately gathered around the shift supplier, flanking her as they left the work row. "What news, Yasis?" asked the first man

as he snaked his arm around her.

"We knew before our capture of Desalia's plan to revolt," she whispered as they walked towards the family quarters, trying not to smile--then having to hide her face. It was too much to suppress. "I heard the Unar say they are to regroup and reassure their defenses. They must indeed have begun..." She looked around again then moved to help the other woman remove her backpack and the toddler in it. "...begun what Novren Pridalar promised would happen."

The other woman blinked her attention up from the child she'd settled on her hip. She too glanced about to see no Unar in the court, but kept her voice near a whisper. "You believe Desal is throwing them off at last?"

"Why would a scourge come so soon after the last? The resistance must have finally made a move."

"This I cannot believe," said the Desalian man, who had followed them. "Three generations ago, my grandparents were exiled for the mere invocation of resistance. Desal has accepted its punishment since."

The Antral woman's satisfaction could not have been abated. "Times have apparently changed," she replied, "and you can thank your spirits for that at your own convenience, Gatra." She did not blink as he turned sharply to return to his housing section. "Good evening," she smirked as she, her mate and her cousin headed off to their quarters. They didn't look back.

Line Officer Gychak fingered the smooth ornament inside his pocket as he watched High Commander Frouwid pace a slow circle around his desk, barely skirting the amber ray of sun slicing through the window shades. The older man's thick white hands brushed at his hip pockets then swung back to clasp behind him; he turned and began the pattern again.

Clearly, his superior was disgusted. The incursions along the Wisnnin borders were in complete violation of the most recent agreement among their increasingly argumentative peoples--and their enemy had not yet shown the fortitude to show their faces. The viruses and anomalies creeping through their databanks were but an annoyance--though a clear symbol that their household accounts were being scanned.

Not an unusual maneuver, but Gychak knew well his sect could not afford another fight so soon. Their moneys were too depleted from the last sect shift, in which the Wisnnin lost three star portions of the Gozhor claim--and Gychak lost his home sect, the Kaseht.

He rubbed the ornament again. It was for the curse of Gozhor that he had been re-stationed and lost his home privilege--the curse of that woman who had incited Hychar's most primitive, though still common, beliefs, and whom he himself had preserved for his own gain.

Gychak was not bitter for his new society, however. Frouwid, once Hychar's enemy, was in truth a better man than reputed. He did not take too many drasks, too much food, nor did he accept as many gifts as were offered. Gychak recalled well Hychar's humiliation concerning the return of two drasks shortly before the fall of Uillar, which had likewise been surprising until he met Frouwid. More, the old commander never made an unnecessary fight. Too many sects cared too well for power that placement and ostentation brought them, but sometimes were defeated and shamed when they became careless. In

contrast, even when his purse and prestige suffered, Frouwid retained his pride.

Even so, the last incursion on Wisnnin territory was beginning to peel at the commander's nerves. They knew also that it was annoying some other sects as well. But they had still to discover those who were sneakily making their claim, seeing who would assert their defenses first. Frouwid paced, not for lack of patience but for disgust, that yet another scourge was being sought when several sects had barely recovered from the last one.

Gychak had put the ornament in his pocket only days before that battle, the last sect scourge, and he had held onto it for the worst of circumstances--a truly empty purse. In spite of that small security, however, he wondered why he had kept it. It was not an honorable trophy, it being a bribe, and selling it might have prevented his purchase to the Wisnnin sect.

Perhaps it was the ghostly desperation in the drask's face, which had intrigued him as much as it had remained a clear memory. Gychak had once wagered that Hychar would defeat those proud ones--and in one way, he had won.

In another way, he knew he had not. The man would not have come, freezing and bereft, to the barricade, willing to sell what little he had left of himself to save that ugly woman, had he been robbed completely of his control. For all Hychar had submitted them to, the drask would yet have his will, if not his identity.

So perhaps it was for that the former guard kept the bribe. It was a most suitable charm.

But Gychak let go of the small gold piece, withdrew his hand from his pocket, when the comm beeped and Frouwid turned to his monitor. He moved forward, too, naturally wanting to see the latest developments.

The older man held up his hand to the approach, however, his shoulders rising with a long breath.

"Arrange our officers," he said grimly. "We stand at ready to defend ourselves."

"We have only fifty-three ships fitted for combat," Gychak told him.

"I realize that," Frouwid replied. "But we must be ready." He turned, his silvery eyes hard in the orange light of the den. "A line of incursions has occurred on the borders of Gozhor, as we suspected. The perimeter sects are rousing their defenses as we speak, as do the Mestraksb and Edreb. Prepare our defenses, but give no indication."

The younger officer nodded once and stepped back. Only outside and unseen did he feel the sigh within him. Perhaps he would have to sell his charm after all. He had no other purse.

Moving to his station outside Frouwid's office, he called up the new readings at Gozhor and began to replot the Wisnnin configurations. Stopping a moment, Gychak let his gaze pass over the gently arching pattern of the nebula, which in some circles was still considered the center of Unar damnation. Hychar had believed so, believed it so utterly that it indeed had brought on his damnation and the downfall of his sect. He had brought the curse to him, Gychak knew, by torturing the woman who by ironic nature bore the shape of hell upon her skull and with equal vigor paining the man who accompanied her.

Hychar was a fool in his devotion to those old ways--and so were others like him.

Shaking away those presently useless and foolishly controversial thoughts, Gychak began to arrange his

new sect's defenses, glancing over when a drichka, finishing her chalice collecting, started towards the outer corridor. "Bring tivaluo, drask."

"Yes, officer," said the young woman, daring to glance once more at the Unar's screen display before moving backwards from the room. Turning to the kitchen upon her exit, she pushed down her smile and hurried herself accordingly.

B'Elanna laughed aloud when she read the report that came in from Kitiadru. She shouldn't have been so amused, but she couldn't help but love the irony. Tom, too, snorted and began typing a return, a clever smirk set upon his lips.

Nine of the sixteen sects had already galvanized their defenses: This all because of Miztri's recent maneuver.

Supposed to be little more than a practice run, she dispersed four ytavrapol of tachyon particles in a displacement wave instead of on the Edreb territory border as she was supposed to. Naturally, the tachyons dispersed with the wave, spreading violently through the heart of Gozhor.

Frantic, she pulled out of the area, speeding back to Cezia to sorrowfully make her report and turn in her command.

Predictably, Tom and B'Elanna refused her humility. "Be at ease," Tom told her, "Be'i and I have made far greater mistakes. --You might know this all too well."

Dalra, listening nearby, said warmly to Miztri, "That you remain among the living bears most importance to us."

"I would yet return to you, my spirit," Miztri smiled, trying hard to mask both her embarrassment and her fear.

"Only inconvenience remains, Miztri," B'Elanna told her. "As Dalra has said, you are safe--and so are we all. Another attempt shall be made."

Yet only a few days later, they were informed that the displacement wave had actually increased the spread of the tachyons, causing the corruption of several primary Unar sensor grids and sending the sects into a complete panic.

Still laughing, B'Elanna ran out into the sunny row outside communications to find their friend, hugging her as soon as she got there.

Miztri was bewildered. "Yet it was an error--it should not have assisted. It may have caused us great danger, Be'i."

"This is an error we shall need to commit many more times, should Unar technology be so sensitive to tachyon interference." Reaching out, she touched the other woman's temple. "Miztri, much of what you would know in a resistance is learned by accident. This was a pleasing one--do not take it as a waste. Take instead what blessings you receive and use them. It is a lesson I have learned well--and you may know it, too."

Miztri pressed her friend's hand to her cheek affectionately and smiled. "Have we truly fluffed the napes of our vicious owls?"

B'Elanna snickered and led her back to communications to show her.

The next morning, all the ships that left Cezia were nicely supplied with what tachyons they could produce--and with specific instructions to use them as necessary. Tom and B'Elanna certainly did. They counted three more affected sects alone with one wide disbursement. There was also a few impossibly encrypted false communiqués, which had been sent out just for the Unar to pick up by "chance."

With another few weeks of developing their ruse, the result was coming together quite nicely. Communicating with Novren and the others, they were glad to know their own underground plots were starting to take shape. With the sect war starting, they could start collecting enough resources to store for the meanwhile.

"Tridl, my friend!"

The Antral agent stared at the man who had put his arm around his shoulder, seemingly to escort him to his ship. "Toma of Azlre."

The man's smile was as crooked as his headscarves. "In your travels, good man, it is wished you perform a service for my mate and me."

Tridl glanced over to see that Be'i indeed had approached him as well and was following a few paces behind with crossed arms and a straight face. He sighed. "And this would be?"

"We are understood that your assigned duty is as charter between labor camps and houses, of course. There are a two born Y'dri and Me'ekra whom I would wish you seek."

"I was under the impression that their names were Nicoletti and Bendera--which, no, I have not forgotten."

"Those are another request," B'Elanna said. "These other two are likewise wished greatly, in debt for kindness and sacrifice."

"We only wish you make yourself known to those names and look for facades alike to Miztri and Dalra's. The two are their children, taken when Unar left Cezia thirteen years past."

"They are likely dead," Tridl dismissed.

"Then resurrect them," B'Elanna responded. "Passed or living, we would wish information or their forms--and a result would guarantee exceeding gratitude."

Slapping a small PADD into his hand, Tom let Tridl go at the edge of the ship field, grinning at the man's slumped shoulders and shuffling feet. They knew they were demanding and used insults as easily as incentive to steer him. They knew he dreaded their attention. Of course, they had also not forgotten his treatment of them when Cali was serving at Onruk's house.

The grasses stirred around the ring they devised; it was both a perimeter base and dry-dock. Holding her hood in place, B'Elanna turned into the wind, not minding the dust as she stared proudly out at the ships, set on their landing struts. They were yet beaten, patched with scrap hull and stained with soot and laser work. B'Elanna knew, however, that within those resurrected ships were systems she and Tom

had redesigned and helped to put in, coax back to life. The rains soon to come would wash much of the soot away.

Not three years ago, they along with Sashana'i and Aratra had come to the Dviglar Gorge hunting for parts in a scrap yard. From nothing but junk and with friends and citizens they trained nearly from scratch, they had rebuilt a small fleet.

She had wished it, thought about it since the time she had woken in the clinic with tridents in her skull and the stain of Uillar still turning in her lungs and her memory. Tom had too, and had reassured her needs with his plain desire for vindication while they both recovered. From there, they had learned patience and care, yet they had never lost their hopes. For all of that, they had gained far more than they had ever lost.

For their perseverance, they had truly done well. With any luck, they would continue to.

She felt Tom's arm squeeze her around the waist; she smiled and leaned her head against his chest. They started forward again, heading towards the three-decked, swallow-shaped Tebri'all, which was almost ready for its first flight in over twenty years. It would be Gihetra's command. Not surprisingly, he was already inspecting it himself and overseeing the stocking of its cargo. He was already quite a captain. They bowed to him with both respect and amusement before boarding the small ship to help finish off its programming.

At the top of the entry ramp, B'Elanna looked back to the ship ring and smiled.

"We'll require a field generator soon," she commented, rolling over in the bed to look up at the PADD she held instead of down. The pressure on her eyes had been tricky that day, tempting a worse headache were it not for the hyposprays Bakali had given her. "A decent shield for Dviglar. When this begins, we might have to defend Azlre, too."

Tom hummed with the thought, nestled up beside her small, warm body. Idly, he stroked her belly, letting his hand get caught up in her soft gown before smoothing it out again. Though reading concertedly, she did smile and purr to his actions.

"I know where we could pick one up," he said after a minute, watching her eyes, blinking slowly, unfocusing occasionally between scrolls.

"Dov? And where is this secret depot?"

"Uillar. --The barricade, B'Elanna. Tsirrosh?"

She blinked, furrowed her brow slightly. "But it was laridium charged.... Though, we could stabilize a geothermal power source of our own, couldn't we? One concentrated phaser blast and we might drill our own energy now." On the tail of that thought, she began typing into the PADD. "I'm not anxious to return to that ball of hell."

"It would only take a couple hours," he shrugged, trying not to dread his own idea, either, "and there might yet be scraps there we could use."

"Tsid ka'e. We'll go tomorrow, if there are no patrols in the area." Nodding absently, she paused a moment in her plotting, and then started again. "Would you tell Dalra at sunrise for me and I'll prepare the Azallis' cargo?"

"Y'ki," he answered, grinning down as she got back to business. Watching her work, seeing her hot on a project--not to mention being a part of that--never failed to cheer him, somehow. Still, when her eyes began to squint too concertedly and her pauses grew longer, he reached up and gently took the PADD away. Setting it on the bench by the bunk, he brought his hand back to touch her temple, earning her brightened eyes. "Shall we conclude our work for the day, mes va'i?"

"Ye'o kev," she replied softly and closed her eyes upon his approach.

He brushed his lips upon her temple, tasted that skin lightly, drawing a gasp from her upturned mouth. Soon, his kisses moved from her cheekbone down to her mouth and his fingers lightly circled her breast, tightening her nipple beneath the thin, beige cloth.

"We might not be able to do this for some time," he whispered against her lips, tasting the corner of her mouth as his hand pressed her breast then slid downward.

"We will be occupied," she concurred in a purr, slipping her hand into his dressing robe, running her nails lightly over his firm shoulders as she loosened the cloth. In fact, she knew, they had already been well occupied with their preparations and flights and training, their communications and planning, more flights and returns to Cezia, to evenings with their elders full with questions and mornings starting the entire process again.

"I'll miss being inside of you," he breathed, drawing in the scent of her, rapidly growing more noticeable--as was his, he knew. "It's difficult some days, and I only want to tell everyone to leave so I can have you to myself, right there on the bridge."

"When I look at you," she whispered, "and I say nothing, only stare at you and smile just a bit, I'm thinking about it."

He smiled, feeling himself harden completely at the memory of her watching him from her seat on the Azallis. No, he had not mistaken that look, only tried not to think of it too much. They did, after all, have a good deal to do there.

"And when I smile, just a bit, back at you, I'm remembering how you taste."

She licked her lips, quivering inside at his sultry tone, thanking whatever might have been responsible for their beginning to share such intimacies with each other. Nudging her nose on his cheek, she opened her mouth to his next kiss, which remained playful, tasting and nibbling on her full lips.

"And I remember how it feels when you do that to me," she murmured, "how you sound when you take me with your tongue."

"And that little growl of yours, asking for more when I drink you...slowly."

His fingers gripped her gown, hiking it up as his hand descended. She ground her hips in a small circle, inviting him further, and his lips turned up at her returning play. She rarely tried to rush him, but acted impatient, spurring on his teasing with little growls and attempts to press more effectively against whatever he was doing to her. She did not fight very hard, though, and always moaned a delicious growl

when he gave her a playful bite of warning.

Uillar strangely came to his mind again as he let his fingers go to play between her legs, which opened unabashedly as she sighed her approval and bent her head back, offering her neck to him. He went to it without delay, pressing his tongue into her pulse before partaking her sensitive collar. How he had once dreamed of doing those things to her when they were together in that rotten shack, freezing and ill. Nature was not the only culprit of how he awoke most mornings. Though at the time, he would have settled on her mere company.

He could not be happy enough that he hadn't had to, but instead had so much more.

"I'o va mas ye'o," she purred. "Please, Tom, zhras ye'o."

"Tsa achi'i ka."

Shifting himself, he got an arm around her and sat her upright. In a move, he discarded his robe to the floor. Just as swiftly, she pulled her gown away. They drew a collective breath when their eyes met again; then they released it.

Deciding simultaneously, their hands returned to each other as their bodies slid together, warm and dry and caressing as their breath sped, their kisses deepened. Rubbing his erection on her warm, quivering belly, Tom lowered them again to the mattress, burying his strong fingers in her hair, massaging her scalp the way she liked.

His other hand took hers from his back and he sucked the soft of her fair wrist. Her fingers straightened, stroking his temple until he growled a little himself. She purposefully was making him the impatient one, then.

Hiking one of her legs up, he ran his short nails down the back of her thigh as he moved himself into her, groaning as she sang out her satisfaction. Her other leg moved around his waist. He thrust fully into her, grinding hard until she arched back, ready for another. Her eyes, half-closed, her smile, one of memory and present pleasure, melted into his...

"Som'dahval. Mmm, yes, ah, yes..."

"Do'asli?"

"Oh, ka, more...as that...as you know how to..."

His thumb stroked her markings as he rocked his hips against hers. She undulated under him in their natural rhythm, humming little gasps and barely trying to catch her quickening breath. Tom felt lost in it. "So beautiful," he managed in another gasp, tasting her sweet mouth again, feeling it quiver as he sped his strokes.

Her fingers, still caressing his temple, stroked more urgently; her muscles began to tense. He closed his eyes, nuzzling into her touch, his moans growing loud as he bore himself over and over into her small body. His head lolled back. "You...so...zhi'a mas Be'i, mes va'i."

"Ve'a havra mes..."

"Somd'vell...ye'a zha'i dvariall. A'a tsi'al ye...tsi'all vas..."

"M'ves ye'a tsi'all.... Toma m'ves ye'a. --Ah!"

There were wrens on the eaves, burrowing and scraping, when B'Elanna's eyes focused on the PADD, lying on the bench beyond their warm bunk. Tom, spooned behind her, holding her protectively in his dry, warm arms, was breathing softly against her neck. His hand rested on the flat of her breast, pressed against the mattress.

"Did you mean that?" she whispered, only a breath of air in the near silence.

He drew a long breath, wondering what he might say. *The truth*, he told himself with a smile at that very old habit. "You wouldn't need to wear that gown, ta'iki.... Yes, I meant it."

"It's more than the gown," she said, unable to keep herself from grinning at that recent memory, the feeling of that dress pressing her ribs the night they took the kraja. And she remembered very well the look on Tom's face when he saw her in it...and the feeling they shared after, and had that night, too.

He wanted the rest, she knew. A good part of her wanted it, too.

As for the other part... "Tom, we would be joined--you would have my memories."

"And you would have mine."

"That's not a very good thing to think about, those...feelings coming from me," she said.

He grinned, kissed her shoulder. "I could say the same thing about myself."

"You are not half-Klingon," she stated. "You know me more than anyone I know, but you cannot understand what goes through me sometimes." She shook her head. "I don't want to give that to you, that...force of feeling."

"What, B'Elanna?" he asked. "Passion? Quickness? That temper you keep reminding me about? The quality of it might not be the same, but it's nothing I never felt--nor saw within you when we meditated with Bala and Bakali. And you saw me, as I am and feel." He gave her an embrace, burrowed a kiss in her thick curls. "You don't need to answer me now, B'Elanna," he said softly. "But just know it. I want to be your husband, to share my life with you completely. We don't need this, but I would like it."

She smiled. "I'll think on it. --And I don't think it would be terrible, finishing this." Touching her temple, she rolled onto her back, looking up into his tired but tender eyes. "It is a part of us now and I do know we will have to complete it--and *that* is what Dalra was worried about, I think. He knew we would have to take it completely someday."

"But he doesn't believe it was a bad thing now."

"Ye zal." She touched his cheek, led him down to kiss her. "I'll give it thought, Tom."

He blinked slowly in acknowledgment and curled up by her again, pulling her close. "It's all I ask," he whispered and shared the view with her again, of the PADD, still active, glowing orange in contrast with the glowglobes' light, still bright in the room.

Reaching over her, Tom tapped them all off before drawing the blanket over them.

Looking at the glowing red viewport, B'Elanna felt her heart hammer slightly. She could not help but be engaged and haunted by it, even if by then she had seen it several times.

Thirty light years away, a sect scourge was in full swing among the various territories of the Unar. According to the enthusiastic reports of the Antral and Brijan and the floods of new refugees--former drasks--pouring into Desal, it was turning out to be a fierce one. Mainly, the scourge was fought for the suspicion so keenly raised among them and the bitterness not yet mended since the last and recent in-fight. That last one had cleared Uillar, severely downgraded the once strong Kahseht sect, taking Hychar and his cronies with him. The Kahseht had once been among the most powerful houses on Unar. The new scourge would hopefully weaken a great many more as the resistance continued its preparations.

"Coming into the orbit. What do our scanners say?"

"There lies no company but our own, Toma," Bolmra reported. "As each time, they are not to be seen in this territory."

"We must scan regardless," was Tom's answer to that. Both a benefit and problem with the Desalians' learning abilities was that they became accustomed to routine easily, relaxed too well sometimes. "Never not suspect, Bolmra. There are always exceptions and the unexpected."

"Toma ka. You would know well."

Tom touched a few more controls. "Take the impulse engines down."

B'Elanna did so, shutting down a few more systems as they established their position. "We are prepared," she said, crisp for the business at her fingertips. "Target the power reactor and transport it into the bottom cargo hold."

That time, their maneuver was simple and straightforward. A few weeks ago, the trip was a resurrection of a nightmare that would never fade in them.

Many from Uillar had been there that first day to begin scavenging the camp they knew all too well. Having heard the plan, they shared their dread but also the hope that the Unar had indeed not gone back to collect their waste. Dalra and Miztri, who had been the ones to break into the control center and call for rescue, restated what they remembered had not been taken when the Kaseht Sect abandoned Uillar.

Even with that expectation, they all paused heavily when, on the main landing pad of the camp, it was time to leave their ship. B'Elanna looked back to Sashana'i before opening the Azallis' hatch and she was struck by both her and Aratra's look of preparation. They had asked to come and dismissed the warnings, but obviously, they did not want to feel that horrible planet searing their skin again, either. And that was merely their distaste for the weather.

As the exit ground open, B'Elanna gasped at the flood of heat that poured into the ship's hold. Tears welled in her eyes; she tried not to breathe to save her still scarred lungs. Somehow, she picked up her old breathing habit like an instinct. Beside her, Tom hacked his first inhale, winced against the light then calmed a moment after with an effort.

It was as hot a hell as they remembered--if not more.

Yet once the initial blast of heat was over, they moved out onto the hard red dirt without any more

preamble, trudging across the tarmac to the first generator, which sat just outside the outer barricade. Arriving, they got to work.

They did not but glance into the camp, nor at the shanty, still standing as if not a day had passed. Tom and B'Elanna studiously avoided looking at the wall where they last saw Susan and Kurt and where she was first beaten, nor at the visible trench of dirt trailing from the shanty to the plant, where Hychar so liked to wait for them, test their resolve...

Instead, Tom strode to a corner, knelt and popped off the generator cover. He remembered staring at that same corner for the whole passing of a moon while he waited, prayed in what ways he could then, thought of the likely bitterness that would have followed any loss of his friend, B'Elanna. --But then he tried not to remember for the mean time.

Giving it a nod after squinting at its parts, Tom yanked its main coupling so that the rest of their friends and crew could hurry around and gather the nodes. Though secured deeply in the unforgiving dirt, they extracted them without too much trouble--or perhaps an added dose of determination. Even Sashana'i, briefly taken by the view of the front wall just outside the barrier, wordlessly got to work on the shield junctures. B'Elanna moved to help her. Their eyes meeting as a hot gush of wind and sand threatened their hoods, Sashana'i gladly accepted her friend's more expert hands, though she did not smile her thanks.

They all coughed up the hard air, sweat profusely for their regained water, groaned as the waves of sun baked their cloaks and exposed skin.

Despite the Desalian's love of history, none stayed for any wistful remembrance, even though there *had* been some pleasantness, bondings, joinings, and tellings on those cold nights around the fire. It was daytime then, and the sun provided no inspiration for rumination. So they collected what they needed and transported the rest of what their sensors could pick up then left without any ceremony and thanking the spirits they could indeed fly quickly away from that place at will.

The night of their return to Cezia, Tom held B'Elanna's shuddering body when she awoke gasping, her sunburnt hands covering her pale face.

Even so long away, her lungs mostly recovered, her vision cleared, albeit weak, her forehead not so much a battlefield as a tragic curiosity, she confessed she felt as though it were all new again. She could even feel the fear and fury coupled with the sensation of a studded glove clutched to her neck, feel her lungs and skin burning as they did on the route to the detail. He embraced her stiffly as she remembered aloud and he recalled his powerlessness and his own pains there, snuggled his face into her hair.

In the morning, Bala brought them their tea and flatbread, bid they remain in bed another quarter. They didn't argue.

When Bakali came to give them their antibiotics, they were asleep again, almost stubbornly so. The old woman stayed a few minutes, stroking their soft heads, watching them lie, unmoving, knowing better of what was underneath their surfaces.

From then on, they transported as much as they could from the Uillaran base, the refineries and the equatorial power reactor, which was gratefully easy to disengage remotely. With all of the modifications already made on Cezia, they had only to replace the relays and install the unit. With their planet's natural plasma, the reactor could easily power planetary defenses, communications and even a few of the replicators. With a little work, they could bring stable power to the cities themselves.

In B'Elanna's opinion, it should have been done a year ago.

She nodded at her monitor as the transports powered down. "We have acquired the reactor and the field stabilizer. P'llaja'i, initiate the second transport and target all nitrium and tritanium-based equipment you can disengage. It shall be sorted through later."

"Yes, Be'i."

Minutes later, B'Elanna tapped the warp and impulse engines online so they could break orbit and take themselves home again. She was anxious to get back, to work with Sashana'i on a present for Aratra, to have a few days rest. The rains were expected any day and she was more anxious still for that luscious bath, even while it meant trudging through mud at Dviglar. For that matter, Tom liked cleaning that mud off her, she recalled easily, distracting herself--and him--with a small smile his way. He met her gaze, smiled slightly back. Enjoying the quiver it afforded them both, she returned to her panel and Tom set them into action.

Suddenly, Bolmra behind them gasped aloud. "A ship has been detected, Toma--it is Unar!"

"Adjusting course," he said immediately and banked the Azallis in the opposite direction.

"They have seen us," B'Elanna said and jerked a stare at Tom. "They have readjusted course to follow us."

"Where lies the Merraj?" Tom asked as he began calculating a new trajectory into one of the many asteroid fields he and B'Elanna had investigated.

"The Unar ship is trying to engage talk with us."

"Hailing us," Tom corrected grimly.

"Let us hear it," B'Elanna said.

The voice that came through was calm and even. "Unknown drasks, you have pilfered a craft designated nineteen kubak ago to waste. You will power down your engines and be committed to the forced labor camp at Esebriw, else be destroyed."

"This is made quite a simple matter," B'Elanna commented, feeling her pulse speed appropriately with the development. It was dizzying after so much time in safety, though her nerve did return well, readying her body and clearing her mind. A few slow breaths later, she began to tap into her panel again, assessing the Unar ship.

Glancing at Tom, she was relieved to see the same. The color had come back to his face and he was entering parameters into the conn without any discernible trouble or concern. It was the ghost of a memory, she thought, and for just a moment, she could see him in his old uniform, black and red with pips on his collar and his hair neatly brushed, and his face unscarred and fair.

The ghost of a memory indeed, for with but a blink she saw the man she knew, telling P'llaja'i exactly how to reconfigure their engines output for the maneuvers he was plotting in perfect Desalian, not even pausing to make the calculations anymore. His beige kneeshirt was stained, his short hair was mussed, his nose was bent for all the abuse it had taken and the scar on his cheek was darkly shadowed in the bridge lights. His well-tanned temples boasted fans of indigo markings, delicate imprints she had shared with him.

B'Elanna smiled slightly as she looked back to her own work. She knew her lover far better than the fellow officer, of course, and trusted him utterly to revive his past skills just enough--as she did.

"There is another ship to join this one," P'llaja'i said, a little shrill and watching their leaders tap quietly on their panels, seemingly unbothered. She saw Bolmra's eyes widen and Plicta grinding his teeth. But the captains--perhaps properly--were as wise as elders at their central console. "It is far, yet it approaches our direction."

The Unar inflection came again, "Unknown drasks, we will take you from your ship and commit you to Esebriw. Prepare for our arrival."

Bolmra furrowed his brow. "Were they not to bring on our passing should we not cooperate?"

"Perhaps they cannot decide which would be worse for us," B'Elanna said archly.

"Unknown drasks, you are in vio--"

The voice cut off with a single flick of her finger. She looked over to the conn. "Well? Fight or run?"

"Contact Miztri and inform her of our situation," Tom said quietly, still thinking.

"Use the encryption patterns and blanket it in our ion trail," B'Elanna added.

For the next several seconds, the bridge was silent, the crew working each at their stations until B'Elanna, seeing the next sensor reading, struck her panel. "Bolmra! Send the Merraj and Korchau *away!*"

"I have told them!" he protested, shaking his head. "They do not listen."

Tom growled, seeing the Unar ship on the sensors quickly closing in. He knew that day would come--they all had--but now that it had, he almost felt fatigue for all the adrenaline pumping his heart. "Open an encrypted channel to the Merraj and the Korchau. --Miztri, Aratra, take yourselves from here--put yourselves inside the asteroid field before you are detected."

"We shall not," Aratra replied over the comm. "We would face this among each other."

"Unfortunately," Tom said, "they would then know we are not only a trade ship off course."

A pause--and B'Elanna filled it. "Move off, my friends," she said evenly.

Her eyes went down to her panel once again, and seeing Tom's single and sober nod, she activated the shields and powered up the weapons array. "Disruptors and torpedo banks online," she announced calmly. "Miztri, Aratra, raise your shields and move away."

"There may--"

"Do so, Miztri!" Tom snapped. "I do not wish to lose friends this sun!"

He released his breath only when they obeyed then readied for the inevitable. His fingers on his controls, he waited, deciding which route he would take to try to escape. Oddly, the thoughts came easily even as the proximity sensors bleeped behind them on the then silent bridge.

B'Elanna looked up. The Unar ship--the first she had ever seen in person--was a dark grey triangular

vehicle, powered on two sub-nacelles on the outer rims of its aft undercarriage. It approached without fanfare, slowing easily in front of them, as if it had chosen to be there just then. For their sheer arrogance alone, the idea of simply sinking a torpedo between the eyes of the cruiser was dangerously tempting. But then, she did not want to start something unnecessarily. More, she would never waste a good torpedo needlessly--or at least she wouldn't as a Desalian.

"Have they detected our weapons yet?" Tom asked.

"It would not seem so," Bolmra said.

"The Mirraj and Korchau are defended in the rock face," P'llaja'i told them, fighting for her calm with deep breaths. She had chosen that life, had asked to help Be'i and Toma, having known well their struggles and pure spirits since Uillar. Most of their crew had known them there, in fact. Like the others, she wished to share their passion for the freedom of Desal, chose to fight to save them all.

She was so frightened, she thought her very spirit would flee her foolish body.

Suddenly, the Azallis banked when Tom chose escape. Darting away from the asteroid field, he set the Unar ship into a pursuit as B'Elanna rotated the shields to counter the Unar's frequencies. With another quick decision, he took them at full impulse back to the dusty red planet they'd only just left.

The Unar ship fired--P'llaja'i rasped a small cry as the bridge shook slightly.

Bolmra shook his head. "We have not been injured."

"Yet," Tom said and spun the Azallis into a loop around Uillar, forcing the Unar ship to swoop down after them, into the hot upper atmosphere. A strange little grin found his pressed mouth as he bucked the controls, drove the little ship up sharply. The Unar cruiser took far longer to respond, it being bulky and badly shaped for atmospheric maneuvering.

He would remember that.

The ship did follow soon enough, however, punching its impulse engines to catch up with the smaller, sleeker craft. They tried to open another channel, but B'Elanna instead reconfigured their comm signal to bounce their hails back at them word for annoying word.

Finally, they fired again--a long shot, one that meant business. The Azallis rattled, some systems sparked and the lighting system flicked. But Tom only cursed their persistence and swung his ship around the third moon of Uillar. As soon as the Unar were out of sight, he cut the corner of the sphere, pulling them around in the moon's natural gravity, straining the dampers momentarily, to end up tailing the Unar ship. Tom's lip curled up slightly at that success, even if it was an easy one.

"Another weapon is being prepared!" Bolmra announced.

Tom felt his temples pound; he breathed a lungful of air through his open mouth, his eyes focusing on a point in space beyond the ship. In the corner of his eye, he saw B'Elanna looking up again, too. Her chest was moving hard, but she was otherwise...ready.

"B'Elanna," Tom said.

She nodded, reached out with one slim finger, let it fall on a key...then fired the torpedo. As it shot out from the Azallis' bay, she felt a pull in her gut. It was starting.

The Azallis had not destroyed anything more than an asteroid.

The torpedo struck the left nacelle of the Unar ship, taking it completely off guard and bucking it around in the momentum of the blast. It spun out of control, shimmying and sparking as the plasma in the nacelles collapsed and imploded into the engines.

Seconds later, the hulking ship seemed to stop momentarily, looked as if it would simply lurk away, drift back to its lair.

Tom and B'Elanna knew better. When P'llaja'i took a breath to speak, Tom held up his hand to stop any noise, his stare at the ship unbroken.

Seconds later, it burst. From the inside out, the Unar ship exploded in a blinding array of white and blue, sending shards of hull bouncing off the Azallis' shields as the stunned crew watched--and knew.

Blue faded to white, white dispersed. Shards of red, coils and chemicals, sizzled in the vacuum then died away; the white spun and shrank, dimming. Some final sparks lit the debris briefly then faded to bits of grey, tinged with the red glow of nearby Uillar.

Tom felt himself finally begin to shake; when he spoke, his voice was hoarse. "P'llaja'i, send out to all Irl'lae resistance ships and underground bases an encrypted message. Tell them..."

P'llaja'i looked forward to the captain, who sat terribly still for several long moments after the last sparks fizzled away. "Toma?"

He took another breath as a couple more chunks of Unar hull bounced off their ship's defenses. "Tell them the war has begun."

Silence held their journey home. Tom barely felt himself in his seat, much less there, on that bridge with people taking his orders and B'Elanna at his side. He could still feel the gentle squeeze she'd given his hand earlier. She looked far away, too, he noticed in a glance.

They had just started the fight, a war they'd wanted, planned, worked so hard for, totally believed in. They'd asked an entire people to put aside their peaceful philosophy for a time so that they could *keep* their philosophies in the end, beliefs he and B'Elanna had come to respect and even follow to a good degree.

The fight for that had begun with a nod from him and a tap of her finger. With that alone, they had committed themselves to Desalia completely, and they would have to follow through.

What was strange to him was that he felt nothing but that desire, that necessity, and accepted it.

In another odd moment, Tom wondered what Janeway would have thought about it, about what they'd become, what he'd become in comparison to the cynical, insecure ex-pilot. Tom Paris grown to adopt an alien culture as his own, make Chief Torres his mate and, with her, take on the fate of not one, but almost forty civilizations.

Tom shook his head. Thinking about it like that made his head pound.

But again, he couldn't say he was sorry for what they'd done. Their people... Not all lived as well as those on Cezia--far, far worse in most cases. Even in the aura of order, there was devastation and

incredible suffering. They had witnessed it when they took the Azallis to the other colonies, and they still had nightmares about how some Desalians had been forced to live, what conditions they had no choice but to accept. It was little wonder they gave themselves to service so freely--another successful Unar design. Now, that would stop. It had to. They would make that fate be truth.

Sitting on that bridge at the conn, knowing what he'd done, he truly believed it. He had to.

Tom banked the Azallis around another group of asteroids, making the final approach into the Cezian system. Indeed, he didn't regret a moment of the life he'd made there, would not have traded an instant for all the comforts of the Alpha Quadrant, which he'd never earned and were superficial, in truth. Realizing that, it stopped being strange. It became a part of his fate, and B'Elanna's, too.

"It was meant," Bolmra finally whispered, his somber tones loud among the bleeps and the hum of the engines. "This is now intended, truly."

"For Desalia," B'Elanna said, looking back at him, "it must be. Bala said once that the dark shall press upon us before we are permitted the sun of our purpose. It is the way of resistance."

"It is a difficult way," P'llaja'i stated.

"Yes," Tom said, "yet at times it is the only way."

"Then, ka, it must be," Bolmra said, giving B'Elanna a nod.

She returned the same in thanks. "We shall persevere," she told them all, "should our belief and purpose remain true."

Though I hope this confidence is meant to last, she added to herself, moving her eyes back down to the panel as Tom began to navigate their landing. A light in the viewport brought her attention back to Cezia, fair green and teal blue with a large cloud mass over the northern hemisphere.

B'Elanna straightened as Tom began the Azallis' descent. "Ka, this is worth our struggle," she told the crew and began preparing the ship for their landing.

Not long after a steady entry into the atmosphere and into the surging troposphere, they touched down, hovered briefly to adjust their landing struts into the docking clamps, shut down their systems and let the engines whirr down to an idle. Wordlessly, they pulled themselves from their seats. Following their small crew to the side hatch, their hands again entwined, Tom and B'Elanna watched and sighed as the bulkhead opened, revealing Dviglar. They drew a deep breath as the musty, wet air flooded into the ship, bathing their dry skin.

Releasing that breath, they walked out into the warm Azlreian downpour.

A form, drenched and waiting, had already disembarked from her bondmate's ship and stood by him in the blessing of the torrent. The water from the sky easily hid her tears, but B'Elanna could tell: They were tears of both fear and relief.

B'Elanna felt it herself, though she did not cry. Instead, she opened her arms. Sashana'i crossed the row and flew into her friend's arms, began to weep in earnest, clutching her dripping clothes.

"Freedom shall now be ours, good Be'i," she whispered into her ear.

"Yes," B'Elanna said, feeling the water wash the year's worth of dryness from her skin, "it shall, Sashana'i."

Accursed Uillar had found another victim, Gychak noted as he ran scans on his flickering monitors. His comrades on the Rywalok had made a full discovery of that system's hatefulness, it seemed.

The others on his ship concluded it had been a containment breach. At first, he was inclined to agree. He gathered all the information and studied it again despite that. Standard procedure had them record all details from the destruction of a ship, particularly one for a family that had very few ships to spare. High Commander Frouwid would certainly wish to know what happened.

They had likely been looking for a place to hide while they conducted repairs during that unpredictable sect scourge. The result of the Rywalok's efforts had easily inspired the officers around him to quote the curse of Uillar and Hychar's stain outliving him; otherwise, they were satisfied with the obvious conclusion. Gychak carried no such illusions, and knew they could wait before nestling themselves into the common asteroid fields there. Their enemies would not follow them out so far so soon. They had the time for a well-done examination.

He was glad he did so. The readings he examined upon further scans were interesting...very interesting.

"This ship was not destroyed by anything Unar," he said aloud and looked over to his second officer. "More, the Rywalok did not self-destruct. I am reading...tricrobalt?" He looked up at the debris before them. "The Rywalok was not destroyed by anything we are aware of."

"Then our enemies have developed a new weapon," the second officer said, glaring at the debris as well. "Which sect had begun these incursions indeed has shown their strength."

Gychak thought carefully about that then nodded. "We must take our findings to High Commander Frouwid and regroup." He turned and gave a nod to his navigator. "Take us back to our territory," he ordered then looked back to the viewport.

Beyond the pool of debris and the black moon, the ominous red glow of Uillar hung in the sky. It reminded him of the glow of Gozhor's plasma streams just then, in its burning aura and the storms of dust within the atmosphere, so much like the plasma streams in full flare.

A moment later, the view turned to the more comforting stars and glowing trails of asteroids he once looked upon from that world.

Unconsciously, his hand fell to his pocket and rubbed his charm.

Upon their return to his sect's base to report his findings, the flushed and stiff-jawed Commander Frouwid had a report of his own to relay: A massacre.

Somehow, after the various sects had left their living houses to fight their local enemies, a fleet of Antral, Brijan, Sureshan, Koba and Iaskeb ships had crept over the Unar homeworlds and transported away over ninety percent of their drasks. In some unfortunate houses, some of the Koban drichkas had brutally murdered the remaining house commanders before making their escape with the others. Other

drihkas had incapacitated whom they could--mainly with tainted wine.

In other quarters, several nearby camps had been liberated with both weapons fire and prisoner resistance--and those who did not fight were spirited away with high-powered transporters. Where they got them was still conjecture. But their labor force had been decimated. Where the drasks got their ships alone was a mystery as well. The sects, all, were in too great a shock to determine it--much less believe it.

They had been taken completely by surprise--and now they knew well who had started the "invasions" of the sect territories. That alone was a humiliation beyond any they had known in centuries--if ever.

Then, as they were shaking with their shame and fury, a message had arrived from an Antral "leader" called Novren Pridalar: "By the decree of Irliae, its true rulers and all its people, we hereby declare war against, you, our enslavers, wretched Unar."

And nothing more.

Gychak closed his eyes. Behind his lids he still could see the fiery glow of Uillar. The disgrace, the impossible arrogance...the power the drasks had taken in claiming *their* places in Irliae. It could not be. Had he ever been cynical about his people's policies, his dissent dissolved with the shot of angry shame he felt in his throat. That same resistance had destroyed the Rywalok, claimed their right, their control--over Unar.

Opening his eyes, he found the old, steely stare of Frouwid. Raising his chin, he said, "We will fight this curse, Commander."

"There is a song of farewells, sung often then..."

"Where would you have learned *that*?!" Novren exclaimed over the comm as he struggled to catch up with the Azallis.

"It merely lies within," Tom answered simply, sparing a wink at B'Elanna before he spun them out of another enemy target range.

"With more of this sort of day, you will not make such a fool of me," the other man promised.

"Should you manage not to make yourself a corpse for it, it might be pleasing to see that sun."

"Vyuch!" Novren laughed. "I will make you the fool for that boast!"

Tom entered the new coordinates and took them back around to their original target--two rather persistent Unar crafts. "I would believe there are other fools to think on at present. --You shall take the backup ship, Novren. The lead ship is for me."

Without delay, Novren's nicely upgraded and stocked ship banked and repositioned itself to take on the second Unar craft. Immediately, he fired and pulled back to strike again from behind. In the distance,

two more resistance ships were approaching, but Novren seemed determined not to require their assistance. He thrust at the Unar again almost immediately then cut up and in to dive through the center offensive again, phasers on full.

They watched the other ship elude the return fire and drag a phaser slice down the second Unar hull, even while Tom both evaded and lined up the lead ship for an equal treatment. "Novren should've gone to the Academy," he commented aside to B'Elanna.

Her lips pursed and twisted to the side. "He's certainly cocky enough to be a Starfleet pilot."

With a short laugh, Tom pulled them into position. "Arm all torpedoes and prepare for another volley," he told the crew behind him as he returned his focus to his readouts. "We send ourselves again. --Now!"

*"Trichel me'al tsa moli'avid, co'a hanek ta moszhirr;
O'a rab lla tsa..."*

"Evade them!" Miztri commanded as she strode to another panel and looked over at her co-captain. "Givadra, prepare a weapon as I project our alternate readings for them."

Givadra nodded at the young woman behind him, and together they unlocked and set the torpedo he would fire upon his co-captain's word. During their initial training, it was easily agreed that Miztri would be the primary command and flight controller and he would lead those among engines and tactical systems. Because of that placement according to the ancient hierarchy, he or Risiydi fired weapons only on Miztri's orders, which in truth was a comfort to him. He did not desire to initiate such destruction, necessary as it might have been. "The weapon is active," he reported.

Miztri nodded and flipped her scarf over her shoulder so she could work. "Sajrra, bring us up more slowly now, yet continue to attempt turns." She resisted reaching up for her sweaty brow, but typed quickly from the memories leant to her. "The false signal of our condition has been generated. Sajrra, halt us and prepare to take us to first warp speed upon my request." With another few taps, she projected another reading altogether.

As they prayed and waited, the Unar ship slowed to look at the projected ships, which seemed to jump into the field from the nearby nebula. Meanwhile, as it turned away, it likewise turned its engine nook towards the "disabled" Desalian ship.

Miztri's eyes locked on the dusky cruiser as it put itself into position to take on the "reinforcements." Such arrogance, Miztri thought as she watched them casually expose their underbelly. It was amazing to her just then that they felt entitled to so much of it. She had never realized the extent so well as when she reached down and easily pinpointed their target. Ironically, she hoped that her bondmate and Toma were correct in his belief that Unar would learn quickly of their mistakes, not always be so foolish. This would give Miztri less cause to pity them later.

She did not smile to save her composure, but quietly said, "Fire, Givadra."

*"Me'al tsa ka'e gyalche'o, co'a hanek ye'e i'ullma;
O'a rab lla tsa..."*

"There lurk four Unar ships in the Y'etarish sector," Dalra stated, staring at the screen as he spoke to the subspace comm, "approaching Gavllorst at raiskoeta speed."

"*We shall engage them and hold them back,*" answered Sollve'a. "*Send for three Antral from Mihor to flank our position.*"

"I shall also send for the Tebri'all," Cali told him, hurrying around the subspace relay panel to help Dalra with the encryptions.

"Be well with your spirits, Sollve'a," Dalra told him and began typing instructions for the Antral.

"*May we all,*" the other man responded then began to prepare his crew, cutting off the comm only in afterthought.

Only minutes later, when those transmissions were complete, another came in: "*Fair sunrise, Dviglar! How fares the weather among you?*"

Cali and Dalra smiled in unison as the former opened the return comm through the decryptor. "Joyful sunrise to you, good Toma, and all upon the Azallis," Cali told them first.

"How is *your* weather, good man?" Dalra asked.

"*Ah, you were asked first,*" Tom replied cheerfully, even if behind him was the nonstop echo of lasers and coolant and B'Elanna ordering equipment to be brought. "*For we have drawn our border nicely and have been replaced by Ityacma and his own. We shall take respite for supplies.*"

Cali gladly moved to the operations table. "Then I shall plot a course for you, Toma."

*"Rrihad llos mihal tsa ras, gy'al monrill ye'e chira;
O'a ll'ar ihr tsul rasv..."*

"I am afraid I learn what a gentle spirit I must be," Sashana'i said as she crawled down into the engine core.

"*Ah, my spirit, Nivilla--*" A blast paused him and shook Sashana'i nearly to her stomach. "*Nivilla and I have become well versed in your reserved manners.*"

Sashana'i grinned and kept moving until she was at the sharply whining impulse generator. Taking out her laser drill, she melted a section of it, detaching the charred node. It stuck as she pulled it; with a grunt, she yanked it out, threw it aside.

"Viche'i," she called back, "I require the node--immediately!"

A moment later, a blast shook the Korchau with such force, Sashana'i was certain the entire ship would come down upon her. Cursing to herself, she waited for the aftershocks to pass, knowing that when she extracted herself from the tube, she would have many more repairs to conduct. Sleep would not find her or the crew for at least another day, with or without a fight before them.

Indeed, she wished she were gentler just then and simply could not do what she was doing, could rather obey the pleas of Lledri and her elders and remain merely the influence and safe upon Cezia--all that was required of her, in truth, as regent.

A moment later, she would not have preferred to be anywhere else.

Reaching back blindly, the node met her hand. She smacked it into place and quickly aligned it. It was a poor job, but it worked for the present.

"Aratra! It is done!"

*"Va'o tsa gywarn gyo'arr, i'a hanek ye'e ti zhras;
O'a ra tsa mirhid llos..."*

"For Desal, they are taken to our blessed ancestors, anointed with the joy of eternity."

Sashana'i took up the sweep of her robe and walked a circle around the line of corpses, her hand stretched over each, her eyes half-closed with prayer.

"They have passed in dignity and grace for my command and their most noble spirits."

"They have acted in true purity and sacrifice," Aratra joined upon her pause, "the sacrifice we bear still this sun and shall for many suns after."

"Through my absolution, peace shall be with them in their eternal journey," Sashana'i continued.

"Zha hevrria," Lledri intoned. "It is decreed."

The witnesses all circled as Sashana'i completed her eulogy with a prayer, the *Song of Farewells*, stepping aside with Aratra once he joined in. Around the ring drawn in the soil which would be the pyre, those who had come to bless the way of the passed reached out to touch the temple of each one then touched their own with a gentle bow of respect and few words of their own prayer. Meanwhile, the song echoed around them....

In the end, the beloved join to celebrate the being; within the body's midnight, our beings stir but in memory, for the light which greets the blessed spirit.

The corner of Tom's scarves dangled against his neck as he reached out to touch the temple of the corpse. Unlike the way, he said nothing, only remembered that he knew the man; he had liked him, and also the next he touched. He felt no energy greet his brief contacts, and so perhaps the spirits indeed had

passed to their next residence.

Free in belonging among all, we shall not be spurned; within my own midnight, there shall be such a peace as this, for that light which greets the spirit.

B'Elanna heard herself singing the words; she knew their meaning. She stroked the temple of each she had at least called friend, all of whom had followed the call she had voiced and Desal answered. If she had ever prayed, she prayed they did have peace, wherever they were.

In the light of our spirit, eternity opens; not of body, we are like water among the stars, rising like fog made of sunrise on the bay.

They would do the same for him, Tom knew. He too would be put on the pyre and blessed--and considering what they did for their livings just then, it was a very possible conclusion.

If he married B'Elanna in the traditional rite, she would go with him. Though human and half-Klingon, they were able to meditate and had adjusted to the kraja completely enough to make him believe bonding wouldn't be too different. Bondmates were linked to such a degree that though they weren't necessarily telepathic, they became dependent upon each other's neural energy. Tom didn't understand the science, but he knew the implication well enough.

Remembering his proposal, he now wondered if he could ask that of her.

As his fingers traced Pahsara's then Hamani's markings, he glanced down at their faces. Pale, slightly shrunken, they still looked at peace. Tom thought that it should bother him more than it did, for he smiled slightly at them, remembering them well, hoping very much their belief was a true one...wanting it to be.

Never barren, our blessed beings may not be ceased, and for this our truest moment is at midnight, and the dawn opens upon our journeying spirits.

She remembered the feel of Hamani's energy when once she touched it. It was no longer there. Only her pretty face remained, nestled against Pashara's collar. Thankfully, the blast had been behind her. Though lifeless, she was more recognizable than some others there.

They had boldly asked to help, against their family's wishes. Yet their family was there, happy for their journey and completely forgiving of the resistance which had guided their children. B'Elanna had apologized to them anyway, for the missing of their physical presence, at least. She knew she would miss Hamani's wit and sharp talent, her slight, quick body darting around the engine room for Latsari, always with a bright grin and chatty stories at meals. She had gone as she wished, with dignity and doing all she could for Desalia.

Now, none of that energy resided there. B'Elanna knew that it could have been her--or Tom...though not together. She honestly wondered if she would really touch Tom's cold temple in a peaceful farewell before the fire would put his body to ashes.

She knew well she wouldn't.

He took her hand and she let him lead her away, out to the circle that had formed far around the pyre. When the line of celebrants had ended and the circle was complete, they drew up their coats and knelt upon the soil.

"Zha hevrra," they all said, a rising sound that faded upon its completion. Nothing more was heard until the crackling of fire began.

They closed their eyes, bent their heads. They were supposed to pray, and perhaps they did. They were at least still as the others there as the fire started, their finer clothing folded in heavy waves upon the firm savannah floor. They did not cry, nor contort their faces with mourning. They only listened as the flames breathed the feeding air.

It should have troubled them more than it did. It was the way to release the spirit so to live enriched by it, though. They had learned that much by necessity of late.

They would leave at sunrise for the long triangle of space they commonly defended by the Azallis. They, along with the Korchau and Merraj, were there not only to defend that border of Desalian territory and the space around it, but to wedge the Unar farther in towards the center of Irliae, and then to Gozhor. Continuing that plan, Bala and Bakali would see them to the clinic step, kiss them and bless their way. They would return the gesture genuinely. They would be gone at least a week, fight as needed, make arrangements and receive updates, hurry into repairs and defend Desal as best they could in another hard day. Then, they would return for supplies and rest.

Sometime after they returned, they would stand as the pyre burned and turn the circle in steps in celebration for the honored passed, hoping...for many things.

As with so many others now, it was their life.

*"Me'al tsa ka'e gyalche'o, co'a hanek ye'e i'ullma;
O'a rab lla tsa;
Hevrra tsa'o zha ra."*

The steam shot up into the main of the bridge and Gychak spun to assess what else those very interesting weapons had done to his ship. "Disengage our weapons!" he told his comrade. "The phaser array is overloading and will cause a reaction in our main power systems."

Wartul paused for but a moment. "Then we will be defenseless."

"The drask ship fires only when we show force," Gychak grunted, pulling out relays as he spoke, feeling the steam freezing welts onto his skin as he dug deeper into the spraying hatch. "They will not attack the defenseless--and we would be killed either way."

"And our disgrace--"

"May be amended! I want to live to see the end of this war, Wartul! Disengage the array!"

It was done, and as Gychak stabilized their primary systems then let out his breath to see the whines on the bridge decrease, he gave his comrade a nod. "I will help you with your repurchase for this."

"Yes," Wwartul replied. "You will." Ignoring the stare he got in return, he scowled down to his monitor. "The arrogant drasks want to speak as well," he muttered, but hit the comm anyway, if only for curiosity.

"*As you may have noted, you have been disabled,*" came a smooth Desalian voice. "*You shall take yourselves to your home. Should assistance be required in communicating with your people, a subspace signal shall be sent for you.*"

Gychak turned at the sound, tilting his head to hear the voice more clearly. From somewhere...he knew it somehow...

The Desalian had the gall to sound amused beneath his cool tones, which drew Wwartul's brow cleanly down the bridge of his nose. "We require nothing of you, drask, but your natural obedience--which we *will* have again!"

"*Yet our obedience *is* well known,*" returned the man glibly, "*to our Desalian spirits. You shall not turn us, nor any others, again, had you ever. Be at peace, Unar craft.*"

Gychak pulled himself from the floor and rushed over only to see that it was but an audio transmission. He had certainly recognized that voice, however. Of all the drasks of Desal he had come across in his lifetime, that one pulled oddly at him, familiar but...more. The insults the drask had laid upon Wwartul and himself were enough to inspire his prideful scorn. Yet that was quickly eased by his finely tuned curiosity.

He clapped Wwartul's shoulder, staring solidly at the comm panel from which the voice had been activated. "We will repurchase our places, Wwartul," he stated, "and I *will* find this drask again someday."

Looking up to the small viewport, Gychak watched as the small white ship turned gracefully in the space between them and, with a burst in its nacelles, disappeared among the stars.

"And thus, what was meant came to be."

"Fire!" B'Elanna ordered and braced herself as soon as the torpedo barreled out of its bay. On a beat, Tom swung their ship out of the way of the return fire. He zipped in through the defensive phaser lines for another shot then quickly maneuvered the Azallis into the nearby line of asteroids. Seeing rocks around them, B'Elanna hit the comm and glared out at the approaching third Unar ship. "Medrove, I should hope you remain among us!"

"I am coming about for the third line ship!" the Sureshan responded. "Take on their reinforcement!"

B'Elanna did just that, ordering a teaser shot through the edge of the rock line at the second ship's bow. The Unar ship immediately turned to respond and Tom lined them up for the chase.

"Jumping to warp," Tom told them and popped the Azallis into a five second burst of power,

disappearing from the field. Immediately, he swung the little ship around.

"Spatial distortions occurring."

Tom saw the coordinates. "Plicta, target the signature and fire on Be'i's command."

"Targeted."

B'Elanna's eyes darted down to the panel. *One more...* "Fire!"

Plasma ripped out of the banks of the Azallis as the Unar ship came out of warp, striking it upon its arrival and nearly tossing them back in the resulting wake. The Unar craft shimmied and sparked as it worked to regain control of itself--then stopped.

"They are severely damaged," P'llaja'i informed them and began tracing the Sureshan ship. "Captain Medrove yet engages the lead ship."

"We shall accompany him, then." Tom returned and let his fingers dance upon his panel. Returning to the system they had been fighting in before, he carefully realigned their coordinates just before slowing. In the past months, the Unar had begun to learn some of their tricks.

B'Elanna stared up at the visual again. Medrove's ship was starting to show its marks. "Tom, bring the Azallis around. We shall take their nacelles."

"That would be expected," he replied.

"Then land on their bridge!" she retorted. "A weak spot is required!"

Tom nodded shortly. "Plicta, prepare a round of tricobalt torpedoes."

Without hesitation, the man obeyed, well accustomed to the procedure. Plicta told himself to pray for their spirits another time--an odd and frightening rationale he never believed he would develop so quickly. Then again, hot, tired and stiff with adrenaline, he also knew he didn't have the time to debate it, especially with himself. Instead, with a few commands, he activated the weapons, performed a quick diagnostic, loaded the first into the bay and nodded to B'Elanna.

"Target their forward banks and fire," B'Elanna said and immediately began diverting systems to face a third ship, quickly on approach. The Azallis slipped around Medrove's ship in a feint and Plicta fired the torpedo. B'Elanna barely looked at the result. She was scanning the next target.

"Their weapons are disabled!"

Tom almost thanked P'llaja'i for the news when a shot across the Azallis' stern sent white sparks and coolant spraying across the bridge. "Plicta!"

The man fired another torpedo; then Medrove's ship turned and added a few of their own torpedoes to the fray. Another shot-- "Ready another disruptor spread!" B'Elanna commanded, jumping from her seat to assess the engine temperatures. "Latsari!" she yelled to the comm, "take down the core and activate secondary systems!"

"*Yes, Be'i!*"

Tom brought their injured ship around again as Medrove fired yet another volley into the belly of the Unar ship, finally stopping their assault. "Release it!" Tom told the man behind him.

Plicta nodded and fired the spread, instantly incinerating the ship behind them. "What of the lead cruiser?" he asked, breathless and glaring at the screen. "It shall follow."

"Take out their engines so their own may find them drifting," B'Elanna ordered, still typing frantically into the engineering panel, working in synch with Latsari below to stabilize their containment field. The last blast had bruised their engines badly that time. "They shall decide what to do with them."

Plicta nodded grimly and did as ordered, firing a clean shot across the typically vulnerable Unar nacelles and deflector grid. The ship moved only in the momentum and sizzled orange as Tom turned them away.

B'Elanna only gave a nod of acknowledgment that the danger had passed, her squinting stare pasted to her monitor. "Tom, should a place of respite be found as we contact Dalra and Cali?" Her voice had grown hoarse with smoke and strain.

"It is needed," he agreed and opened the comm to Medrove. The man's equally soot stained and tired face grinned back at him. "We are to take shelter in the Oyal Zi'ihar. Shall you join us or return to the Ralleve Jihag?"

"The latter, my friend," Medrove told him. "We require replenishment--as do you."

"Yes, yet only when we bear assurance of our route to Cezia."

"There are no other Unar here just now," the Sureshan shrugged. "But I will send the Litsvakal should you not leave the Oyal field by a third day."

"My thanks," Tom said. "Take yourselves safely."

"And you."

They had been in that field for nearly a week--a long time to be on a single strike. During that time, the Azallis, with Medrove's help, had struck down two supply lines and three sensor nets, and disabled five Unar ships. It had been a good mission.

But there had been a price, Tom and B'Elanna learned. After nestling themselves down into an asteroid crater and helping their friends on the bridge settle a bit, they climbed down to engineering. Latsari and the others there were still harried in their repairs. B'Elanna immediately removed her filthy coat and rolled up her gown sleeves to assist.

After inspecting the other departments of their five-decked ship, Tom likewise retrieved his repair kit and set himself to work on their shield manifold, though he knew it would require a full reinstallation once they returned to Cezia. The entire section had been reduced to hanging relays, conduits and shards of metal.

It still was going well.

In the half-year since they fired upon the Rywalok, the resistance was surprisingly holding their own. Having taken their positions along strictly organized routes of defense and offense, the resistance's lead ships had held their line. They had not *gained* much ground yet between the Desalian colonies and

Suresha, and they had lost several ships, but the Unar had gone no farther on the fields after initial detection of their presence.

Many of the resistance's home planets and a few of the colonies had been stripped of Unar. With the officers gone to fight the sect scourge, it was relatively simple to banish the remainder--families, mostly, who were simply packed up and beamed down to an outer Unar colony. Worlds closer to Unar--all around the Gozhor Region, in fact--like the laskeb and Antral, still bore Unar-dominated space, however.

Like most of the outer colonies and lesser-developed worlds, of which there were many, Desalia-Four itself remained in undisturbed occupation. Well equipped by the Unar with planetary defenses, a strong sensor grid; having plentiful natural resources, it had no supply route and was impenetrable. The resistance simply chose that battle to come later.

Besides, they knew well they had their hands full, though Tom agreed with some that it was tempting to go after the home planet. Symbolically, it would mean a great deal. The greatest drawback was the potentially great expense of resources, which all in Irlae feared wasting. So he and B'Elanna maintained the defenses on the ancient Desalian outer bank between Surve'i, Nose'ek and the Pashill and Sha'ot asteroid strings--the inner border of of Desalian space. He had already memorized them.

As he pulled a charred phase reactor out of its holdings, he wondered how long they would hold that line before something happened. He knew from many histories that wars like theirs could go on for years before one side or the other got a break or finally weakened the other.

Thankfully, the Desalian crew was somewhat accustomed to the routine, and nature alone proved they would not tire of it easily. Their patience had transferred as best as could be expected. With it in full use just then, as they drifted in the Oyal asteroid stream, they got the warp drive stabilized and their shields patched decently enough to cross through to the anterior Sha'ot perimeter and begin their course to Cezia. After a half day of less pressing repairs during their journey, they gladly put aside their tools to gather in the common room for their meal.

Simple but satisfying, they took their usual flatbread, cheese and vegetables--sometimes fish, when they were not too tired to prepare it correctly. Together, they reclined on the spare, hard pillows, Tom by B'Elanna, Bolmra and Latsari curled up together among the other crew, numbering but thirty overall. They ate quietly at first, descending into a bit of welcome talk soon after, all of them knowing they would return to work for some time before the second shift could allow themselves some rest.

"*Toma of Azlre,*" came Cali's pleasant voice just as they had pulled themselves unwillingly from their third of such meals.

Tom walked over and opened the comm. "Fair sunrise, Cali--or has the sun risen yet?"

She laughed. "*It has, good man," she said. "*And I bring you news that your path is clear. Our sensors have picked up a small retreat in the Morshad system. Our friends the laskeb have pushed Unar to the interior border again in a fine debate of skill.*"

"It would also mean that Unar would regroup," B'Elanna said, but sighed at her pessimism. "Yet our return is a welcome one. A shield coil assembly is required and the manifold requires a full rebuild."

"*Then I may presume we may satisfy our greed for your presence for more than two suns?*" Cali asked, audibly smiling. "*Our elders shall be thrilled. Bring yourself in good time, however. The Korchau, with our good regents, has taken much food from Unar and is in repair.*"

Tom jerked his head around. "What? How are they?"

"They are to arrive by next sun, as they bear little more than impulse to steer and the Inaadel to guard them. Yet Nivilla reports that but two have passed among them. --Not our regents, good man."

B'Elanna sighed with relief, and then did so again with the guilt that any life would be more expendable. Unfortunately, that was indeed the case just then.

"We shall return as our engines are brought online," she said quietly.

A Cezian day later and with their satchel straps light on their shoulders, B'Elanna and Tom strode swiftly through the busy streets of Azlre, his hand on her upright back as he steered them around one group or another, and even packs of straying dwellers. Since the clearing of the Unar houses, all the colonies of Desal had taken on more refugees than ever--and a good many of the ones bound for resistance or technical training came to Azlre on top of the other load. It was not unwelcome, but it certainly was more crowded in a city that never needed help in that respect.

They made good speed through the winding streets, however, greeting all who paid them notice through their still dirty faces and tired eyes, though not fully pausing until they were to the square. B'Elanna sped herself upon seeing Aratra, skipping forward to touch his temple in greeting.

"We have been told of the Korchau," she said.

Aratra nodded, smiled uncomfortably. "We left the field with success, however, good Be'i."

Feeling him fumble with her fingers, B'Elanna put her hand on his cheek to meet his stare again. "It happens, Aratra," she told him, reaching up to push his soiled golden hair from his brow. "It is terrible, yet it does happen. That it does not overcome you bears the most importance, yes?"

"It was a...long incursion, my friends," he said to her and to Tom, who patted his shoulder comfortingly. "And Sashana'i, seeing the force of her injuries--"

B'Elanna started at the suggestion and looked beyond to the clinic. "No."

"She shall bear wellness," Aratra said then coughed a laugh. "Clearly as I yet breathe, so does she. We both fare better than when we brought ourselves home, however."

B'Elanna half smiled, but with a pat on Aratra's cheek, a look back to Tom, she hurried into the clinic.

The regent wasn't hard to find. She was on the side of the front room, which had been made into a makeshift triage by Bakali with the help of her growing league of trainees. Seeing her friend awake and all right--what looked like radiation burns were being treated by Fisdra at that moment--B'Elanna moved through to Bakali.

"Oh my child!" she sighed and accepted B'Elanna's firm embrace. "My thanks to the spirits of all our ancestors we are blessed by your return--and until f'hajen, Cali has said."

"Yes, we are to stay," B'Elanna promised, her voice cracking a bit with a tiredness she was finally beginning to allow. More, it was good to feel the woman's thin but strong arms, comforting as they always were. "It pleases to be home," she said, glancing to Sashana'i as one of the assistants finished on her. "How fares my little sister?"

"Far fairer than her arrival," Bakali answered and led B'Elanna across the room. "You must teach my dear child-regent not to run into irradiated compartments. She did reactivate their shield generator, yet she found harsh injury. It spoke of carelessness for her place, I would think."

Sashana'i heard that and smiled with combination of relief to see her friend, guilt and other shadows of the fight that had brought her to that table. That and what else had been spinning inside her eased, however, to see B'Elanna's predictable smirk.

"You shall inspire Lledri to chain you to the silag and Dalra curse my tongue to Prihar," B'Elanna admonished, touching Sashana'i's temple. "Yet not one could say it is something I might not have done in your situation."

Sashana'i snickered, broken from the spell with B'Elanna's teasing--and the resulting thought of old Lledri chasing after her with a joth rope. "Yes, Be'i, you have taught an equally stubborn lady too well."

"Our elder is correct, however. You and Aratra are required to remain among the living. A safer remote procedure can be created, which should be good work for me while we await our equipment. --Yes, the Azallis is in for maintenance, as well. The Kivosl and Ivitari'ad take our positions for the time."

Sashana'i took her hand and kissed it. "It pleases, my sister," she said, willing up her cheer with the news. "We shall take dinner in the square in two moons and celebrate the Akosa'o which our elders decreed for the arrival of Rykynsa--a true scholar and word painter once buried in secrecy upon Ivllisa. Now free, he has requested to come and share his words and knowledge with us."

"Really?" B'Elanna was genuinely interested. Bala had spoken of the man. A historian by trade and a full scholar of proper teaching and training, he and others like him were likely the finest gems in Desal's pocket.

"We shall enjoy an entire day of it and all the blessings of Akosa'o--which Bakali says rightly is much needed just now, with our way so pressed into duty. It has been several du'ave since we have enjoyed such a time." Smiling up to B'Elanna, still holding her hand, Sashana'i nodded once and surely. "Most certainly, this shall be a fine holiday. We shall wear our better cloth--and your hair shall be tied like a true lady's."

B'Elanna laughed and leaned down to kiss Sashana'i's forehead. "Only should you catch me."

Rykynsa of Ivllisa bowed to a knee before his good regents, as properly as he might have in his youth, and with far greater meaning at present. The young woman, while small in stature and attired with grace rather than grandeur, was handsome in appearance and had a pointed easiness in her formality, a trait that had not faded in the Allanois, he noted. Beside her stood the man who shared her house, a pleasant and witty gentleman with an excellent sense of curiosity Rykynsa looked forward to appeasing. Their doings and responsibilities at present combined with such presences, wisely tended for such youth, was certainly a good sign for their people.

"My blessed Sashana'i and Aratra, good regents, I greet you in our people's progress and swear my service to you both."

Sashana'i graciously bent to touch the elder man's temple and bring him back to his feet. When he

stood again, she giggled at his height. Like Bala and Tom, a healthy youth had given the man a long frame that lasted into his elder years.

"Your service is most welcome, most blessed, Rykynsa of Desal. My own of Cezia anticipate greatly your trade and company." She gestured to her left. "My honor to introduce my siblings, Be'i and Toma."

They greeted him with the same formality as Sashana'i, as befitted their rank and privilege, even as adopted. "I bear anxiousness to hear your words of Desal," B'Elanna said, "of the time before Unar domination."

Rykynsa nodded with an ancient smile and eyes crinkled by a youth spent in study and meditation. "Yes, Children. Corrupt times they may have been, but as many blessings graced us. Much can be learned of bot and our weakness, as you have made plain, as is now told. I compliment your learning and your shrewdness. Not many would have braved their spirits to open Desal's eyes to its true threat. Yet as Allanois spirits, you would bear your will."

B'Elanna kept her smile in place. Like most not of the Uillar camp, the man was ignorant of their origins. "Merely our conscience, good man."

Tom diverted him directly. "The resistance is a correct action in your belief?"

"Like many others of age, I first feared it," he confessed thoughtfully. "Yet there is truth in the telling: Unar are not the owners of our ways, nor may they change our way to their benefit. This is where contrition becomes accursed, as no growth for our living spirits may be had in that."

"This is truth," B'Elanna said, taking Tom's arm. "Would you take refreshment now? I am certain Treshadi would gladly meet you at the tables, to serve your plate as well as share your ear, being also a word painter among Azlre."

Rykynsa chuckled, patting B'Elanna's cheek. "I should think we would make ourselves annoying in our chatter--and thus I might like this, indeed."

"May I and my bondmate bear the honor of taking you, friend?" Bala asked.

With a bow to the regents and their own, Rykynsa joined his fellow elders for the bountiful table.

B'Elanna smiled after them, but with no more effort than just a pull of her lips. An eminent word painter, that would be seen, but he was like any other elder on the surface--which wasn't necessarily a bad thing at all. She had expected more...mystique, somehow. Then again, she knew she'd likely let her imagination get away with her again. Most elders had a rather curious way about them and rarely wore their acumen on their sleeve, as it were. Bakali and Bala were perfect examples of that. It had taken some time to understand how much knowledge they actually possessed. So, she shrugged away her first impression and looked at the others. "Shall we take some food?"

The informal holiday may as well have been a spiritual one, with the variety of prettily prepared foods, citizens and guests dressed for the holiday and music that had started not long after first meal. There were also crafts and games, telling contests of both wit and skill--an even an errant joth herd which brought much amusement to the children, who helped to gather them again.

For Tom and B'Elanna, Aratra and Sashana'i, it was a well-needed day to recall their home and those within it without the need to go elsewhere, to stroll through the square, visit their friends and participate

in some of the activities.

Tom had become rather good at ba'akull, a game of wit revived two years past. It involved quick answers to a dizzying array of odd questions. He'd won three new blankets offered as prizes at the last Akosa'o, one of which he bestowed on Dalra and Miztri; he gave the other to Haviki, who had asked him to champion her family in that game.

B'Elanna much preferred to sit back with Sashana'i and Latsari when the men got into the game--often laughing when they blundered and fell to flat points. The women in particular liked to heckle their men when they began to feel the heat of that competition. Though good-natured, the game did raise their nerve, and that was pleasant to see outside of a smoky, sparking ship with Unar droning over the comm.

Of course, Tom always repaid the favor when B'Elanna took to the more studious game of tyimasho: geometric puzzles without props, chess for the brain alone. B'Elanna had always been a cool competitor in that one, however. It took a lot to make her stumble, unless Tom playfully quoted decimal units, which called upon her native way of thinking numerically and tripped up her calculations.

But he didn't do it *too* often. In the right mood, she could be far more competitive than he--and showed it.

From there, they went without much purpose, separating at times for their different interests and conversations. The music, which in one form or another had been continuous that day, quieted for a while as the evening meal was prepared at the center.

Tom joined the men in that duty, still fishing for more ba'akull corners with Aratra and ribbing Dalra nearby him, all in the good cheer that the word painter's arrival had allowed and helped to build upon. Rykynsa, indeed, had been busy in talk all day, of both stories and histories and knowledge that his fellow Desalians drank as though they were the finest wines their people could procure. Tom teased him in passing that he might have won at ba'akull would he play as well as he spoke.

"Ah! A game much enjoyed in childhood," Rykynsa smiled, leaning up against the time-eaten pillar of the silag facade. "My wit has grown gradual. The stories of easy speed are preferred in my elderhood, good Toma."

Tom laughed. "Your exceeding humility prevents you from shaming our points," he replied, activating a small flame to light the lamps on the steps of the silag.

Rykynsa laughed. "And you would most certainly be worthy of the game," he returned.

With a casual bow, Tom moved away to continue helping with the remaining torches, a common duty he had taken for granted before he was away so often. Afterwards, he rejoined B'Elanna, who was still grinning with the glory of her victory earlier that day and hungry for all the mental energy she'd expended. They took to the meal trays after nearly all the others were gone, collecting some real harisde and sirril, gifts from Ivliisa that were instantly popular among the Azlrelians.

As they made their way back, Rykynsa was speaking yet again of histories. The topic that time piqued them more than the others: The outer plasma fields. In all of Irliae, it was their greatest available energy source, yet it was notoriously difficult to approach, a fact Tom and B'Elanna remembered from their very first day in the region. It had all but ripped apart their heavily shielded shuttle; it would easily destroy twice the finest ship in Irliae.

Day of rest or no, the Barrier was a topic they could definitely learn more about.

Looking around for a place to sit, however, they noticed pale looks on Sashana'i and Aratra's faces, as well as some of their other close friends. More than pale, Tom thought--it was almost as if someone had literally drained their blood while they sat and listened to the wise old man tell his tale before the silag.

"What's with them?" he whispered to B'Elanna, who shook her head and almost moved to go to Sashana'i.

Then Rykynsa continued.

"By the spirits, yes, it was a great tragedy for the brave men who had unwittingly sacrificed their physical life but life itself for their science. Even our own bore no knowledge of it, yet we call it the Barrier for a reason. Irlae is truly unto itself, in space and in time. Indeed, even time is unique among us."

Tom and B'Elanna froze in their steps.

"How is this, good Rykynsa?" Cali asked holding Haviki in the cradle of her crossed legs, as engaged as the child in their new knowledge.

"Here, one may travel in life twelve revolutions," answered Rykynsa, "while not a single standard sun among outsiders has passed..."

They didn't move. A moment later, they couldn't.

"The science calls it but an odd anomaly, among so many bred in the stars. There are technical data which I have not recalled, yet lies in databanks confiscated by Unar. I have certainty they are yet hidden on Desalia..."

B'Elanna grabbed Tom's hand, shamefully needing something to steady herself. He held it as tightly, let out a breath as his own blood vacated him. He glanced over at their friends, Sashana'i, Aratra and Miztri were all staring at them--Lledri, too, with dread. Dalra's head was bent; he was staring at the ground, calming himself.

They knew as well as they now did...

Sashana'i opened her mouth, wanting to speak. But she said nothing.

"Yet this is truth: They returned to know that nearly three hundred years had passed in Desal. That which among ancients was called the shield of Prihar certainly did spread its curse upon those wretched travelers..."

B'Elanna turned suddenly, facing away from any more of it, breathing short, shallow breaths. "It is impossible," she muttered.

Tom let out a breath, failing to take another.

The word painter continued with the tale of the scientists, drifting with a practiced skill into the point of his telling: Adjustment to times changed--as suddenly for them as other times. Though of course different and encompassing that time, there was indeed a story to precede the incredible changes they had undergone of late.

B'Elanna couldn't be there just then, couldn't hear it. Her head began to thrum; she almost choked in her tight throat.

She looked up at Tom, but what further words might have come to her dissipated to see her mate looking at the ground, trying to figure it out and not wanting to. Glancing at her, Tom tugged her hand, jerked his head in the same direction--away. She stiffly followed where he lead them, out of the warmly lit west square and into a moonlit avenue, wide but empty as the holiday played on behind them. They were silent as the street but for their cloth sandals shifting on the stones beneath their feet.

There, he released her hand and she moved to an opposite pillar, gasping lest she scream, but too shocked to actually do so. Her brain rebelled belief for sheer unwillingness. She tried to deny it, tried to push it away, to no avail. It made sense.

Meanwhile, Tom could barely move once parted from her. Numbly, he watched her. B'Elanna, in her pretty gold gown and raisin-printed leggings, her wrap shoes and her hair braided with a scarf and tied back, just like he had come to know her, as she had even come to prefer looking.

For many minutes, neither knew what to think, though their breathing calmed, their hearts slowed, their blood returned.

B'Elanna turned around, falling back against the pillar wall. Her dark, haunted stare rose from the street to find her mate's intent one. He was in all but birth Desalian there--or at least looked it, even in his silence and waiting and his stance.

Though painfully reminded of it, she could barely picture those still out there...who had been there all along...

She would have cried if she thought it would help. Somehow, her eyes remained dry, even as she found the words, any words, something...

"Tell me we did not hear that." Her voice was a pale whisper. "Tell me I mistranslated him."

"I wish I could."

"Do you?"

He paused, shook his head. "I don't know."

She almost felt sick to think about it--their lives there, lived while Voyager sat ignorant and unmoving...as they had once been in another way, but were no longer. Even so... "They never left us."

"They didn't have time to," Tom said, not affecting emotion into his empty voice. He never had been one to like paradoxes--if he would even call it that. To him, it was something an earlier incarnation of himself would call typical bad luck. Maybe it could be called that even then. But he had always found peace in the fact that they were gone. "That life, those people. I barely know them anymore. I only hoped that they were safe. We both did."

"It was easier to think like that," she agreed.

"It is so long ago."

"We're different now; we changed from what they ever knew about us, in our minds, our ways,

everything. We took the kraja and let that change us; we took Desal and helped start the war--all in good faith." She stared up at him. "We became Desalian, and they have not even had a *day*."

"Yes." A pause. After he staved off the dread in his chest, he managed to admit, "We were the ones to give them up."

"All of this time," she continued in a thick throat, replaying each thought as her mind tried to push it away, "we thought they were gone. But they're *sitting* out there. They possibly don't even know that we are *gone*, anything that happened to us, what...I..." She cut off, coughed for the sudden tension in her lungs.

On instinct, he neared her. But he stopped as she caught her breath and settled on the slight distance.

"It has only been..." She breathed humorless laugh. "I'eva tsa, I cannot even *count* like them anymore. It has been not rachal a'etak. Gye, gye'i taum misllav."

"Ka, bi'ull i'a ka'akle rai rallkle majall al," he confirmed.

"Dov?" she asked, shaking her head again.

"Rlle ka'e. --Gy'icha tinropde'ita aschi ay."

"Tsid ka'e, we do not even have a ship that can go *near* the flesh of the plasma field, even if we do want to go. Ka?"

Tom considered that for only a couple seconds. "Frankly, we couldn't leave, knowing what we have started here. More, with Nicoletti and Bendera still out there somewhere, if they're still alive... --And those are just the practical reasons."

She closed her eyes for a moment. Unconsciously, her arms crossed against her ribs. "So then we are completely bound to this place."

Tom noticed her position. "It depends how you think of that. Like you said, these are our people now."

"I know that," B'Elanna replied.

"You didn't sound completely sure of that just now," he observed.

Her eyes narrowed. "You know damn well I don't give my loyalty to *anything* easily," she responded, "and when I do, I don't give it up. Why would I turn my back on everything I have for a past I would rather not relive on a ship just as trapped--and in a place it doesn't wish to be?"

He sighed an apology then added, "But it's still there, isn't it? Voyager, the thought that we could go back someday, to them, to all that."

She felt her heart sink again at the thought, that once forsaken time smashing into her again, their faces and voices as clear as they were in their spiritual journeys--and yet, quickly diluting into another face, and then another memory--memories, at least four years old and nicely faded, not her present. Why it didn't overwhelm her, she didn't know. Perhaps the shock had dulled her response.

"We gave up that idea when we were still on Uillar. And as you said, there is nothing we can do about it now, anyway," she finally reiterated. "Even if we did want to go back, we couldn't."

"The question is," Tom said, "do you want to? Whether or not it's impossible and despite what we have here, would you want to?"

She looked at him, paused in it to see the familiar sight before her. His eyes, his expression, and the way his palms were slightly raised: All of him asked her, along with the tall, proud presence that was completely familiar to her. He was so well suited in the burnished robe sewn for him by Cali three years ago, his long tunic and the muslin scarves he'd finally learned to wrap correctly, she could hardly picture the officer anymore, see him in the clothes they had once worn. Not anymore.

Somewhere in the distance, a ship rumbled in the atmosphere. Taking off from Dviglar, her finely tuned ear knew it was an laskeb ship--Oetibre delivering their latest supply of ferranide crystals and dilithium. Their work for tomorrow, she knew.

Tom barely blinked at the noise, though he had heard it.

Somewhere in it all, the other memories still seemed all the more faraway, displaced--in the past, and willingly so after a time.

She felt her head lighten even as her mind found her answer: "No."

It was much simpler than she thought.

"Knowing they are out there still will be difficult to become accustomed to," she added. "But no, I do not want to leave, especially now. Maybe someday we might change our minds...but not now."

Sighing with relief, Tom finally took the steps across to take her hands. He gazed down into her searching stare, rubbing his thumbs over her knuckles. "No matter what is waiting for us out there, it doesn't matter to me--probably less than it should."

"No," she said softly, "you are entitled to choose your place."

"And I have," he confessed. "There is little left there but a poor reputation I've grown away from and a life with no more purpose than resolving my mistakes and proving my worth on a ship in wait of a miracle. I like to believe I'm past that. So, I have little to gain there and everything I care about here. Right here." He squeezed her small, slim fingers. "I don't think I really lived until I came to this place--Ulllar, Cezia, our friends and enemies--you--all of it combined."

"A part of us will always be there," B'Elanna mused. "Bakali and Bala would say it first."

"Ka," he admitted quietly.

"At the same time, I have friends here I have known longer and better than anyone, and I also have never felt more at peace, more..."

"Belonging," he supplied.

"Yes." She felt her lips turn up as his did. "I never thought I could ever feel it as I do," she said softly. "I never thought I could handle it as I believe I have. I've never been as content with anything, or loved a place as I do Azlre. Ka, we chose this place, maybe for that."

"Though again, our 'birth,' as Dalra would say, was outside the Barrier."

"Dalra also knows that children grow and move on," she replied. "I haven't seen him and Miztri flying back to Maha'aje, though they can now--and that place is readily accessible." She breathed a soft, ironic laugh as she thought further on it. "Part of us out there or no, we are honor bound to finish this war and find the others. And when *that* happens, our shield output would need to be quintupled at least to manage a single stream."

"Finally, a way about passivity we can practice," Tom returned lightly. "I can see why it was so well accepted."

"And yet," B'Elanna said, "someday, we will have the capability; we'll have to choose. I don't think it would be as easy as it is now."

"Or maybe we won't want to choose," Tom pointed out. "Personally, right now, I can't see myself wanting it--or I don't see myself thinking this one to death."

"Yes." She felt her strange grin again, her brow rising slightly as she realized it. As much as her mind was spinning with dread only minutes before, it was equally relieved to know how she truly felt, and how he felt, too, even when the choice was still open. "I don't want to think of it right now, either. Too many impossibilities at this point and other people to consider in it."

He thought about that. "So, when the war is completed and we know what has happened to the others one way or the other, we will decide which place we belong to more and accept it."

She gave a nod. "Ka."

"No matter how long it takes."

She shrugged. "We have plenty of time, after all."

"Zhra'a ka."

Looking at each other, they knew better of their indifference, which kept their lighter expressions in place as it was assured in the other. It was indeed ironic, maybe even a little surprising, but they didn't doubt their place. Their feet remained planted on the stones; their stares did not waver.

B'Elanna's shoulders finally relaxed. "Toma..." She paused, finding her learned tongue again. "The way between us shall not be changed by this, yes? Bearing this knowledge, it is natural we would think on it despite our present inclination. Perhaps should you decide otherwise of your needs..." She left the rest open to him.

He released her hands to cup her face, run his fingers tenderly over her markings. Only then did he realize that he had needed to.

"My love..." He smiled, feeling her life beneath his touches, feeling her in him, even if but partially. "You are my spirit: Should I truly own one, half is yours. I am where you would be; I live *with* you and nothing shall change this. In a manner, I was freed in you. I shall not be taken back to what I had been."

"Nor shall I," she whispered, pressing against him, raising her own fingers to his temple, to share the touch between them. "I remain in you, as well." She felt his lips caress her hairline; she breathed his scent, pulled her chin up to kiss his mouth, softly, before releasing it all to his warm embrace. "I am where I feel belonging and wish to be."

He sighed a breath, nuzzled his cheek against her soft curls and scarf and whispered into her ear, "So, we shall not be held back any longer?"

She understood, feeling her smile creasing her eyes, her heart beating inside of her. "Yes. No longer."

Closing her eyes upon his collar, she felt his grin pressed to her cheek as he hugged her even tighter.

The music echoed again through the streets of Azlre, and they swayed without thinking to the rhythm of the dominant melody, a song of lovers walking along the river to the sea. Tom hummed a little bit of it to B'Elanna's ear, kissing her warm skin with a soft sigh.

After several more minutes there and a change in the song, they finally looked towards the square. Their hands slid downwards from their embrace to meet again. They walked slowly back, through the wide street towards the torchlight, until they were within it.

Sashana'i was waiting for them there, as were Aratra, Dalra, Miztri and their elders. They had gathered, apparently to look for them. Each of them showed some anxiety, clasped their hands or fumbled as they spoke and looked around.

Then Sashana'i saw them. Turning, she stepped forward, only a few steps as her mouth opened to speak. The wells of her eyes filled to see them, but she did nothing more but wait for them.

With a glance to each other, then back to their friends, Tom bowed to a knee, his head and stare turning downward as he brushed his fingers over his temple. Then he held those fingers out to them, a most proper greeting. B'Elanna mirrored the gesture, but then held her arms out to Sashana'i. She pulled up her chin in defiance of the other woman's visible doubts.

"Ab," she mouthed.

The other woman released a cry of relief and rushed to B'Elanna, clutching to her tightly upon arrival. "Be'i, what you bear knowledge of now, it... I feel such fear for you!"

"Sashana'i," she sighed. "We would never leave you, not now particularly. We had been shocked, yet we are reconciled and certain of where we wish to be."

"Your own," Sashana'i gasped, "you would wish for them! It was not your will to part from them."

"Yet it is now," B'Elanna said into her ear. "Was it not said by you, Sashana'i? We are family. We *are* with our own--whom we have chosen. Never mistake that."

Sashana'i cried, nodded into B'Elanna's shoulder. "The extent of my thankfulness shall never be known by you. By my ancestors, I shall always pray the spirits bless you, Be'i and Toma."

Tom reached over to squeeze their sister's shoulder then gave her a smile when her swollen eyes moved up to meet his. "They already have."

"Ye'i tsa hanu d'a vadri llosch al al tsa va'a."

"*Va'i al tsa, vadri llosch, mes tsa a'ya'o...*"

It continued with acceptance.

They had agreed to say nothing of their birth, and they requested those of Uillar and the others who knew their origins not to mention it, either. Having relinquished that part of their childhoods sufficiently enough, it needed not be mentioned again. Regardless of the fact that the ship they had come from was only a sector away from them, crawling in relative time, they continued their own lives as if indeed they had never known of the Barrier.

There was little use in thinking about it, after all. They couldn't reach them even if they wanted to.

For that matter, they had their own lives and subsequent duties to attend to.

"They are collected! Full speed!"

Tom punched the panel to shoot the smoking, flickering ship off and away towards the asteroid field, trying hard not to cough at the thick air. He was certain he could lose them in the rock ranges. In the last few months, the Unar had adapted to their strategies--even copied some of their shield configurations. Dalra's prediction of Unar jealously adopting technology was proving to be a correct one.

Tom knew he was a far better pilot, though.

"Release a series of disruptor bursts into their forward emitters," B'Elanna commanded as her day-worn eyes droned over her readings, "then follow it with a torpedo in their forward weapons array."

Plicta did as asked. "Their shields are weakening."

"Release a tricobalt torpedo--" B'Elanna responded.

"They are evading!" P'llaja'i announced.

B'Elanna growled. "Then *target* the torpedo for their deflector."

As Plicta prepared it, Tom turned a look to his mate. "Would you think they are displeased with our borrowing our people back?"

She pursed her lips into a crooked smirk. "Perhaps a condolence can be sent when there is less business to tend to."

"I bear certainty they would appreciate your way of that," he chuckled and added aside, "But it's the thought that counts."

B'Elanna snorted.

A few moments later, she ordered Plicta to fire the torpedo; Tom nodded as its path into an unprotected aft phaser array knocked out power on that side of the Unar ship. "That has slowed them," he reported as he sailed the Azallis, such as it was, into the familiar confines of the asteroid field. There, he ducked them around and about the rocks, dizzying their path if only to confuse the signal they would leave behind.

When one of the recovered "drasks"--a leader among them, they said--found his way to the bridge to meet the captains, Tom finally gave it a rest and stood to greet the slightly greyed but very relieved man.

"Be'i and Toma of Azlre," he said, greeting them with a deep bow and a slow gesture around his markings. "My greatest pleasure to meet you. I was told by Cali of Azlre that you bore her true Desalian spirit, and I may see it has not dulled with our necessary sacrifice. My many thanks for your generous efforts. I was not anticipating spending the remainder of my existence in Mogracho."

B'Elanna tipped her head. "Cali spoke to you of us?"

"I am called Aprra of Ci'avas," he told them. "We came to know each other during her time at Onruk's household."

Tom and B'Elanna's gazes turned to each other's as their mouths creased upward in unison. "Ah, Aprra," Tom intoned, turning a wiser eye to the man that time. "Some words have preceded you as well."

B'Elanna grinned when the man's brow rose, but didn't address it but to suggest, "I should believe we might take on replenishments sooner rather than later, yes?"

"Vaa, I would think it, indeed," Tom returned, enjoying Aprra's reaction for every bit it grew more curious. Clapping the man's shoulder, he looked down to him. "Welcome, Aprra. I bear certainty Desal's second captain of communications would be exceedingly happy to show you the various venues of Azlre. There, transport to Ivliisa can be arranged, should this be wished, after your...tour."

B'Elanna laughed and excused herself for engineering. Tom asked Bolmra to take Aprra to the replicators to supply food for the fifty-six Desalians crammed in their cargo bay. When they left--Aprra looking back before he disappeared--Tom began encrypting an update to Cali, who had spoken in heart-rendering detail of the pleasure and reassurance the good man had given her during their brief time together.

She had accepted she would never see him again and claimed she bore nothing that lingered but a fond memory of comfort. For that, she had honored his memory.

Tom and B'Elanna knew better of her. She was almost as bad as they once were.

On Cezian soil again, warm and dry well after sunrise, B'Elanna gave Tom a quick kiss and took off for the communication center, bursting into the main room and snatching Cali aside before her presence was even noticed. She immediately pressed her fingers on her friend's lips, snickering as would a mischievous child.

"My debt to you, Cali," B'Elanna told her, "--or I hope you would be happy with our catch this sun. A particular household drask reassignment has borne a fine reward."

Cali furrowed her brow, her brain still calculating the readings she had been torn from. "What has claimed you this sun, good lady?"

"The question is what *you* shall claim," B'Elanna returned and led her friend into the sun.

Cali stopped at the sight of Tom--then a blink later, his walking companion. Cali's mouth fell open then turned up as tears rose in her eyes. Darting a look at B'Elanna, almost asking if it was truth, Cali turned again to Aprra, whose hand rose slightly as he returned her gaze.

"A pleasant sun to you both," B'Elanna said softly, stepping away.

Cali's fingers drifted distractedly in a circle over her markings; Aprra did the same.

As the two met, Tom gravitated to B'Elanna's side and, placing his hand on her back, steered them back to the Azallis.

"There was a boy whose gaze was lost in the stars, and he wondered where he might take himself should he grab hold of but one and sail there forever. Nothing more was wished than this for more than his dream-laden spirit. Indeed, part of his desire was to be not where he was, too young was he to realize that wherever he went, he took his pained spirit with him."

B'Elanna smiled, leaning back in Tom's warm embrace, her head burrowed in his thick robe collar as he spoke. Her half-closed eyes lazily watched Haviki snuggle against Bala's thin lap. The six year-old looked up to Tom with round yet tiring eyes and curious smile. From time to time, her small, pink mouth opened into an unwilling yawn.

"Thus he went amongst the stars, and many, many stars, much betrayal and sadness passed, until it was discovered where his being truly lay. He had suffered in ignorance of it, in selfishness for it, and he was convinced of his doom. Yet with true survival, hope and love, his spirit made itself known. For this, he knew a joy like none other and never wished to take himself again."

The elders were baby-sitting that evening. B'Elanna had a feeling this would be common, until Cali could make a more private arrangement in her tiny flat downstairs.

Not that B'Elanna minded. Tom's bedtime stories were always worthwhile.

"It was begun with a small craft...."

"Fifteen nahol of ferranide crystals, twenty containers of photonic plasma, fourteen base units of galacite and a fresh supply of sheet duranium are required. Should this not be available, then you may contact me at Dviglar tomorrow and we shall make other arrangements. Toma and I shall begin repairs on your vessel then."

"Of course, Be'i," said the Antral agent as he finished adding up her list. "Your debt is *three* plasma relay rebuilds, however."

"Of course. Choose the ships and it shall be done." Finished with the arrangements, B'Elanna bowed, touched her temple and turned away with Sashana'i. "Three rebuilds would not even touch those garbage ferries," she whispered as her friend took her arm.

Sashana'i giggled. "Yes, they are hideous--yet they bear some functionality."

"Barely that," B'Elanna smirked and turned them off to find their men, also in arrangements--for foodstuffs--near Padan's former flat. Spotting them, B'Elanna unconsciously straightened, readying something smart to say to her mate.

Sashana'i grinned at the habit. B'Elanna always reclaimed that clever way about herself when she had a good day in the trades. Releasing her arm, she watched B'Elanna approach and peer over Tom's choices with a quip or two. A few of their acquaintances gathered to see the couple, greeting them kindly. Tom

and B'Elanna both began chatting with Gihetra and J'vishi, who had recently been bonded, over the table of food supplies.

I have underestimated them, Sashana'i thought, smiling wistfully to see them so true in their ways, and yet I am more indebted than ever.

With a wry observation on Aratra's part, Sashana'i met B'Elanna's eyes, giggled lightly at the usual turn to her lips, the slight roll of her eyes. B'Elanna and Pedranai jumped in on the discussion; Tom's sharper wit came again to the fore as he held an eglos root before Gihetra as an example. B'Elanna snorted and laughed aloud, slapping his hip as she admonished him.

Sashana'i laughed, too. *It is a burden I may live with--as shall they.*

And they did, already accustomed to giving away their more desired life at Azlre for the war, which heated and paused again and again, a tug of war between a far better equipped and steadily rallying people and a makeshift but determined resistance.

Tom and B'Elanna's training of Desal went on, however, as did their deals, their resistance maneuvers, which added burglary, outright sabotage and live ship scavenging to their list of sins later to be excused. They fought with all the wit and quickness they possessed to gain their edge, which in turn allowed them sufficient respite to prepare for other matters once left to indecision.

The torches were lit upon sunset and the people gathered with their foods, prepared for that evening. Lledri oversaw Zeptra's dressing of the front patio of the silag with a particularity that some of her wry initiates said befit only a prichava. Others jokingly corrected them as it befitting Lledri *herself*.

Far calmer, though catching each other's grins from time to time, were the elders of Azlre. They set out their ginhra cloth with care as always, inspected and set their kraja tools upon the center stone. Having once been two of only nine who could perform the ceremony in Azlre, theirs was a common procedure. Still, they had never prepared the ginhra for any they considered their own and therefore remained longer in their task.

Were they asked to admit it, one might have said they were likely as expectant as their spirit-children.

"Ouch!"

"Would you remain still, you would not be pulled."

"First your bondmate--now you. Is hair pulling a tradition you have not spoken of yet? Or has this been created in our honor?"

"Only for you, Toma, as this special treatment befits you," Aratra laughed and wove the next bead into the braid he'd tied close and tight on his brother's nape.

While they had prepared in meditations with Bala and Bakali over the past months, Tom and B'Elanna had also allowed some other preparation to come on their own. Thankfully, Tom's hair, though thinning naturally, grew well at the nape--an opposite pattern to Desalian men that turned out to be quite convenient. That afternoon, Aratra had trimmed it close to his scalp save a hint of length at the crown and, at the bottom left, a healthy, curled tail. One moon past the ceremony, it would be cut off and

rewoven with a lock of B'Elanna's hair, then offered to the elders as a thanks for their services.

Sewing the beads onto the braid was another matter entirely. Aratra chuckled all the way through Tom's squirming.

Soon, though, Tom calmed enough to instead fumble with his embroidered green kneecoat and brightly woven sash--gifts from Bala--and move his toes in his new boots, which were wrapped up to his knees as was proper. He had first balked at that one, especially when Aratra admitted he preferred his short boots, too. Still, both men had to admit the whole outfit did look good.

Looking across at Dalra, who was pressing his long, outer robe on the sheet wood floor of Aratra and Sashana'i's main room with a polished rock, he caught the man's grin. Dalra in turn raised his brows with intent to say the obvious. But looking at Tom another moment, his eyes crinkled with a grin.

"I have not seen you so preoccupied with your hems since the sun which brought you to us, when you considered sharing a blanket with your companion."

Tom laughed and grabbed his scarves. "You would recall my better awkwardness now."

Bending his leg, he began wrapping and tying the gold cloth around his knee to form his headdress. Nearby lay the ankle-length top scarf that he would don first; then he put the headdress on top of that. In a moment's distraction, Tom was glad *that* wasn't a normal part of the traditional Desalian male dress even more than the boots...even if for that night, he would have worn plumes and toe bells if necessary.

Dalra saw Tom's face change as he wrapped then braided his scarves with a deft hand, a little more serious than a moment before. "Perhaps you shall take yourself with less hesitation to her bed this moon," he observed lightly.

"Who spoke of hesitation?" Tom returned, his lips twisting upwards.

It was quite the contrary, in fact, once he let himself think about it.

She knelt on the floor of Miztri and Dalra's flat, calmly holding the edge of a trunk as her gown stays were pulled behind her and finally tied off. With a plain smile and an assured stare, she had told the young regent to bind the gown more comfortably that time else she would not leave the room and Bakali, Bala and Tom would simply have to come to her.

Sashana'i did not doubt her, and so she gave B'Elanna her wish.

Rising, B'Elanna carefully sat again on a footstool so Sashana'i could braid and pin her hair, scarves and beads properly. Before her, Miztri kneeled and both women grinned. With a slip of sibra nectar on her thin finger, Miztri darkened B'Elanna's lips, brightened her cheeks--tapped her nose playfully. B'Elanna smiled fully then, even as she saw her elder friend blink with a sudden thought.

"Do I pull too much?" Sashana'i asked, intent on her work.

She peered up. "For the first time, no."

Sashana'i bent to kiss B'Elanna's soft curls then pinned up the braid she'd woven.

B'Elanna looked down as Miztri pulled her foot forward with one hand, shaking out the ties of her shoe

with the other. Immediately, B'Elanna opened her mouth to say she could do it herself. Miztri gave her a belabored look.

"Enough of this stubbornness, Child," she scolded affectionately. "You yet insist upon exceeding independence."

It took B'Elanna a moment to remember, but when she did, she laughed and reached forward to touch the older woman's temple. "How different I must be now."

"Yes," Miztri answered, "and yet you are the same girl, as Toma is the same young man, Dalra and I hurried from the sun that midday upon Uillar. The light of your eyes, the spirit I see in them, is the same but for the pain. Such cuts have healed in your presences."

"Some," B'Elanna acknowledged.

"More than some, I should think. And there remains so much for you to learn, well past this moon."

B'Elanna let that sink in as Sashana'i draped her long scarves and a few thin braids partially over her forehead then looped the remainder through the crown braid and back, letting the ends of the cloth fold gracefully on the floor as she adjusted the top. Finally, her earrings were clipped in place, the chain of those beads and jewels pinned up into the scarves. They were Bakali's, borrowed for the evening.

Sashana'i handed her a mirror to inspect the work. Out of habit, B'Elanna hesitated at first, but turned up her reflection without much more trouble.

The image that greeted her was not surprising.

She was certainly cleaner and far more elegant than usual, but as she gazed at her reflection, her fair face and all the markings and remnants there, parts of her birth, her past, her present, even the dressings, the beads and scarves, her hair, grown longer of late, she knew, *Yes, I am certainly different, and older...* Still, she knew Miztri was right: it was still herself she viewed. For the first time in several years, she found her lips turning up at what she saw.

"This is truth," she finally responded and looked up to Sashana'i. "It is beautifully done. My thanks."

Sashana'i shivered with joy to hear it. With a clap of her hands, she hurried to the side table to pick up the full-length, maroon coat she'd had made and subtly embellished at the hems with tiny beads and stitches to compliment the cloth below it, her gift to the bonding. Bringing it back, spreading the coat open, she slid it onto B'Elanna's waiting arms. After turning the small bronze clasps at the torso together, B'Elanna pulled the edging of her gown's bodice up a little to reveal that layer beneath the coat's hem. Miztri meanwhile pulled out the skirt so it fell over the gown and parted at the sides correctly.

The regent drew a proud smile upon her lips when her adopted sister turned to face them again. "And now for you to bring yourself to all..."

"...Hanek tsa a'i brre, bras mar'trell ini'ash..."

So many times, they had witnessed it, yet never expected to see it from the perspective they were that night. Kneeling in a massive half circle, formed before the silag and filling nearly half the square, their fellow citizens waited to witness the ceremony. On the patio of the silag, Bala and Bakali stood in their formal clothes and ornaments, his fingers resting in her palm. Then, softly, building, the soft singing

could be heard.

From opposite sides, the couple was guided in by their siblings, through the rows left by the onlookers, who blessed their way with a softly-voiced, "Zha hevrra," and "Havra zhal," spoken all in friendship. Indeed, they knew each person who had spoken, acknowledged them all as one would a friend.

"...Vyel trell anl chi, a'i yrra eb rab..."

At the front of the circle, the four young people paused. Aratra and Sashana'i moved aside with a bow of their heads as their elders approached and their charges finally saw each other. For several seconds they took in their chosen partner, their formal array, their equal looks of expectation and curiosity, until their attention was diverted. Bakali smiled at B'Elanna, placing her finger on her palm to bring her onto the patio; Tom was similarly led by Bala. Once they all had gathered, the elders knelt briefly before their children in respect, greeting and a silent prayer.

The music's rhythm pulsed as the elders rose again; it continued to thrum as Bakali took B'Elanna around in the circle. They moved, the elderly leading the youth, a simple tilting step around Tom and Bala; they bowing each time they faced them, making B'Elanna's presence known to all, her part in nature's cycle and that between man and woman--Bihla and Sa'alli as they wandered their different realms yet failed to touch. After the second turn, Bala took Tom around in the same fashion.

Then they stopped. Tom and B'Elanna were left facing each other, as nature's physical cycles may only be made sacred when meeting the ancestors, who are eternal.

Tom and B'Elanna's eyes met. They started breathing again several seconds later.

I am doing this; I am going to do this with her after this much time...

He and I have survived, come so far that I would do this with him...

Their gaze parted when their elders then lead them to the diamond-shaped table erected at the foot of the silag, which had been decorated with the finest cloths Lledri could find, creating a one-walled room. There, spreading the long portions of their clothes and scarves behind them, they kneeled. When they turned slightly and their eyes found each other's again, Bakali's words, finally spoken, were more like the voice in their journeys, separate from their physical reality but entirely present.

"Be'i of Azlre, should you desire to combine your being with the man before you, offer your hand as claim to your oneness."

B'Elanna pulled her hand from the lap of her coat then turned her palm up. She barely felt inside her body just then, but for the breeze slipping around her hand and her firmly beating heart. Tom's fair blue eyes shone into hers, and her mouth turned slightly up when he released a silent sigh. His expression was so full that she could feel everything behind it even without the elders' help.

*What will it be like when all of that really *is* within me?* she suddenly wondered.

"Toma of Azlre," Bala said with his usual lilted gentleness, "should you share the desire of this lady before you and wish to combine your being with hers, place your hand within her own."

It took no deciding: Tom reached up and placed his hand upon B'Elanna's. She was like a magnet, increasingly so as they were enveloped in the ceremony; he might have fallen into her himself for the strength of her dark, searching stare.

Tom had to think to wet his gaze. *And I will know exactly what lies behind it...and everything else...*

"...Inish alz sholl a'o, shos ach ma'shivarr..."

"In this place, before your people, Be'i and Toma, you shall claim each other now."

B'Elanna's lips parted to obey her elders, and she realized it really *was* beginning. Her gaze still in Tom's, she suddenly felt such expectation and adoration, it would have scared her to death years ago. Then again, that was years ago.

"I claim you, Toma, in the way of Bihla and Sa'alli," she said, the words feeling a thousand times more real and more sincere than when she'd giggled to practice them with Miztri and Sashana'i days before. "Before our people, I tell you this moon that I shall take you as my bondmate, your blood into my house, your spirit into my being, and I ask this to be blessed among our own and in the realm of the spirits."

Tom reminded himself once again to breathe. "I claim you, Be'i," he responded, "in the way of Bihla and Sa'alli. Before our people, I accept you this moon and shall take you as my bondmate, my blood into your house, your spirit into my being, and I ask that this be blessed among our own and in the realm of the spirits."

"...Nicha chirr chamr e, metir ebnis lle..."

Her smile found her eyes as she allowed Bakali to take her hand. With the ease of her elderhood and their previous journeys, Bakali found the correct nerve and pressed her center finger to it. The contact was as easy and familiar as it had ever been.

You must give all to me now, Be'i, she said within the younger woman's mind.

Instinctively, she hesitated, but only for a moment. She had been prepared well enough to know to relax. *I allow you, Bakali.* Swiftly, she felt her entire life rush forward through her consciousness, even as she sensed the old woman's comforting encouragement. It was overpowering despite it, the stream of her life, her every moment in a blur, somehow--she couldn't figure out how--washing through her and into Bakali.

B'Elanna's eyes closed and she felt her head droop, her eyelids flutter and fall. It was like a waterfall between her ears, then...

It is done, Be'i, came Bakali's soothing voice, and she raised her head to find the kind stare of her elder; then she felt her touch disappear. B'Elanna willed herself to remain straight as she watched Bala take Tom's hand.

Clear your mind, Toma, and relax. We have been here before, only not so completely.

Tom readily gave it, forcing himself not to think as he felt a spin in his head like nothing he had known before, even as a pilot. Bala's constant assurances and his own efforts weren't enough to keep him straight, nor prevent a heavy sense of finality from filling him as the old man finished collecting his life from his mind. Tom's head still spun from the speed and mass of content that had just washed through him.

You shall bear far more to consider in little time, Toma, Bala smiled inside of him before taking his hand away and giving it to Bakali.

The young couple watched silently as the quiet singing hushed around them, and they became lost in the sight of their elders exchanging their memories, their lives. Their old faces lit with what they would give to their children. Completing their trade, the elders, parting hands silently, turned back to them.

"Look into the eyes of your spirit..." Bakali and Bala said softly in unison and reclaimed B'Elanna's and Tom's hands.

Before they could think to think anything, their gazes locked again...

...and be bonded with blessing of the spirits.

"...Shymra anl achra nre, vyel e'a trell zhrave'isb..."

The elders entered...released onto them...

A darkly handsome father, his arms upstretched as she laughed down to him....a mother's embrace, a yard of bright toys and a large, fluffy dog came to lick his face....running on the sandy lake beach....sneaking through Starfleet Headquarters...."You're a liar! He wouldn't! I hate you!"...."One more try--that's all I'm asking for!"...."Klingon-head! Are you gonna come and kill me now?"...."You'll never amount to anything if you don't straighten up--and this time, you'll remember what I told you. Understood?"....sitting on the riverbed watching the birds....looking out the window on a rainy day...

They forced their heads to remain upright as it slowly filled them, barely seeing each other's eyes, everything beyond that quickly burred away...Rather...

A PADD of computations below her eyes as she sunbathed....a red-haired girl he watched passing by....packing one suitcase but wanting to send the rest somewhere....reading at a cafe for his astrometrics final--it was too easy....throwing some stupid sculpture she never did like at the closing door. "Slithering p'tahk!"...."Oh come on, you got to be kidding me!"...."Face it, Torres, you've got nothing else to do with yourself"...."Thomas Eugene Paris, you are hereby stripped of your"....kicking a dent into a wall....falling against a laughing woman....sitting in a dark engine room, crushing her teeth together as she pulled apart the blackened component....leaning hard over a banister, unable to swallow it back but able to taste it...."Leave me the hell alone!"...."Go to hell"....

Their breath was catching, they felt themselves either blushing or paling. It was hard to tell with the storm of feeling and memory, memories not their own--and yet now their own--flooding into their consciousness then burrowing deep within, as if they were their own...

*Running for a white door...."Paris to Voyager! Three to beam up!"...."Apologize?!"....working through the code on a door....bearing her spine before Seska's hard stare...."I'm on it!"...."What do you mean 'no way to redirect it?'--Get in the tube and *fix* it, Carey!"...."What have they done to you?"....running a brush cursorily through her redone hair, primping a side....taking a deep breath before leaving his quarters....looking at Janeway over a cup of coffee....running his hand over the nose of the Cochrane...."I think I have a solution to our problem"...."Inertial dampers offline! Hang on!"...."I can take a little pain"...choking on the smoke as he sprinted through it....the feel of the halter tight against her skin....lowering behind her, nipping at her shoulder....waking briefly to see him setting their tea....*

They straightened, though thinking and breathing and knowing they were even there was secondary to their unbroken gaze, focusing within...

Kneeling on the ginhra cloth....looking at him....looking at her....Looking at...themselves, through each

other's eyes....

"...Pamedre trell, monro sholl, mosyll dakna aj ysham rai..."

They did not even realize that Bala and Bakali had finished the bonding, had released their hands, or that the music and singing had stopped, not until their hands touched once again, were positioned, their central finger into each other's palm.

Here, Be'i and Toma, is where you henceforth shall join your spirits, came their elders' voices within them both. Yet at present, you may ask the blessing of the ancestors.

What? B'Elanna thought, but the elders were gone--though not without leaving the slight sensation of amusement for her query....

They drifted...

A bright light engulfed them, and they knew they were not to be there. This was not their place, that part of the white plain...within them, far away, all around them. Like in the meditations, but deeper...beyond...

Yet they stood among others, countless presences and beings; some appeared to be familiar: friends, grandparents, uncles and peoples lost of time before, even friends of recent, passed unto...

They knew them all somehow, and felt each presence but briefly among so many others. So many others...so much life...peaceful, alive yet not living, joyful...beyond...

They were not to be there. Not yet.

We ask your blessing, they blurted in their minds, shocked still at what had greeted them, all the faces, all the presences, welcoming them there but for the moment, minutes, hours...whatever time there was there...there was no time. They had not imagined it would be so much like what they had been told it would be.

The faces, so many, all fleeting... They could not solidify the presences for that they indeed were not a part of that realm. And knowing that, they suddenly knew that they would soon need to return to their place among the living...

We ask your blessing, for our union...

A flurry of energy met their request, and again they tried to believe they were there, much less asking, seeing...feeling their life forces being embraced among that expanse of light, so much closer than the elders' introductions, so much more...palpable. Not cold or even a breeze, it was not a feeling to be described but as pure awareness of others...separate, but briefly embracing their energy, spirits...and accepting it.

It was understood.

They turned to each other as the other realm faded into its proper place, leaving the two upon its edge, in the pure white plain only between themselves, in perfect clarity.

Joining hands, they saw each other. Their temples and hands were marked with kraja.

They were wearing the same regalia they had donned that evening; their hair and scarves were just as their siblings had dressed them, their facades were healthy and unscarred but bore their present age. These were now their beings, their spirits' truth. Though smiling wisely at the change, they felt no lack of amazement that they did not doubt that new and shocking thing, far different from what they had imagined. Rather, they bore nothing but awareness of their new place, ones among all.

Leaning to each other, they kissed, their arms and the light of their beings and that realm wrapping around each other, washing over and through them, sharing past and future...and present...

Tom and B'Elanna blinked, breathed suddenly, deeply, fell back into Azlre, the square, their places before the table at the steps of the silag, into their bodies. Their world sat around them, silent and waiting.

"We have asked the spirits," B'Elanna breathed, still realizing what had happened even as she spoke, "We... The ancestors have been applied to."

"And we have been accepted," Tom said, coughing a laugh as he too pieced together the experience. Instinctively, he reached out, touched her. He needed to touch her, feel her physical presence so closely again. It was amazing--*she* was amazing, and she was within him. There was so much he was feeling...

"We are bonded."

A rush of approval rolled over the crowd and the music rose again. Bala and Bakali smiled proudly as the children offered their hands once more. Taking them, the elders lifted the kraja pens to their skin for the second time in the past year. Yet that time, the fine design was of their own making, drawn by the whim of the spirits they had shared and joined, and marked on their left hands.

B'Elanna watched, still in a daze, as the ink painlessly sunk into her flesh, in the same pattern as Bala was drawing on Tom's. She thought it should bother her somehow, being marked like that. At the same time, she knew it was what they had asked for...and then she could feel and see through him the day they asked, feel his eagerness and yet his caution, see her own face when he had looked at her...

Without having to be asked, both Tom and B'Elanna leaned forward to accept the small Kraja patterns upon their napes...

She blinked slowly. His memories nagged at her, and she reminded herself that it would take some time for them to acclimate to the added awareness and their now being equally aware of each other. Their native physiology would make that adjustment slower, Bakali had warned, and yet, like with their temple kraja, the neurological changes *would* come upon them soon enough. That time, however, they fully understood the consequences of their decision.

More surprising, though, were their similarities, Tom thought, interpreting the design in his hand as best he could while yet another design was imprinted just beside his neck bone. Like their bonding, it was something they would come to understand more only with time, all the strange parallels of their lives. His natural curiosity made him want to explore it, though he knew the details would appear of their own volition. That was the way in the first few weeks after bonding.

For the mean time, they would simply feel the joy of their union...and in belief--strangely welcome, nearly as overwhelming as the rest.

When they reclaimed each other's gazes and smiled at each other, they knew it all over again...

"Zha hevrra!"

"...Yrr ag'j a'i zhrre'itsa varrj zha, tam shi'ovarr rrullm mas..."

He dropped the flap door and spun to face his bondmate, who had likewise turned to have him. With a single breath, he paused to stare at her in the rich candlelight of their loft, which had been scented and dressed for their evening by their friends and family. Somehow, none of the memories they had taken on that evening interrupted his appreciation.

Only she, there and then, was present--and that time, her presence was more intense than ever.

Once her arms lowered from removing her scarves, she stilled, let his intensity and desire, equal to her own, melt into and through her. She had to breathe against the feel of him then, the sense of him. Had they one thing in common...

He moved to her, his lips finding hers upon arrival, and then her skin as his hands divided her beautiful coat and slid it away. Her pleasure spun into him, nearly crushing his breath; he growled to find the stays of her gown and halter, needing his mate almost desperately. Likewise, her fingers ripped at his robe and coat and pressed them away. Hungrily, she nibbled on his ear, tasted his temple.

He yanked loose her ties and openly kissed the fabric down from her skin, which had been sweetened with spiced oils and was hot even to his mouth.

She laughed a gasp. She could feel it--her own reaction swirling in him and vice-versa, rising almost impossibly while he tasted, suckled and nibbled, as his hands pressed away her gown to allow him more and he lowered to his knees before her.

Almost as soon as the lushly scented air drifted around her legs and her gown and leggings swished to the floor, he grabbed her close to him again, groaning at the assault of feelings that met them both even as he satisfied part of his need. He tasted her fully, partaking of all she had there for him, driving her almost immediately to orgasm. She cried out and held onto him as their shared pleasure rocked through and between them both. Another wave rolled through her body, and she swore she had never dreamed she could feel as much without becoming insane..

Her knees gladly buckled; falling before him, she attacked his lips, her hands everywhere on him at once, baring him from his scarves to his waist with a sureness and arousal he was doubly excited by.

She worked layer by layer, returning his tastes and nibbles until she was pulling away his trousers and the ties on his boots. Pressing him back so she could remove it all, she partook of him completely and everywhere, purring loudly between gasps in an animal desire to complete their spirits with their bodies, to share each other in every possible way.

When she had brought him, there on their floor, to cry out in his own right, and when she turned her feral gleam back to him, he sat up with a resilience he'd not yet known and collected her into his embrace. She clung to him, moved as he did and without thought. Kissing her openly, sharing their pleasures' taste, he took her up and onto their pallet, softened with fine cloths and a fresh mattress, sachets of herbs and the softest of pillows.

It filled and overwhelmed them, those added feelings and scents, their senses already overloaded in each other. For those moments, minutes, hours, they were no longer anything but each other, encompassing nothing but that tiny space, yet fuller than they had ever been. There, their skin caressing,

sliding, molding together, their breathing labored as they craved and claimed more and more, they touched and devoured, heard and explored, felt and sensed everything.

Finally, they turned themselves up onto the pillows and he wove his fingers into hers; she wound her legs around his waist as he entered her with a single thrust. The song that escaped their throats was a relieved cry, almost a sob as the waves wrapped around their joined spirits and shuddered between their bodies.

It was exquisite. No longer separate, but they were truly one, in taste and smell, in body, in mind, in spirit: *Their* nature.

They would gradually become physically dependent upon each other; their physiologies would gradually become sympathetic, bonding partially in body as their spirits had utterly. As a result, they would necessarily pass unto the ancestors together someday.

They would always know that moment, when they first understood that truth and cried out their thankfulness for it. That one moment and their continued exaltation would remain with them through eternity.

The rest was not important. It was behind, faraway. It had passed in them as any memory did, allowing them finally the freedom they celebrated there, that night and all their nights after.

In that time after, those memories did come, invade and shake them, confuse and overcome them with understanding or remorse, with anger, joy or awe, sexuality and habits, and behaviors. The sheer weight of it all overcame them when they first explored it; it left them lying in their comfortable bunk staring at each other in shock, unable to speak, uncertain that their voices were their own, unable to unwrap themselves from the memories for the sheer power of the assault.

They had been advised that that was the way, but the reality of it was indeed shocking. When they found their voices again, they were reassured to know their sense of self was still there. And yet, they were changed, too.

Gradually, as the newness of their bondmate's memories burrowed into their psyches, they found their bonded conscience more familiar than their former incarnation, strange as that was. Even when on some days their bondmate's memory surprised their native selves, a breath, some learned concentration or quick meditation eased them--and they would soon realize why it had arisen in the first place, and that it indeed belonged there. Odd at first, it became quite welcome...those pasts, both distant and recent, woven into one. It all had purpose in the end, they discovered. It was the way.

So, they would move only forward from there and become what fate saw fit.

Indeed, those memories soon rooted well enough within them, not as much by time but by mature and chosen acceptance, that the vines of their youths finally rooted in their adopted earth and intertwined, gained the strength and security they required so in order to bloom. In that flowering of awareness and completion, they unwittingly had grown enough away from their initial soil to likewise produce his seed, which when set to flourish in her enriched waters, at last bore their fruit.

"Re'irr vyacha me'all e'a shivarr chij yrrall, dakna alm a'o fallj llo ishll abllar..."

7. Indeterminate Movements

The young woman's voice, singing the song at Anai's soft bequest, was like a fine flute in the bright moons and firelight, lilting in a heavy rhythm, a slow skipping waltz. Anai breathed through it, her thin, hoarse voice full with emotion, her eyes still a century away...

"Spirits borne of the midnight air, blow gently over the soil;
Make wide your seed over the earthen water, be warmed in the new dawning sun of life;
Spring roots to drive into the soil, fledgling tendrils penetrate the moist earth;
Drink from the ground well in loving nurturing;

"Spread over the dewy field as the seed yet grows in its welcoming bed;
Draw out the leafy branches, drive the roots, bear the fragrant flower to the sun;
Feed on the sun's warmth and love in exaltation of nature's blessing;

"My mate, bring the stalk of your desire to my warm watery earth,
And let the flower of our natures' bonding ripple through our blessed lands."

There, the song ended and the elder returned to the present with a slow blink then reached out to Babaki. Osna came for Ara, who had been sleeping but awoke as soon as Anai's hand parted from his.

Anai did not speak again, though her smile hardly faded.

The others remained quite a time after her, equally silent, some more pleasant than others.

As for Janeway, she didn't dare ask about the hundred curiosities that last story had put in her--reviving several of the those that she'd put aside the day before. Knowing she'd get it soon enough, she put it aside for the time and instead watched Anai and Ara leave as they had twice already, two shuffling forms clutching their helpers' robes; then they noted the family's thoughtful, cheerful faces, and mates still entwined to hear the song of bonding. Slowly, parents began to gather their sleepy children, or stand with their sleeping babies in their arms and bid each other good night.

Janeway considered once again going to the Doctor for that sedative.

Looking over, she saw mostly pleasant, albeit exhausted, faces on her crew. Kes had tears in her eyes and an inward smile, still leaning back into Neelix's arms. Harry was helping Samantha Wildman to her feet, commenting on the end of that part, glad it ended so pleasantly that time, but wondering why Anai had sped through Tom and B'Elanna's adjustment to each other.

She certainly hadn't sped through much else.

"Are you ready, Captain?" Chakotay asked from her side. She nodded quietly, got to her feet.

"Anai!" he gasped. Clutching her bony arm, his eyes bolted open and nailed to the ceiling.

She was already awake, choking for her own breath as she tried to reach for the monitor, cursing its distance and her wish to keep it on the other table. Her lungs feeling as though they would collapse with but another breath, she almost broke down for the panic suddenly filling her.

"Ara..." Her voice trembled and croaked, she sucked a rasp, feeling his pain--searing pain that shot through her chest and down an entire side of her body.

He gagged again and she jerked a stare back to him. In the bright moonlight, he looked like a twitching corpse, gaping at her in desperation.

Not like this, oh please, blessed ancestors! But one more moon! Oh, spirits, please take us not yet!

Both his voice and hers screamed the prayer.

It seemed for a moment that it would yet be. But she would not give them that, so unfairly, not with their work, their promise, so close to completion. She had only asked that and had committed to the finishing.

None of the rest mattered but that--only that.

Or was it more?

Because it was still in their hands, Anai knew.

His hand squeezed again.

"Anai, we may not be taken yet..."

"Ka," she gasped, half a cry as she unwillingly realized they might.

His stare begged the point, pressing it further into her spirit.

"Release me, my love," she managed. "I shall...help keep us among the living. Please, Ara!" His hand flattened and she stumbled across to the nearby table. Clawing her way up, tears finally finding her eyes in the terror of possibilities, she hit the monitor. "Babaki!"

Kathryn woke to stare at her hand.

Well, at least I managed about six hours, she thought as she pulled her head up enough to make out the digits on her chronometer. It was better than she'd had in almost two weeks...by her perspective, anyway, and had done the trick.

She felt groggy, but good.

The near end of the gamma shift was not an unfamiliar sight; in truth, Kathryn had always enjoyed prowling the corridors at that time, when it was quiet, and especially when it was as clean as it had become again with a good deal of work on her crew's part.

It helped her think, helped clear her mind, to walk through the clean grey lines of her ship, sometimes even pretend it was her first day there all over again, so full of promise and purpose.

She'd always believed herself lucky to get Voyager. Certainly, she had campaigned for it, argued for it, worked hard throughout her career and felt in her most confident mind that she deserved it. In getting her command, to say she was a proud woman was a vast understatement. She'd sworn to excel in her sleek little treasure, hoped to see and discover, and to do so much more. Everything--her very career, even--seemed to be starting the day she first stepped onto the Voyager.

Pacing through those halls had always helped her recall that time, the hope that was all but utterly lost when an Ocampan deity snatched them away from their home. From then on, the purpose had changed and the hope became a determination.

She could walk and remember, though, and feel herself relax. Unfortunately, since the shuttle disappeared, the old trick did little to ease her conscience. She realized that she wasn't in the mood for thinking about hope and promise ultimately leading to... *To what?* she wondered, but drove at least the worst of it away with a turn in the corridor.

Also, like so many other early mornings of late, she found her way to the messhall, her other nighttime haunt. She paused to see Chakotay already there, though. Holding his tea between both his hands, he stared out to the glowing asteroid streams and that system's planets, thoughtful as ever...but more, too, likely for reasons she didn't have to guess about.

He turned a couple seconds after hearing the door and grinned, albeit slightly. "I thought you were supposed to be sleeping."

Her lips curled up as she went to the replicator. "I almost made it to the alarm," she told him with a shrug. Ordering herself a coffee, she gladly pulled the steaming mug from the slot. "What's your excuse?" she asked, inviting herself to sit with a glance to the space by him.

He gestured to the empty seat, though he wasn't so sure about the rest. Then again, he hadn't been certain of anything since his first vision quest, nor since he finally saw them in it...and then...

He looked at Janeway, crisply uniformed and indeed more rested. "Maybe it's my turn to have trouble sleeping," he hedged, choosing to stare out the viewport again, sipping his tea.

"So much for the school kid theory," Janeway replied, sharing that view. "But it all seemed like a natural progression."

"They did find peace there," Chakotay agreed. "It's good to know."

"Though not for long," she said, almost unwillingly so not to remind either of them of the ultimate end, having been left the night before with so much happiness. They all knew how the story ended, after all. Her gut knotted to think about it, in contrast to the contentment they'd found, that they would soon choose to sacrifice themselves in a way that would earn the Desalians' lasting honor.

Seeing Janeway's face harden, Chakotay said comfortingly, "They were married six years."

"It's not enough," she returned, her jaw tightening as her teeth met again.

"It was for them, if they really did believe in their spirits' eternity," Chakotay countered.

She allowed him that, even if she didn't personally believe it.

"Anai lied to them," Janeway said, shifting the topic. "She let them believe there was no way out."

"At the time," Chakotay said, "there wasn't."

"But she didn't tell them," Janeway repeated pointedly. "It was more than just letting them live up to the culture they were in. I had a feeling there was more."

"Considering their circumstances on both sides of the issue, I don't think it was as much of a crime as she does."

She shook her head, sipped her coffee. "Anai admitted it herself, Chakotay. She involved them and let them think they had nothing else, even on Uillar, because she knew she needed them. Perhaps it wasn't a terrible crime. Tom and B'Elanna *were* allowed to make their decisions, and as you had suggested, things did go well for them--very well."

Chakotay felt the pause after that. "But?"

"But there's more to this than the story." She sighed heavily, watching the steam waft out of her mug. "Not to say I don't like Anai," she added quietly. "I do--a lot. I like her family and the Desalians. That said, I keep getting the feeling that she's doing it again."

"Doing what?"

"Withholding information from us so things can develop elsewhere. She's a master of her own intrigues, Chakotay. I'm sure she's acting for what she thinks will come out well for everyone, and I don't think she or her people would do us harm. But there's something... Like I said a couple of days ago: I can't quite figure it out, but something keeps nagging at me, and I don't know whether to feel for her and let her have her way or go back to demanding she tell me everything."

"So, we're back to day one," Chakotay observed, "except that this time, you know you can trust what she has to say."

"Do I?" Janeway asked, but shook her head at any answer he might have given then took another sip of her coffee.

Likewise, Chakotay took a long drink of his tea, letting its warmth fill him. Breathing slowly after it, he looked at the captain, noting her thoughtful expression, how her fingers curled slightly on the mug, her

stillness otherwise. He looked at his own hands again.

"Since we found out about what happened," he said, "I've been trying to deal with it, too. It hasn't been easy." Janeway said nothing, though Chakotay knew she was watching him. "Yesterday morning, I saw them in my quest, but they wouldn't talk to me, answer me--they didn't even seem to know I was there. I talked to Sue and Kurt, but then they walked away. And then, just this morning..."

Janeway leaned forward. She knew she shouldn't, but the words came before she could even think: "Then?"

He looked out the viewport to the few stars that were visible.

They were similar stars to the ones he'd seen earlier that morning, when he walked through the forest, hearing the scraping and shuffling under the leaves. His guide having darted off again, he looked to those stars to find his way through the thick trees, though he didn't know where he was going...where to look.

"I know you're here," he said. "Please, I just want to speak with you."

High above, an owl flew from one branch to another and a deep grey moon began to rise somewhere beyond the thinning trees.

He saw two fleeting figures dart across a path far ahead of him then disappear. Speeding his pace to catch up with them, he found himself blocked by a thistle bush and so he turned around. A chirping, almost like laughter, shook the bushes then faded away.

He only wanted to speak with them, but he had a feeling even the rodents wouldn't tell him where they were. So he kept walking.

"B'Elanna? Tom? --Be'i? Toma?"

Then he saw a light...more, he felt it, drawing long shadows on the trees. Soundlessly, a white deer crossed the path but did not stop. He looked after the doe as it hopped away, quick yet unbothered by any of the presences there. At a clearing, it met its mate, nearly as fair. Together they paced to the river's edge.

"Chakotay," she said, an impatient note in her throat, and he swung around.

In a warm white light, B'Elanna stood with her arms crossed over her ribs and her lips slightly parted, as if on the verge of a response. She began with a sigh as she stared at him. Appearing behind her, Tom stepped in and put his arm around her, claiming his place by her side. His usual air of casualness was marked with displeasure.

They bore a full complement of kraja.

The mice were crawling around their feet, reaching up their legs, crawling over their boots. Another few birds swooped through the air behind them then took to the high air, avoiding the two and their light.

"Why do you keep coming here?" B'Elanna demanded. "We're happy where we are."

"You keep calling us," Tom said, gesturing the man to walk with them. The mice cleared the way. "It's distracting."

Chakotay nodded at Tom's silent suggestion and stepped onto a rough path with them. Creatures popped their heads from the trees to examine him, squirrels and burrowing birds; hares peeked shyly from around trunks or under bushes. Every time he looked at the curious denizens, his friends moved farther away. Their pace was quick and unmindful of his attempt to keep up. Tom grabbed B'Elanna's hand to hop over a fallen tree together. They passed over it weightlessly and continued moving away, their feet silent on the forest floor.

"Hold on," Chakotay said, "I'm not over yet."

"You all were our friends a long time ago," B'Elanna told him, glancing back as Tom led her around the path. She let her hand drift out to touch the head of a raccoon, perched on a thick branch, without slowing. "I knew you a couple years--you were a good person to me and I'm thankful for that. But it's not fair that you have to keep divining for people who no longer exist. You don't know us anymore."

Chakotay sighed, jogging to catch up. He would have stepped in front of them to slow them down, but the mice were in his way--and he didn't dare step on them. "I just wanted to see you, so I could come to peace with losing you."

"You might find peace in talking to the spirits," Tom told him, more mature and assured than Chakotay had ever known him to be, "but among our people, we go to the ancestors to ask blessing for the bonding--and only because it affects the realm of the spirits in the end. No, you're not among the ancestors here; you don't belong there yet. But you're sure making it hard for us."

"Have I disturbed you?" Chakotay asked. "Trespassed? Tell me. I need to understand."

"Yes, you've trespassed," B'Elanna said bluntly. But her eyes danced downwards before she looked at Tom, and then Chakotay again. "Look, we'll know if you really need us. In the mean time, leave us in peace. We've been granted that much for the promises being met in your lifetime."

Chakotay blinked a reluctant nod. "You're very missed on Voyager. I miss you. It's been hard to come to terms with that."

"People can be replaced," Tom shrugged and swung their path into the thicket, swerving around the trees and undergrowth there. "And it hasn't been long enough...for you, anyway."

Their light was dimming, but Chakotay kept up anyway. "Don't leave--not yet."

"You know all you need to know for now," Tom said.

"You'll be all right," B'Elanna added.

With no further warning, they skipped off, their light fading slowly away as they skirted behind a row of thick rocks covered in flowered vines.

On the other side, a white aura preceded them as they reappeared in their Desalian dress, his tunic and coat in deep blue and green with a brightly embroidered sash, dark trousers and robe; her pale green gown and the wine-red coat Sashana'i had procured for her: Their wedding clothes. The crown and some strands of her hair were braided with gold-tinted scarves and dotted with ornaments; his headdress boasted a wide plait braid on one side and amber beads dripping down over an ear to his shoulder.

They were beautiful, Chakotay thought, taken by their appearance as he watched them move, stirring the earth at their feet. A breeze picked up and uncovered the leaves to the dark soil below. They no

longer addressed him, but knelt upon the clearing to offer their hands to the mice. All the conflict had faded from their faces as they smiled to their company.

Their light faded quickly; they shrunk then disappeared into the crowd of creatures they had been petting. Another breeze replaced the leaves, burying the creatures, who slipped underneath and away, into the thick.

Chakotay looked up. The birds were gone, the forest stilled.

All but the two deer, who had watched the scene, had left him there. Upon the return of his attention, they hopped back into the bushes. Moments later, even their sound could not be heard. A cool breeze in the high trees brushed feathery leaves, followed by a moment of utter stillness...

"Only allow the promise to be, should it be fated," came B'Elanna's voice in a Desalian inflection. "There shall be peace."

Chakotay continued to stare out the messhall viewport, feeling Janeway's stare burning into the corner of his eye. She had not taken to her coffee again, but waited for his reply.

He didn't know what to tell her, except...

"Do you remember what I said yesterday about being patient enough to figure out what the story means for yourself?"

"Yes," Janeway said.

"I've been having trouble with my own." He sighed, turned his eyes down. "To be honest, I think they wanted to turn away from us--or at least once they were there, once they knew we were out here, they had no intention of rethinking it once the war ended."

"I suppose I can understand that," Janeway said quietly, running her cool fingers over her warm mug. Shrugging slightly, she put her elbows on the table. "I know that Tom was still trying very hard to redeem himself, to get past his crimes...forgive himself. B'Elanna always seemed very confident, but it wasn't hard to tell she had some demons to work through herself."

"At least a few," Chakotay nodded. "But on Cezia, they had a home and acceptance and family there who loved them outright, with no expectation but that they came home for dinner, were honest with themselves and treated others with respect. B'Elanna and Tom both ended up doing a lot more than that."

"I can see why they would want to stay, even in the conditions of the time."

"I can, too."

"Where Anai fits into all of this is what bothers me," Janeway told him. "It's more than a promise to come clean with their history, Chakotay, to wait for us. Even she said it was, when I first met her after our visit to Uillar, said specifically that it wasn't anything nefarious--even scolding me for accusing her of having ill intentions."

"Knowing she lied outright to B'Elanna and Tom, though..." Chakotay started, opening the door for her answer.

"I don't like not knowing what to expect from people," the captain admitted, "especially when I come to admire them."

Chakotay thought about that a moment. "Maybe we'll find out tonight."

"I hope so."

He grinned mirthlessly, turned his eyes to the stars again. The haze of the Desalian sun was just beginning to fade them.

"So do I."

Janeway's eyes roamed out to the brightening field, to the few stars beyond them. Quiet there, yet teeming with life. For such a small region, they did have a large variety of life forms and possessed so much history, only a small part of it they knew about. But there was some they did...enough to wonder.

"Or," Chakotay added quietly as his eyes followed a ship's trail in the remaining darkness, "maybe it's time to stop looking."

It had already been a bad morning. It spoke too well of fate, Anai feared.

"I should not be surprised by your actions, Child."

"So, will you talk with him? He has a lot of questions, and he could probably help us fix the problem I'm having with--"

"Discussion is unnecessary. Should it be meant, it shall be; if not, then that is meant. The ancestors shall find Ara and me at peace in either stead."

The topic was ruining what little she could enjoy of the sunrise, which danced through the thin fir trees of the upper garden. Little indeed. She had decided to wander there while Doctor Gihora finished treating once again the worst symptoms of Ara's heart disease. She could hardly look at the playful light.

She too was suffering at that point. Ara's last episode had spent her terribly, partially through her sympathetic reaction, the other part plain stress. Earlier, Babaki had asked Doctor Gihora to perform one last treatment to spare them both of further pain.

It was only partially successful.

Nor would it be very effective, they all knew, though Ara insisted he have only a little more time, a few more suns to conclude their business. Anai felt her adoration beat afresh in her chest for his wish, though at that point, even she might not have had it. The treatments were very uncomfortable, even for her.

"It is but another piece of time...in this wretched body," he had whispered to her as Gihora prepared the regenerator's beam. With tears in her eyes, his hand held to her breast, she almost shook her head, but he spoke again first. "This is as dearly wished, my spirit. I spoke...less upon it, yet my desire was equal. This is known to you." A slight smile crossed her lips. "It is but another du'ave...among our

blessed family. There is...little curse in this much."

"Ka, my spirit," Anai whispered then brought his knotted knuckles to her lips to kiss.

Thankfully, it was almost done. They had laid the steps for all involved. Their life's wait was almost finished.

It was nothing unique, such casual intrigue among Allanois, beginning a thing and simply allowing nature, destiny or the spirits involved to choose the remainder of the course. It had worked well before, Anai believed, had indeed been necessary. It would be relief that last time.

She was anxious for the evening, but she dreaded it, too, as she knew what tale she had to tell. The memory that had haunted her since acquiring it was coming very close to her and she still did not know how she would explain it, express that moment, when her beloved siblings passed beneath her fingers, when Be'i and Toma were extinguished in all but memory....

With a deep breath, she steered herself away from it for the time.

Presently, she had the young girl she and Ara had confided in, who had knocked on their door at daybreak, begging Anai's further tongue, not to mention interrupting her attempt at some peace after a terrible morning. She did not tell Kes of the trials of that past midnight, however. She instead pressed herself to remain patient while Kes explained her difficulties with the task appointed to her and confessed bringing in their doctor to assist her.

Perhaps I might have asked the security officer after all, the elder thought, especially as he had chosen to remain on board the Voyager and listen to the transcripts. The girl was too heavily involved in the telling, and her keen mind might well affect the doctor. Then again...

"I should think it was meant you did this," Anai sighed, blinking slowly as Desalia's sweet star warmed her old, fallen face. "Yet perhaps Ara and I were not correct in permitting such an ambitious hope to take seed. Nature itself is desecrated in the mere consideration of this plan. Still, now we see certainly what fate has decided."

Kes considered the elder woman carefully, hearing the genuine disappointment and yet the easy acceptance of that destiny. Both seemed right for Anai to feel, but Kes hadn't thought the lady would let it go so easily, not when it was still possible. "Anai, you're the one who said Voyager needed--"

"I bear awareness of my words," Anai cut in. Closing her eyes against the brightening light, she held her pained breath a moment. "Particularly after this past moon's painting, I must reconsider its worth. The moon they took their kraja, Tom Paris and B'Elanna Torres became Desalian, in both body and spirit. Their bonding sealed this path. This was what was wished; they had chosen to remain. In one manner, they passed to you at that point, when they became utterly of Desal. The resulting neurological changes are what bar a resurrection to Voyager in the manner we have specified, I ask you would tell me now. Be this the case, it would not be wished for and shall not be."

"It is by me," Kes said honestly, "--and the Doctor; it would be by the others, too, if they knew. You're the one who said that, knew that we needed our crew back."

"I also said we should not tear into spirits only now mending by creating a hope which is impossible," she replied. "I and Ara may accept that, Child. We shall not force this matter to be, insist on life when it is not meant or desired."

"But you've made *me* hope it can be done," Kes countered. "Can't you just speak with the Doctor, answer his questions? It would make me feel better knowing that we did everything we could. --And I know it would you, too. You've waited over a century to see if it was possible. Why give up now? That the Doctor and I are having trouble with the parameters you set up doesn't mean it can't be fixed. We only need more information."

She didn't answer at first, seeing the sun, so giving after so much time, so faithful to its own promise of life...so needed.

"I have asked much in my lifetime," Anai muttered, "even in this debt, now, it seems. I have indeed made you hope, Child, only to feel my mood stir my desires suddenly opposite." She drew a breath of the dewy air, stretching her sympathetically crushed lungs, begging for the life it brought. "Or perhaps I feel but tiredness. Ka'id, I do feel it. I do not enjoy it, yet it is truth."

Kes caught herself with that, nodding. "Maybe it's a lot for me to ask, too." She smiled gently at the woman. "The way you tell your story, I forget that you've held on so long. You really do make it live--in all of us."

Anai smiled, more to herself than her companion. "I bring forth what lies within myself and feel gratitude to know it communicates well."

Kes touched her arm, earning the old woman's heavy gaze. "Anai, I don't want to give up yet. Please don't ask me to."

The elder reached over for Kes' hand, pressed it against the waist of her coat in a small embrace. "It is a familiar sentiment," she said. "Your forgiveness, Kes. I bear an elder's way, and I bear my own nerve too, as susceptible to strain as any at times."

"Then you'll come?"

Anai peered at her. "Gye. --Yet, I shall speak with your doctor. Ara may not travel with me to your ship and my transportation could affect him poorly. A meeting over a channel may be arranged, however."

That was enough for Kes, who turned her hand to hold the elder's warmly. "I could have him talk to you now. It's still very early on Voyager. The alpha shift won't start for another two hours. Nobody else is in Sickbay."

Anai considered it despite its convenience. It truly had been an uncomfortable morning and was to be more of one yet. And yet, she had spoken truly...and had promised.

A chance remained, and there was no sense in letting that pass for her mere tiredness. Obstacles never had stopped her in the past, after all--or was she simply being stubborn? Perhaps a bit of all of it. More, the child she had trusted did truly wish it. Anai could feel that, feel the desire shining through the girl's pleading stare. Anai knew such a plea, such a look, and the cry that came with it...

"Assist me to my chamber, Child," she whispered, moving her hand to hold Kes' arm.

Upon first coming to the nebula for haven, they knew just from preliminary scans that it was massive, possibly stretching on for over a few hundred light years in that nook of the Delta Quadrant. Irllae, they had noticed when they scanned that area, was an even more interesting region not for only its temporal qualities. A thick disc approximately eighty light years across--a tiny galaxy unto itself, in a way--it was more like an astrophysicist's dream.

They had come to the correct conclusion that the myriad asteroid fields throughout the region were created by the sheer stress of the plasma waves, which had crushed weaker planets as the Barrier took shape. Several nebulae floated in Irllae, too, the result of other small star clusters being caught in the initial and enormous explosion, which had created the region. In all, it was an amazingly rich field of study.

Scientists on Desalia, Brija and Suresha had agreed already that the Barrier would someday fade, in about forty thousand years--Irllae time, Janeway surmised, and just over three thousand years in standard time. Thus, the instability of the plasma waves. They were burning quickly out. They predicted that the temporal variance--created by but not dependent on the plasma field--would stabilize a good deal sooner.

She almost wished she could be there to see it.

Why Janeway had waited so long to investigate those very interesting features of the region in any detail at first was beyond her. Of course, the good sleep she'd achieved the night before had really done the job in clearing her mind. She also felt she needed to step away from the situation she'd been dealing with--with her away team's fate, with her own feelings of responsibility and her questions about Anai's openly cryptic methods, the repairs on her ship, the mourning of her crew...

Aside from finishing the mess of reports she'd neglected, she had also spoken to Havetsi that morning. The young captain had merely meant to greet her as she transmitted the new supply lists from the Ki'ial. Janeway in turn asked about possible visits to Cezia and beyond after the stories were concluded. Havetsi answered with predictable enthusiasm, suggesting several nebulae Voyager might enjoy collecting data on--and most certainly, Cezia was a wonderful idea.

On that note, Havetsi helpfully transmitted in addition to the lists a full map of Irllae with all its data and points of scientific interest. There were more than even Voyager had found, it seemed, and as she decided she could indeed use a few hours' break from what had recently been consuming her, Janeway curiously poked through the files and the visuals, mentally sorting out what she wanted to read and in what order.

After she scanned through the various nebulae of the region, the Gozhor Jihap jumped out at her. The largest and most unstable in Irllae, the small but violently charged nebula that had been for over a millennia a vital power source in the region and bordered one side of the Unar homeworld. Like most nebulae, it had its own peculiar shape. It looked almost like a two-dimensional cornstalk from one vantage point, one central reed and leaves of gas arching out from each side, fading on the ends.

Janeway was taken aback as she viewed it for the first time from the angle of the Desalian file. Crazy as it was, it really did have the same shape as B'Elanna's cranial ridges. That much, indeed, Hychar hadn't been delusional about.

It still seemed insane to her that the commander would have acted so violently against B'Elanna for that alone--but considering how even the Desalian allies distrusted Tom and B'Elanna for being outsiders, she could believe Hychar would feel the same, in addition to what heredity had merely given her chief

engineer.

In a way, though, he'd been right. B'Elanna, with Tom, had indeed become Unar's greatest curse.

What had Sashana'i of Cezia, a regent heir born in a refugee city, seen in them so strongly that she would base a lifetime worth of hope and dedication to them? Janeway wondered, staring at the image. In her stories, Anai had never confessed her own initial feelings--only later spoke of her guilt.

Janeway shook her head, though, reminding herself that she still had over three hundred files she wanted to glance through; by thirteen hundred hours, the new status reports would start to arrive for her review. She heard Ensign Kim mention that he'd downloaded some of the public historical files. She did want to investigate those natural resources, however, from which Voyager was getting their much-needed supplies...

As her fingers moved to advance the file, her eyes were glued on that damned nebula, a form of gasses that in a way had initiated the fate of her crewmembers, both good and bad.

Her fingers still on the soft panel, she drew her other hand out to grasp her coffee cup.

Anai of Cezia sat on the edge of her bed and let out her breath, painfully still.

The silence she had asked for was good. It eased her nerves. She needed that time.

To think. To collect herself.

The talk with the holographic doctor had gone on far longer than she had wished. His questions had been endless, bordering on the inane and completely useless at times, and then on matters that should not have been confusing the issue at hand. He was simply too curious for anybody's benefit. She corrected him firmly--and Kes, too--for making too many children of a mother. Even Ara, lying in the bed, fell back to sleep after waking for a time. Meanwhile, Anai swallowed her growing irritability and bore through the interrogation. Thankfully, the girl had finally intervened and ended the session, her own frustration held by a sigh of sympathy for the elders.

A minute later, she left to allow Anai to crawl up with her bondmate and nap until Havetsi came to rouse them, as promised. The short sleep had helped to take the edge off her exhaustion and pain, but even Ara suspected when he quietly greeted her opening eyes that she should have a bit more respite from the world.

She allowed their spirit-child to assist Ara with his dressing as they all three spoke, of Ara's attack, of Kes and her doings. The younger woman was not surprised at Kes' determination and was glad her elders had done so much. Of course, the children of their house had supported fully their maneuvers, seeing it as an adequate balance of fates--and a most interesting one at that. Indeed, they were children.

Then Havetsi informed her them of Janeway's wish to tour on Cezia after that evening's story. The elders shared a grin at that.

It was a good idea, in truth. Like with Uillar, it would give those who went some perspective. Humans liked to see with their eyes, benefited from reality reinforcing their education. They did not take on

information as readily as Desalians. In any case, Anai took a moment to contact her daughter at the silag at Azlre and tell her she might expect their visit--unless their guests wished to be independent and prowl the city themselves. Mar'lli chuckled, knowing the party would likely become lost in the winding streets, but promised her finest treatment should they find their way to the square.

With that thought out of her mind, Ara prepared to spend time in the library and Havetsi gone to help him there, Anai finally took some leave to herself that day.

All she could make herself do, however, was sit on the corner of the bed and stare at the opposite wall. There was a mural there, a scene from her beloved Cezia, painted for her some years after their relocation to the capitol. It was the golden white rise of Mecrisop. It rose hazily upon the old plaster, accented by the fields at its feet, the lush silver and green grasses dotted with a patch of vine or daknas and the teal and amber forests on the first rises of the rocks.

She could see herself sitting on the edge of the field in the first flush of spring, her knees pulled up to her chest and leaning into her sweet bondmate's arms. There, she had sobbed too many years of strife away, shuddered with all the knowledge and memories she and Ara had taken in those hard times...that most difficult time...that terrible scream of dread and desire, chiseled into their spirits unto eternity...

It was also on the edge of the field that they had decided on their purpose and how to fulfill the promise that would a century later consume the oncoming days of their passing.

How she ached to see those mountains but one last time, as she knew it would please Ara, too, to sense their majesty once more. She thought she might ask for them to be taken, if only so she might feel the grass around her legs, breathe the crisp air, feel its nurturing sun upon her skin...

Only imagining it, Anai could feel it.

She wondered yet again if it was meant--or should be meant; then she shook her head at her tiredness and discouragement. Were it to be, then it would be. It was that simple, and it would not be much longer at all until they knew what path was to be taken. Doctor Gihora informed them that with Ara's last treatment, they could have another du'ave within body still, little more if that. This was more of a relief than a sentence to the ancestors--as it should have been. Indeed, they would embrace their passings with gladness and dignity, whenever it might arrive. Anai was certain of that much.

At least she would know that they had indeed seen them, told them, let them see...

In memories so ancient that they appeared to her like vivid dreams rather than realized realities, all would have called their actions unnatural, their silence, their plotting, their will, their promises, even if unto passing...

This was certainly no precedent in their house, however. Pulling her eyes away from the Cezian plain, she looked over at her memoir boxes, neatly lined up on her bureau. They were almost ready, with but one last thing to add.

She had made the child hope, after all, earning more debt, which she had not wished.

Still, Anai never had been a person to leave a debt unpaid, even if the actual value of the payment was questionable to the ones who would ultimately bear it and she could not say she desired it anymore.

Millennia ago, Unar looked at the skies and, some evenings more readily than others, saw a red hand of flames in the stars. At various intervals, those flames would blanket the panorama; the entire planet would be lit vermilion by the sun, maroon by the moons. Sickness and death, corruption of foods and crops often followed these occasional flares.

They called it the curse of Gozhor--the demon's claw.

The welts and burns caused by the Gozhor curse quickly inspired hygiene in the Unar, which included stringent powders, tightly bound hair and frequent changes in clothing. Women, more susceptible to the curse, were isolated for their protection, as were children. Daily inspections of their bodies were necessary, and several often-uncomfortable cleansing rituals needed be followed in order to guarantee purity and resistance to Gozhor.

To resist the cleansing was to accept the evil and filth. This possession of Gozhor, if not corrected by forced cleansing, was punishable by death. The execution method--a broken neck, usually via a blunt club--was a means of cutting off the gases of Gozhor's evil. The burial method was cremation, with the ashes consigned to a reserved dung heap.

For a good deal of Unar history, this theology was forefront, even after advances in medicine and science allowed better treatment of the "curse" and their latent talent for philosophy grew into a true cognitive science. When Unar braved space travel, they resisted their curiosity to go within while studying the phenomenon. Like an old sailor's myth, they simply avoided it, just because.

With time and experience with other races, however, the Unar gradually began to accept that Gozhor was simply an inconveniently placed, photonically charged nebula that, when more active, released a good deal of radiation into the Unar system and indeed lit the night sky with fire.

Other races who that studied Gozhor assisted Unar in furthering their awareness. Desalia, for instance, seeing previous attempts at the same fail, donated an advanced array with which they could better predict the surges and thus prepare their people. The Unar government in power at the time made themselves thankful for the generosity of their neighbors and enjoyed a rich trade with them. After more time, some Unar took to living on colonies within some of the safer niches of the nebula.

In certain sects and communities, however, those traditional beliefs in the curse of Gozhor continued. Those factions were, in fact, the ones who had found their way into power after nearly three centuries of stable, friendly relations with the other denizens of Irliae.

Janeway barely realized that her coffee cup was cold and nearly empty as she finished reading the general history of Unar's Gozhor. Glancing through the sub-topics, she decided to touch on them some other time.

The ancient theology did not resurface again after the Irliae resistance. Rather, Unar society had become relatively progressive during its restructuring. Like Desal, it had looked to its finer past, to a peaceful and educated philosophy, and moved forward from there. This was no easier a task for the Unar, however, as all its colonies had been decimated in the last years of the war, and needed not only to restore its worlds, its trades and resources, but its former views and reputation. Solid, progressive leadership had been a key to that in the beginning; it was credited as the cause for the Unar's eventual recovery.

To that day, the Unar still used the array--though upgraded through the centuries--which had been given to them by a Desalian regent called Rallesi'i...

Janeway looked at her cup, considered it for several seconds before standing up to go to the replicator. On the way, she paused, and then looked back to the console. Chakotay wasn't expected to report back to Voyager for another couple hours, and she still had some time before the next reports would come in...

She tapped on the wall panel. "Coffee, black."

It was strange, the silence of the house.

Havetsi, too, was quiet when she greeted Chakotay at the door and led him through the front quarter of the house to join her tola in the library. Her eyes were more downturned than usual, though her back was straight and her smile seemed real.

Like the house's aura, she seemed tired.

"I hope I'm not disturbing anything," Chakotay said politely, glancing at Ara, who was buried in a thick, square book at the table, silent save his cluttered breathing.

"Gye," Havetsi answered. "It is but a sun among us and we were scheduled to meet. You are welcome to remain and may seat yourself. I shall bring tracha while we wait for Nali to bring herself to us. Then we shall take ourselves to the laboratories, should this be agreeable."

Chakotay furrowed his brow. "I thought we were to be there at noon."

"Ka, this is my understanding, as well. Nali shall bring herself soon." She touched her temple again with a small nod and gestured toward the table. "Please sit and I shall serve you in my tola's name."

"Chakotay, zharab'llar'os," Ara breathed from his seat. "Good Havetsi, I would take tracha as well."

"As Nali is not here to supervise this?" she returned. Her tone was light for his benefit. He truly appeared wretched, though not so bad as earlier that morning.

"A mere glass is permissible," he told her, playfully petulant to humor her.

It did its work: She smiled. "Tola ka. A glass shall be brought for you. --My friend, I shall return shortly."

She disappeared a moment later. Ara said nothing more.

Chakotay meanwhile looked around the library for a place that wouldn't disturb the elder. Then again, to sit far away from him might be an insult--though he correctly believed the Desalian wouldn't take it personally.

The library, a dark and richly hued gallery filled with volumes on all its walls, was lit only by a few table lanterns and narrow, blue-tinted windows between the shelves on one side. In the corner by the

door, a bowl of incense puffed several thin trails of white smoke, hanging a woody aura in the room.

The old man, buried in the finely embroidered yet simple robes of a scholar, seemed quite at home at the low stone table in the center. Halfway reclined to the side, his bony feet, wrapped with indigo cloth to his shins, were jutted out and crossed. His kraja marked hand lay on the table, twitching; the patterns on it were still discernible within the heavy wrinkles and tan blotches. The other hand was poised to turn a page.

Chakotay felt almost as if he were in the chamber of an ancient sage.

Finally, the commander chose his seat, a row of pillows adjacent to Ara and about two meters away. He did so without much noise, though he essentially had to get to his knees before settling down on the soft mounds.

He heard the man cough lightly, but when Chakotay looked again, he saw Ara huddled undisturbed over his text, occasionally dipping his hand into his heavy headdress to lick his finger with a grey tongue. Seemingly content to keep the silence, his trembling finger pressed another leaf. The page crinkled as clearly as the water in a wall fountain trickled...

...Like the waterfall in the forest and the leaves underfoot, the slivers of light from the creamy moon and the deer...

Chakotay blinked the image away.

Finally, Ara breathed; his lungs gurgled on the air--and he cursed it under his breath.

Then the air all but died again.

Chakotay did not mind the return to silence in itself, but it was somehow overpowering and increasingly distracting in the formal room with the elder. For Anai's presiding over the storytelling and many interactions among the crew, they did not know Ara as well, but plainly, the regent looked very ill that day. He had barely looked up but in his initial greeting. He seemed to be getting through his book rather quickly, however.

"What are you reading?" Chakotay asked, offering to break that silence.

Ara pulled another breath then swallowed to hold it. "Yet another story, Child," he croaked. "A story of lovers."

"A romance?" the commander asked, having expected something completely opposite.

Ara coughed a laugh. "At my age, for lack of ability otherwise, I must find visceral pleasure." Receiving no response to that, Ara shrugged slightly, having not expected the young man to say anything to that. "My lady and I shall once again enjoy each other. And yet at present, good man, I long for her with this useless body." Still, the man sitting across did not speak, only nodded, so Ara thought of another approach, one that produced a wry little turn to his mouth. "Shall you hear of this story, Child?"

"Please," Chakotay asked, indeed curious. The hundreds of volumes alone on those shelves seemed, at least to his eye, like a small storehouse of history that Voyager had yet to learn about those people. Only slowly had Anai been teaching them as well, unpeeling layer after layer of the spiritual and cultural mores B'Elanna and Tom had immersed themselves in, which remained a strange but pleasant surprise to Chakotay.

"I read of lovers," Ara said in an epic breath, "separated by fate and birth, yet always known within their deepest spirits that they are one. A laboring family is hers, and thus in the degraded regency, she is unable to rise to her beloved's status. --This was not naturally the way. Yet when greed crept through Desal, the practice of stable social ranks was not unheard of, as you have heard in my bondmate's paintings.

"From afar he watched and loved her very spirit as his own, and yet his duty to his family resigned him to incompleteness. Yet can our spirits be denied, can our nature be forgotten? The two met secretly, revealing their passion in the shadows, tasting of each other their desire and adoration, until she was full with his child. Upon their discovery of his affair, his bonding was arranged by his family to separate him body and spirit from his lady. In the shadows, his escape was made, and he fled with his mate to the wilderness of Gavllorst, where their daughter was brought into the living world. There they found scholars who secretly bonded them, made them one. In this, their lives, so distant, were made into an equilibrium, with great beauty, purity and promise.

"Poverty and joy mixed their life afterwards upon Gavllorst, until his family found him again. He faced them humbly and yet with great strength, made his claim of his spiritually bettered life and returned with his bondmate to her family--his family through his bonding--who cherished him and their child. He worked with hands thereafter, happy, yet ever aware of his origins. Never blaming, he accepted and believed his life was meant by the blessed spirits. It is a fine depiction of the times."

"Was it written before the occupation?" Chakotay asked.

"Ka," Ara answered. "In the day of its publication, it was considered controversial. Ivliisa was the author's origin; our first colony had not conformed as completely to the more stringent laws that had reigned upon the homeworld. The novel inspired a mass of discussion--many questions of Desal's way."

Chakotay nodded thoughtfully. "A man escaping from his duty to his family and breaking the social ranks--it must have been a powerful statement against the cultural biases operating then."

"It was," the old man confirmed then added, "However, Child, I only read the tale for the eroticism."

The commander closed his mouth, not knowing whether to take that with a laugh. Though, he couldn't help but be a little disappointed in the highly honored scholar's reply--and wondered at it as well. Or maybe Ara was simply teasing him--a thought that annoyed him a little, as he had sincerely been interested.

Finally, he was saved by Havetsi, who swiftly returned to the dark room with a small tray of steaming mugs. "Have you yet tortured our good man, my dear tola?" she asked wryly, setting the tray on the table before moving around to attend to her elder. "Ab, Chakotay. You need not keep such space among us. Your distance is respectful yet unnecessary." The casual noise she made in the warm, somber room as she went about her work seemed like further desecration of its aura. "I'e ma'i Tola vrucillosch y'eyachoj ga'ahl?"

"Glorr' a'a chajisch ka se'ill, me vdra'i," he chuckled and coughed, giving her his hand to clutch her fingers. "He does not admit to reading erotic literature, I would think. This must be his own peculiarity, as Derra often proved his acumen in this genre when asked--boasted, more, I should think, when Yasis was not near."

That time, the commander cracked a small laugh. "Kurt did like to talk about those Ferengi romances he'd pick up."

"As Toma possessed great fondness for his relating their details," Ara said, the lilt in his voice both amused and sincere. "This genre sounds most interesting."

Chakotay's grin remained. "When we transmit our literary databases to you, I'll see you get a volume or two."

"You are a good child," the elder said approvingly.

Havetsi helped him to sit up with her gentle, practiced hands. "So you *have* been darting our guest's humor, my honored spirit-father." Leaning in to kiss his cheek, she set him to his drink and returned her attention to her guest, stifling the remainder of her snickers for the business they rather needed to discuss. "Chakotay, I have wondered on your samples from Uillar while within. Have you found conclusion in them?...Vi akich. --What is meant, that you are satisfied with your findings?"

The commander didn't miss the look of regret that Havetsi offered with her casual question. Though it stung, he understood well enough that such a grim thing to Voyager was only the passing of spirits to her. She was still respectful of the difference, albeit belatedly. "The Doctor is still examining the DNA fragments, but he has confirmed that they are Torres and Paris'."

She bowed her head. "Zha hevrre. For what does he examine them still?"

"He's interested in the effects of the benozine on their systems," the man answered. "It's detrimental to humans, and he was curious about the treatment they received. If it helped them, it could help us if we encounter those conditions again. The Doctor wants to investigate the trisiptic compound your people used there."

Havetsi thought about that. "An inquiry shall be taken to our physicians. The agent used would be known to them."

Chakotay nodded his thanks. "I was going to ask if you might. The Doctor can replicate it, but it's not as good as the real thing."

"Then a fair supply shall be procured," she told him, "or the means to create your own with better accuracy. In addition, I have contacted my comrade from Antral, Captain Mihalín. He shall bring the dilithium and the remainder of the deuterium you require in three suns, as requested by your captain."

"We appreciate it," Chakotay said. "The captain is anxious to finish the repairs..."

Leaning over the table again, Ara flipped a page and let his eyes fall over the text as he heard the businesslike tones coming from the commander and into Havetsi's equally business-minded ear. Ara crooked his head to it, but despite his being tempted to add his comments to their "briefing," he retained his silence.

It was very good eroticism, he recalled as the familiar words found his memory--good enough to make him keep only half his attention on the others' conversation, which had gone from shield arrays to warp theory in another minute.

What Ara had also not mentioned just before was that the book was in fact from Anai's collection, given to her by Bakali, long ago, to pass the time while she had remained in wait of childbirth. Their twin girls, he remembered with a secret smile, recalling, too, the pure beauty of his sweet Anai as she held their daughters in both her arms the first time.

Once, they had accepted being childless, their family as but among others, their people, who needed the most care. But then that most adored blessing of nature became possible, one after the other. To that day, Ara wondered how fate had managed to fit not just one, but two within his bondmate. Miracles...

"Your systems are interconnected interestingly. Yet it has been our practice to train the electroplasmic discharge to yti'ave hrif rapol to assist in recycling the energy and increase efficiency," Havetsi stated.

"That's lower, right?" Chakotay asked, having not gotten the translation for her calculation. She nodded. "We have similar recycling processes. But with Voyager's configuration, that kind of energy distribution wouldn't be enough to keep all our systems at full power."

"This is why Desalian ships maintain their power structures fully independent yet able to accept the other system's energy when required. It requires additional labor in development, yet it is more efficient in completion."

It was odd to him. Ara thought he might be more interested to hear of their doings, of their ship. Certainly, it had been a very long time since he had acquired his memories of them. To hear it, their common sentences and their inflections, to see them, feel their presences, seemed before as very worthwhile. Indeed, it was rather unreal, like a premonition come to life. They were as any other with a duty and a conscience, however, while full of sorrow for matters they could not have prevented.

The commander, of all men, would not speak of it, but of technical matters--as was a good officer's way. He and the other crew had maintained their facades as well as Ara and Anai and the rest of the family had been subtly circumspect. It was the same way with officers as it was with Allanois, it seemed--and all for good reasons.

He wondered, as he knew Anai still did, how her painting would conclude that moon. It was the last cycle, and Anai had grown unsure, nervous. He too felt anxiety, particularly after his episode last night. Admittedly, they both were worn. Even after meeting again with Kes, and then Voyager's doctor, and having been inspired again from their panic early that morning, they had looked at each other and wondered...Should it be?

Yet they had promised. They had promised and they themselves had hoped for completion, even when it seemed not to be. They bore their debt without fail, nor the slightest regret. That was not the difficult part.

They thought they knew precisely how they would set that wish into action. Of course, reality tended to change one's dreams, Ara knew all too well. They had known what troubles Kes and the ship's doctor would bear in their task. They might have known the girl would press the issue; they might have known they would come to feel for the crew as they did, would sympathize so with their losses.

He was surprised that the others did not seem to suspect their plotting. Or perhaps they kept that hidden, too.

It would be no less than fair.

Now that it was finally pouring into his ears, Ara found the commander's information increasingly dull. Of course, among all the memories contained within him, he could recall great boredom, too. It had been a complaint at times, among others.

Perhaps some other topic would interest him more, some other time. For the moment, the first joining of Vasa'i and Trylla would do. Choosing a good page to stop upon, he carefully took the mug between both his hands--Havetsi had thoughtfully filled it but halfway--and drank.

"Your tracha, Havetsi, as always, brings pleasure," he said upon swallowing and grinned to feel her youthful hand rub his back in thanks.

The Desalian Regency had been an active force in its people's ways for over sixty-five hundred years, the way Janeway was interpreting their measurements in time.

Several different family lines ruled over the centuries, the first widespread leadership beginning with the Mashij, a benevolent central force of culture among a nomadic people living on the massive northern continent. A cousin to that family erected the first silag and began to share their philosophy of spiritual oneness and connection between the land and the spirit world. This combined with a stable, gentle fatalism that yet allowed some free will encouraged an accepting but liberated society. It quickly caught on, unifying the people with incredible speed.

This philosophy spreading down the plentiful rivers and across the seas to smaller continents of equally nomadic peoples, Desalian culture found a sense of unity in times similar to Earth's Medieval Age and within seven hundred years.

The Desalian penchant for learning and natural curiosity was another binding force among them, as many citizens of varying trades found themselves searching their spirits in the silags, curious of the prichava's meditations and methods. Also naturally generous, the prichavas opened their teaching to any who applied. The regents, learning this, openly approved and began to establish places where such learning could be mastered--and attended regularly, too.

From that beginning, the scholarship was formed near the end of Mashij family's leadership and was brought to its present state almost two thousand years and three regencies later by the Ji'ibran. With that came the beginning of Desalia's long golden era, a period of over one thousand years, in which industry and technology, all largely water-powered, began to find advancement among their increasingly well-educated yet simple, gentle people.

The Kova'enll family, nearly fifteen hundred years ago, saw its people begin to explore their local space, though there seemed to be no great rush to do so. To Desal, such exploration and the later colonization of nearby planets only seemed like the next thing to do. It was then that a series of mores and preconceptions began to naturally reform with the new discoveries, making it also an era of intense philosophical debate and a fear of losing Desal's long-loved cohesion and traditions. These were not the easiest transitions--but in relation to great changes in Earth's history, they were handled with a great deal of peace and maturity. More, the Desalians seemed to enjoy the chance for talk and learning.

By the time Desal began to discover new races, in the first years of the Zezhembe Regency, they had even worked out their own sort of "first contact" rule of thumb as they gladly toured through the region now called Irlae, or "blanketed realm," peeking into everything they could without disturbing their "nature." Almost a century later, they were pleased to meet the laskeb; soon after, the Antral became allies. For almost eight hundred years, as other races in the region--the Unar included--found space and met each other, that golden era continued, straight through the Schricha Regency.

All these regencies enjoyed great peace and prosperity. Its leaders lived with great respect yet among the people, never a power in the strict sense of the word, but a unifying force, a "desal," which in itself meant "one who brings together--or is one among--the community." Even so, very slowly, the regent eventually rose to a level above their citizens, partially because their citizens had put them upon that pedestal. As scholars themselves, their advice was sought; slowly that advice became increasingly significant, their word more prized and their life more valued. They yet ruled well and fairly from that vantage until the Unar began to assert its own changes in temperament.

The Allanois Regency was a product of its time. Having inherited a regency that had resided too long in comfort among a people slow to change, seeing a threat it knew not at all how to handle--the steady change on Unar--it accepted its given power and used it. Unfortunately, after Sharana'i and Mi'ejara, the first and long-lived leaders in that line, that influence was used ineptly with their former allies, mainly through concerted non-interference.

Da'ili, their gentle daughter and blood heiress, however, was blameless but for her lack of strength and inability to balance her bondmate's more forceful and impulsive nature. A solid ruler in the first half of his and Da'ili's reign, Mi'hida's preservation of unity in the last half failed only with exile--a brutal fate among their community-driven society--and succeeded with privileges given to those who went along with the regents' policies, or simply did not see it for what it was. His son, Troka, continued that policy in his ten years as regent.

Only Yusi, the unwilling bondmate to Troka, resisted openly her mate's policies, knowing that as much as he had forced her into his life, he could not rid himself of her, either. In her thirty years as "regent heiress" and ten years as co-regent, Yusi was most noted for her charity and protection of "radicals," her public pronouncements and support of Da'ili before the elder's passing. Her failure to turn Desal's ways in time resulted in her brief escape with their teenaged son, later called Dulla, on the day of the Unar attack. But only three months into their exile, they too were captured and sentenced to an Unar labor camp called Satrif. A few months later, Yusi reportedly died in a shack, an hour or so after her bondmate was beaten to death.

Almost two hundred years after the Allanois ascension, that six thousand year old culture was brought down not only by the Unar, but also by those who created and tended it, and even those who had so embraced peace and acceptance. The Desalian record was quite clear about their shared responsibility for the terror that nearly consigned them to oblivion.

Feeling her death approaching, Yusi passed on the Allanois legacy to her son, who six years and two assignments later was deposited in Sacezia. There, he fell in love and bonded with Aneschi, lived an ostensibly simple life as a day laborer, secretly earned his scholarship, promoted the limited scholarly instruction, or "spiritual training," to keep that important aspect of their culture in tact and patiently planned the regency's resurrection. The executor of his designs came in the form of his granddaughter, Sashana'i.

"Come in," Janeway said, several seconds after she heard the door beep the second time. She glanced up and gave Kim a small smile when he entered. "Yes, Ensign. Please come in."

"I have the preliminary deflector analyses you requested, Captain," Kim said, trying not to peek at the colorful display. Though, the way it was angled, he could clearly see it was one of the Desalian files.

She noticed his glance. "Thank you," she said. Before he could try to excuse himself, she continued, "I've been skimming through some of Desalian history. There's quite a bit inside the summary file. Have you read it yet?"

"Yes, Captain." Kim finally let himself see the words. "The regencies?"

"And the advancements placed under their names over the years," Janeway nodded, reaching for her coffee cup before recalling it was empty again. She lowered her hand. "Fascinating that they have never had a war before or since the Unar occupation, considering the way it started or the bureaucracy of their central government. I don't think humans could have been as gentle as these people have been."

"Have you read Anai and Ara's policies?" Kim asked.

"No," the captain answered. "I think that's in another file."

"If I may make a suggestion, you might find it interesting, Captain."

Janeway looked up to him. "Really?"

Harry broke his recent mood and his usual formality to grin at what he already knew. "They did a lot."

"I just might, then," she said, smiling to see him lighten if only for a moment.

Peering at the monitor as the doors closed behind Kim, she set aside the PADD he had delivered.

Havetsi cut her conversation with her guest the moment Anai made her presence known--more precisely, stood at the library door and waited for her bondmate to rip himself from the throes of the literary lovers long enough to smile at her. When their grandchild moved to pay her full respect to her elder, however, Anai only held up her hand.

"Be at peace, Child," she said, a bit lightly for everyone's ears. "You witness no miracle of fate."

Havetsi laughed, nodded. "Nali zhi'akli."

"Hzaal ya'i zhal," Anai said, reassuring the girl, then asked, "You shall take yourself past Tibrrad on your route this sun?"

"Ka. Bear I an errand, Nali?"

"A note to Brymare'i, should there be no inconvenience." Eyeing Ara's tracha, she opened her mouth to comment, but only shook her head and went to write the letter.

Chakotay was about to greet Anai, but saw her back before he could speak. Then Havetsi skipped away. With a shrug to himself, he said goodbye to Ara, who seemed properly oblivious to the women's quickness and nearly deaf to the commander. Sighing to himself, Chakotay stood and moved out of the library to find Anai activating a stylus and pulling a piece of paper from a small writing table in the corridor.

It was a real pen, he noticed, a slender oval stick carved from stone with a triangular point. Her hand shook with the effort, though she got the job done rather quickly. Curiously, he peered at the small, sweeping letters, dots and flourishes, vertically placed in dark red ink.

"Your people have a beautiful handwriting," he commented.

Anai glanced back, focusing on his eyes before returning to her letter. "I shall teach you a portion, should you like, when my duty is past."

"I'd like that," Chakotay said, more softly for the look she had given him. Rather knowing, it seemed, even in that second. Then he reminded himself that as a possessor of both B'Elanna and Tom's memories, she would know everything they had about him. It was strange to think she could concentrate and see him through their eyes. Or that was how he had interpreted it. For all her "paintings," she hadn't explained that part of herself, maybe because of the traumatic nature of her first acquiring the ability through her grandfather at such a young age, maybe for her unease about how she got her self-named siblings' histories.

As though she had read his mind, Anai dotted a few lines, made what looked like a signature and set the pen in its well. "Be'i's memory of you were fond," she said as she folded the paper with trembling fingers, "among recollections of your interests in anthropology, in ancient histories, among other matters. A museum on Maha'aje, when you are not as occupied, may interest you. My nephew Edjilla bears years near your own and practices his trade in your interest. He would take you, when I have taught you your name."

"Taught me my name?" Chakotay asked.

Anai pressed a seal on the note then drew a few characters in the bottom corner. "*Chak* is standing water; *oah* is a trunk, referring to a tree and yet is used loosely; *teh* is strength as material sturdiness. You are the tree which flourishes in the lake...which may be taken in several lights, yet is complimentary in any manner." Choking a giggle, she pushed herself to stand on her unwilling legs. "You shall be taught to write your name, as all Desalians properly learn first in their education."

"Again, Anai," Chakotay said, grinning at her offer as well as her unabashed innuendo, "I'd like that."

In acknowledgment, she simply bowed then crossed to look into the library again.

Chakotay barely felt the air she moved in passing, though she was both quick and near. Following her with his eyes, he watched her bony, tattooed hand press upon the jamb, the letter between her wrinkled fingers. The remainder of her was but silver locks and braids pinned up and pulled back with downy scarves, a finely embroidered violet coat cinched neatly over her gown and dark leggings. It all stood before him like a portrait as she watched Ara, who continued to read undisturbed.

Feeling the silence again surround him, he would have asked her, at least broached the topic with her, but then Havetsi returned, swiftly draping her robe over her coat and taking the letter Anai held out to her. As the women said their farewells for the day, Chakotay decided to ask her about those memories another time. With a polite bow of his head, he followed Havetsi out.

Anai watched them leave, holding up a hand to her temple when Havetsi looked once more to her then moved into the library. As she neared, Ara finally looked up.

He appeared as tired as she felt.

She lowered herself onto the pillows beside him, reached out to stroke his cheek. Shakily, he brought his hand up to take hers; then he pressed her fingers to his mouth, closing his eyes. His lips moved just enough to kiss; he breathed just enough to take in her perfume. Anai reached out and drew him to her.

Gladly, he leaned over, his eyes still closed as he tried with traitorous arms to hold her properly.

She did not need to ask to know his mind, but smiled gently, stroking his markings as he pressed against her breast. Caressing his trembling form for some time, she turned her head to kiss him. His breath caught at the gesture. Then he took another.

"All this time," he muttered, "and I bear no care for this fate we tend. Their lives shall turn to but danger and violence again, their world is but a shell of a home in cold space, barren of nature's truth. Hope rises too highly and thus disappointment too commonly finds them. Were it not for our debt..." He sighed the rest, knowing more words were unnecessary.

"Ka, my love," Anai whispered thoughtfully. "Similar thoughts filled me while speaking with the hologram, and pre-dawn when Gihora came to us." She paused. "The girl's outstanding hope may be the greatest difficulty. It is for that I am most reluctant."

"You may discontinue at any time, Anai, should you feel it is not meant."

"My spirit, this is known. Yet the painting should be completed."

Ara sighed in a thick breath, nodding minutely. "Ka, this much is meant, and then it is done and we require only fate to speak. The spirits shall bear us truly in the end." With an effort--and her assistance--he pulled himself upright. The shadow of a smile crossed his lips as he regarded his lovely bondmate, how her eyes lit with both concern and acceptance. "When we are passed, it shall be known, Anai, that we have fulfilled all we have taken unto ourselves."

Anai nodded, relieved to have heard him speak what she truly had wished to hear. "Ka. And upon our passing, we are liberated. Fate shall tend to the remainder."

"At last."

Smiling slightly with her nod, Anai reached out to have a sip of Ara's tracha. It was cold, but good.

"In this blessed time, let us be like the newfound seed upon the fields of Desalia: May we embrace our mother stars and spread our life's promise across the lands, become as we were truly meant to be. Let us, with humility and patience, recover in body and spirit all that our ancestors made in us and for us; let us learn the ancient way again and be exalted in our truest spirits. We give our bodies and spirits to you, Desal, utterly, for but this wish."

So went the first officially recorded statement of Ara and Anai after the war.

It had been a brutal time for all involved, but especially Desal, who had no experience with such slaughter. As the Unar began to learn from its enemy, their battles began to draw out into days of hunt and search, fighting to the last. Even Unar's practice of punishing disabled ship crews was put aside for the time. They would not be crushed by the filth they had sought to control.

The resistance would not be thwarted, however. Thanks to the regent siblings Be'i and Toma, the patience of their allies and their own growing creativity, they also learned and revised methods and means and became accustomed to their sacrifice. They doggedly chased down Unar supply and war ships,

disrupted its inside trade lines, destroyed its communication relays, remained in asteroid craters to watch and attack passing cruisers, ignited nebulae when Unar chased them in and refused to pull back once a front was drawn. They fired upon Unar ships without provocation. They plotted intensely and followed through stubbornly.

They took prisoners: The Koba in particular took to the practice; Desal sighed and turned its head to whatever happened to those wretched Unar after that. Desal asked for fairness and the Koba instead had revenge. The Antral were also known to be rather unforgiving. Sashana'i had been recorded by the Brijan at the time as reluctantly accepting it as a necessity for their people, even while strongly suggesting their allies should not make Unar hate them too bitterly, else prolong their struggle with more retribution.

In this manner, the hard fought battles and carefully staged campaigns continued, slowly, painfully, pushing the Unar lines back. This continued for six increasingly violent years, until a major success at Desalia-Four was doubled eight months later by an invasion of the Unar System. This brought down the Unar's already crumbling leadership and depleted sect system. The war ended upon that victory.

With that done, Irlae had the enormous job of recovery.

The day the regents ascended into the scholarship--the very day after the fall of Unar--Ara and Anai of Cezia were summoned to reign over a people desperate for leadership and progress. They came to Desalia, just as Anai had told her, to find it but the filthy remains of its former glory, and so they started from the bottom and worked their way up. The comprehensive list of edicts following their arrival clearly indicated that approach, and it was presented to their people like a sprawling roadmap. They all knew the destination, but very few outside the regents' circle were aware of the actual route.

After claiming their places on Desalia-Four, taking care of that world's immediate physical needs and securing the similar recoveries of its colonies, they rolled up their sleeves and got to the next stage of recovery with the continued help of their captains, their elders and their worn but hopeful citizenry.

Reconstruction would not have been possible without those "decrees," however. Their people revered their passivity once--and likewise clung to their regents' words and ways, waiting for their direction rather than taking initiative. All too aware of those well-learned mores, Ara and Anai used it as kindly as they could to get Desalia where it needed to be, starting with that first speech and continuing with many requests, some of them more difficult to follow than others.

Their interior work began with the rebuilding of the Institute of Desal and the massive effort to reeducate the population from the primary school systems to the advanced trade academies. This alone took a generation to accomplish. Meanwhile, Desalia's technology and ship fleets were resurrected while its recovered databanks were slowly but surely pieced back together then stored with the utmost caution. The system of recordation quickly became a most vital science again. The arts, liberal and land trades, too, were immediately encouraged, supported and developed. Holidays remained largely public and eventually turned into structured festivals that brought regional communities and towns together for a few days at a time, much like it had before the occupation.

The Allanois leadership itself reestablished itself with a great deal of branching out--or useful delegation. For the regents, the prime ministry had been secondary in political importance only to the reestablishment of the scholarship as an arm of government. The latter was an easier process, though it would take more time. Unfortunately, Ara and Anai soon discovered the extent of their sway when it came to Desal's traditions, particularly during that delicate beginning. Changes in *old* ways were simply unfathomable outside of Cezia, or perhaps Ivliisa--if even then. Installing a prime minister with any real power to represent and enforce policy outside the regency was therefore no small affair.

Seeing their people's resistance, the regents cleverly corrected themselves and called the ministry simply a representative of the regent's court, and then publicly requested Gihetra to speak for them on matters of state.

Many of their beginnings involved several such "adjustments"--stretching an old thing then reshaping it into something more effective and efficient. Though it was not completely honest, it produced the desired effect: Prime Minister Gihetra was accepted as a courtier of the regents.

In time, that meaning was slowly adjusted to what Ara and Anai had initially wished--an official voice at the Worlds Council and for Desalia among their neighbors. In the past, the regents had cared for those relations and claimed too much power and influence because of it. The prime minister, a high scholar who was elected into the post and worked occasionally with the regents on domestic matters, was a means of diluting that control and maintaining another perspective.

Janeway chuckled softly at that part of the summarized history. They'd thought out the best way about getting what they wanted and patiently let the dice roll while continuing their subtle manipulations--and repeated that method elsewhere as needed. Very like how Anai operated.

To Janeway's mild surprise, Ara had been the one to write the final treaty with Unar. He had also arranged the tenets of the alliance that later became the Worlds Council, a development he was also drawn into. That time, however, he was not so ambitious. The regents had set up the prime ministry to handle those regional affairs, after all. By design, his work was to be centered at Desal.

For his people, however, he capitulated and assumed both positions for the first two decades following the council's creation.

More surprising was that Anai had been the one to assist the Unar's new leadership. The same woman had cursed Unar that first day at the Institute and had admitted she did not enjoy their company but would work with them. Obviously, a century ago, she overcame her completely justified distrust for enough time to help them recover.

She and Ara were not as forgiving in other matters, however. Trade with Desal's allies was carefully controlled in the beginning, as was the demilitarization of the region. Anai of Cezia decreed that: "Should violence be done to another within Irliae, be assured that this shall be met among Desal with equal treatment upon the offender. This shall need be our strict policy until we all may control ourselves in a manner which befits our advancement."

Janeway's brows rose to read that: It was as radical a statement as ever might have been voiced by any Desalian.

Ara's similar decree on their allies' transactions with Desal, some years later: "Corruption within walls of trade shall not be tolerated: It bears the stench and cause of the occupation--greed. All honest requests of commerce shall be accepted at Desal by the prime ministry; any infractions shall lead to that *people's* removal from the merchant league for a period of one revolution of Desalia-Four. Their government may choose to deal with that dealer as it pleases them to."

*Well, the Worlds Council *had* asked that Ara give his thoughts to the initial arrangements--and they got it,* Janeway grinned to herself. As she read further, she learned without surprise that the regents had their ways of finding those criminals. Mihor and Koba suffered embargoes twice each for the careful eyes of their chosen "courtier."

There were thousands of files of their policies for their allies and their own people, written and adjusted as needed over time, but basically achieving the same goal: The restoration of the "old way," the true spirit of Desal and Irlae. At the same time, a few necessary "corrections" were slipped in over the years, in order to balance their traditionally bureaucratic power structure and help prevent future stagnation.

It worked.

In their century after the war, they were firm and gentle but always busy leaders, working side by side with their citizens in academics, technical trades, community affairs, public debates--and raising their six children to do the same. Though, by the time of Babaki's birth, Irlae had recovered sufficiently enough that they could endeavor to live in relative normality despite their rank and wealth, and they did so as humbly and prosperously as any other large and highly educated family. By their account, they achieved a fine balance of ways.

Around the time of their first grandchild's arrival, they slowly, unobtrusively extracted themselves from their initially powerful positions, allowing their people to once again think for themselves and rely on the scholarship and ministry, the teachers, prichavas and elected ambassadors, for justice and spiritual guidance. The regents remained a center, a voice of reason, example and community--as was the true way.

For their dedication and sacrifice, their people revered them. They had given the entirety of their lives and consciences to Desalia and to Irlae. As was written on the entry wall of the Institute of Desal: "For the children, we are the earth in desire and the sun in conscience, having looked to the stars for our guidance. This must be for the future of Desalia."

They maintained their careers and active scholarship well after Ara began to suffer heart disease at a youthful-spirited hundred and twenty years. They retired only two years ago.

When they passed the legacy on to Havetsi and Cera, the regency would at last be what it had originally been--a unifying force for Desalians. Not a need, but a guide, not a power, per se, but the regent again became a respected member of the community who would bring people together. They among others had also firmly impressed upon Desal the lessons of their people's blight and resulting war to prevent the corruption that made their life's work in the first place. By the look of it, their people did not take a word for granted.

Janeway leaned back in her seat, her mouth turned up. What a life they had led, what a world of change they had made and seen.

Her smile faded.

In about six hours, they would hear the remainder of the story, the end of one history that would lead to the dynamic one that she had just read.

Then she really would have to mourn her people, who, if not for the regents' honest love for them and undying conscience, could have been considered pawns in the Anai's massive ambition to die with Desalia restored.

Then again, it was for *that* future that Tom and B'Elanna had striven. According to Anai and other accounts of that night in Azlre, Janeway's former officers had pleaded their desire in public council, gave everything they had to see Irlae's freedom become a reality. No matter how the desire to fight for Desal

had started in them, whether revenge or just having nowhere else to go, or even Sashana's influence, Janeway did believe by then that they would have wanted it as much as their adopted people did. If she'd been there, she would have, too.

Her people, gone, consigned to a noble death a century ago. When she had first heard it, every bone in her body had rebelled and scorned the loss. In some ways, she still did. That they gave themselves body and soul to the war to never know what their work and influence had helped produce was perhaps a fact of life in such a dangerous time, but was also a gross injustice.

Janeway drew a breath, pausing as she finally, honestly knew, it had indeed been better that Tom and B'Elanna had ended up in Irl'lae. She hated it, but it was the truth.

Little wonder Anai had insisted on telling the story. It was the only reparation she could make for that incredible, tacit favor she had asked of them.

Or was it?

They stopped along the way to the laboratory. In another half-hour by his time, Chakotay was scheduled to meet the Brijan ambassador and pick up the rest of what Voyager needed to begin their repairs, and they made good time with the woman's pace. Heading west and down through the middle of the busy city, they came to a dense park of flowering trees and a wading pool. Passing it, Havetsi suggested they venture through instead of around it.

"My errand asks I take myself to the catacomb entrance briefly," she said, turning to cross the street. "You have not seen our wading pools, I should think."

Looking at the barelegged people they approached, Chakotay grinned. "Not yet."

Indeed, on Desalia, a wading pool seemed entirely fitting for their people. Citizens came, often at their midday rest, to remove their wrap shoes, lift or roll up their gowns and trousers and wash their feet in the sparkling waters, which was fed by a crystalline aqueduct at one side. They came to bathe, but also to socialize, and sometimes they came to meet prospective lovers.

It was where Havetsi's parents had met. Both careered outside the scholarship, Beshelli was a respected data recorder; Koluba was a technician working on a science vessel and only just happened to be passing through the city. It did not take more than two glances for them to know of their attraction, nor more than two nights for them to consummate their desires. Throughout his quarter on Desalia, in fact, they continued to act upon it and became a much spoken on couple in Desal.

From this time came Aveketatsi, much to their surprise, but also their pleasure. The two, always rather liberal in their own right, thought it romantic that they would have a child spring from their passion alone, without any desire to bond. For that matter, they were just as pleased they had it in them to mate so quickly. Indeed, when he lifted his newborn daughter to her mother's belly, there was nothing but sheer pride and surprise in the man's face. They spoiled the girl with their love accordingly.

The lovers continued as such for some time, possessed fully of their finely tuned separate lives, longed-for and passionate reunions and their beautiful little girl, whom they openly called their greatest achievement--to Prihar with humility in that respect. The little girl, also a product of Ara's house, only

giggled at her silly parents before proceeding to go about her own way.

Havetsi bent to the edge of the pool and dipped her fingers in the water; then she caressed her temple with the wetness. "My tola--my father of birth--bore much love for this park. I have always brought myself for that I might feel his presence, his spirit as it was when he brought me." She glanced up to the commander. "I was but a girl when he met our blessed ancestors."

Chakotay watched her in the pleasantly solemn act and remembered the deer again, crossing the path. He blinked, but couldn't get rid of the impression, the way she was bent before the water, her fair clothing and fine, white scarves over her long brown hair, a portion of which she held from the ground in her graceful fingers...

"Forgive me for being a little confused," he ventured, "but do your people believe that the spirits of your...passed ones remain here or in the stars?"

Havetsi smiled. "Ka, you have been confused. The presence felt is what my tola gave to me, the memories in my being, in my memory. His spirit lives among the stars, watches us grow and become and awaits our presences without time. I should think he would bear pride, as I embraced many of these things as would any self-willed spirit."

He continued to watch her as she rose, seeing a distant cast to her eyes. He realized just then how similar it was to the peculiar awareness he'd noticed in Anai earlier and the other scholars of that world. "What is it like," he asked, as softly as before, "to have someone else's memories running around in your mind?"

"Running...around--around *what* within us?" Havetsi laughed, but held her hand up to excuse her giggles. "I beg your forgiveness, good man, as your people's way of speech is at times amusing to us." Seeing the commander's smile of acceptance, she lead him out of the park, through the thick, soft conifers. "It is not 'running around,' to begin. When another's memories are placed within a recipient, they are very carefully ingrained into our far memory--not conscious, present thought. Is this understood?"

"They're put in your long-term memory and not your immediate consciousness?" Chakotay ventured.

"Ka, this seems correct." Havetsi paused, thinking of a way to explain it best to an outsider. It was not a simple matter, as it was difficult to teach the same to an untrained Desalian without example. "Until one is of the scholarship themselves--or a particularly adept mid-novitiate--the procedure must be performed for them, and the scholars take precise care in their act.

"In bonding, the memories are both connected and woven. The procedure requires much experience to be performed with any ease. When it is another's memories, they are placed in sum at the base of the recipient's far memory. Yet at first, it is like...waves upon the shore, pulling at the sand in each tide. It rushes up upon you then ebbs, leaving its impression upon your mind. When one becomes accustomed to the presence, it becomes like...a book you know in every character, or a program you have seen so repeatedly that every detail of the story is known. Olfactory and tactile memory also are recalled."

She eased aside a final branch to return them to the street, back into the sun and to their brisker pace.

"It is difficult to have you know as I do," she continued, "yet it is a fair analogy. In essence, the added memory becomes a part of you. Your being is changed and balanced by it in your bondmate; you are added to when it is an archived memory. However, most scholars bear but a few lives within

them--which would include their bondmate's should be so joined. High scholars, archivists and family leaders bear more."

"How many?"

"It is not uncommon to bear thirty, though we yet rebuild our way in this. For three generations, our practice was not possible. My family's is one of but fourteen legacies that survived the occupation. When the Allanois legacy is given unto Cera and me, we shall have inherited twenty-nine family lives--Nali and Tola included--among several others in addition, such as the good elders Bala and Bakali, and Susik and Derra and the like, to add to the few we carry at present. Cera and I have prepared for this honor and gift for two ralkle--two of our years."

"It must take a serious course of training," Chakotay mused, "to supplement your telepathic abilities."

"There is an innate predisposition to telepathic ability, yet we are not born with this ability," Havetsi corrected him. "Our neurology is heightened by the kraja, yet a scholar's skill is indeed a trained art. Meditation, the centering with one's spirit then with others', and then diligent study, are some of the practices by which we bring ourselves to our greater awareness."

This at first surprised the commander, but then he thought about his own vision quests and how that might seem to someone who had never looked into their soul as deeply. "You mean even I could learn it."

"There is potential," Havetsi answered thoughtfully. "Much time would be required, as you are not accustomed to the practice, and a bearing of kraja. Yet the ability might be developed in you with proper dedication and patience."

They came around a façade heavily covered with vines. She bowed quickly to a group of elders standing by then spotted a woman within a heavy white cloak, who waited alone. "A moment, please," she told Chakotay and hurried across the boulevard. Pulling Anai's note from her coat pocket, she placed it in the elder woman's hand then touched her temple respectfully. The elder smiled briefly, patting Havetsi's cheek in thanks.

As Havetsi skipped back to him, Chakotay watched the old scholar glance through the note, blink then move quickly away.

Though curious of what that was about, he politely didn't ask. Instead, he followed Havetsi the rest of the way to the laboratories, thinking, oddly enough, on rustling leaves, slivered moonlight and feeling a fair sense of relief when their talk returned to the business that brought them in the first place.

"*Kim to the captain.*"

Janeway pulled her eyes away from her monitor. "Go ahead, Mr. Kim."

"*We're almost ready to begin the next transfer. Commander Chakotay has transferred all the supplies to the cargo bay. We're going to begin recharging the deflector grid on schedule.*"

"I'm on my way," Janeway said, feeling some certain satisfaction when she ended the communication.

It was about time--though that time had been blessedly short. The deflector had been running on emergency power alone since they came through the Barrier. Had it not been for the galacite and deuterium, among other raw materials donated to Voyager's cause, the full repair they had planned might have taken a couple months. They could have gotten by on a patch job, but it would have been susceptible at best. Any decent Kazon ship might have taken the deflector out with one good shot.

More satisfying still was seeing the crew working so smoothly together. She knew that her people would need time to deal with their personal loss. Kim, an easy gauge for the general morale, had been downright morose. His smile earlier in her ready room had been a great relief, as his face had been like stone since their first day on Desalia. He had been one of her finest officers during that time, though, putting aside his grief to get Voyager back on her feet.. Likewise, Carey had easily sacrificed his needed rest and time to readjust to get the engines back online.

She had commented to him the day before on his tiredness as she left engineering--as if she had any right but as captain to talk. Carey shrugged as a grin found his fallen facade. "It would've made B'Elanna nuts to see the systems ripped up like this."

Janeway shared that smile. He was absolutely right--and she could still hear B'Elanna barking orders left and right and staying up one more hour for just one more system--and then another. Those who loved a ship, whether a captain or an engineer, were all fair game.

As she looked around engineering, buzzing with life and reports from deflector control as the coils were recharged, she had a feeling B'Elanna would have been pleased with how things were progressing--

"Lieutenant Carey, I am reading a surge in the deflector control's EPS relays."

He glanced over to Vorik, who in Nicoletti's usual space was calmly trying to assess the problem. "Must be overloading the nodes," Carey said. "Shut down that relay and I'll divert the transfer through the main array. It'll be slower, but safer."

Janeway nodded. That sounded correct. Voyager hadn't had such pure supplies for over a year and she knew B'Elanna had compensated for that. Those transfer relays didn't need the boosters that were in place. Why they weren't removed earlier would be a question she'd have to ask later.

"The relay junction is locked," Vorik reported. "I have attempted to override the pathways, but they are not responding."

At the first beep out of the computer, Janeway moved forward, tapping her badge as she walked. "Janeway to deflector control. --Shut down all main power relays and discontinue the transfer."

"*They're not responding, Captain. We can try to manually override the transfer protocols but--*" A sharp whine cut the crewman off, which in turn was interrupted only by the computer's warning of a possible rupture in the power shunt.

"I'll override it from here," Harry announced, his fingers punching on the panel, diverting and cutting pathways until he too saw the result of it. "Captain, it won't respond. The power transfer is caught inside the deflector grid relay system."

"Captain!" Carey said, staring at the screen in front of him. "It's not the relays. One of the deflector coils is looping back the transfer--"

--And doubling back into the relays," Janeway finished shortly, cursing the rest under her breath and she found a panel and started working. Another warning came from the computer, but she ignored it. "If we don't stop this transfer, we'll blow the entire grid out. Shut down the deflector and vent the unaffected relays."

"*Chakotay to the captain. Captain, we're reading an overload in the deflector.*"

"A section of the deflector has locked up. --Lieutenant Carey, target the defective coil and beam it off Voyager."

"I can't get a lock on it, Captain!"

"Divert power to the transporters," Janeway told him.

"Coil stress has risen by a factor of four," Harry reported. "If we boost the annular confinement beam, we might cut through the interference."

"Do it!" Janeway ordered as she glared at her readings. If she could have run to deflector control in time, she would have. The power levels were still rising exponentially... "Override the safety protocols and target the grid itself," she croaked. It was the last thing she wanted to do, but better that than replace an entire department along with ten more crewmen and the *entire* deflector.

Below on Desalia, where she and Chakotay had been curiously monitoring the transfer, Havetsi also stared at what she saw on her rapidly scrolling display. Reaching out, she tapped Chakotay's comm badge and nodded to his reaction. "Captain Havetsi to Captain Janeway. --Allow me to transport the affected assembly. This can be performed from my location."

"*The field is too unstable to get a lock,*" Janeway argued.

"Our transporters are superior to yours," Havetsi countered, glancing to Chakotay then back to the controls. "It is within our grasp now; it shall be transported to Duvrid, our second moon. The high magnetic factor of the satellite may prevent complete destruction."

There was a slight pause--then another sharp whine. "*You have my permission,*" Janeway finally said, her relief mixing with the remaining exasperation and shot of confusion.

"My thanks," Havetsi replied, understanding the captain's tone. However, there was a time when a favor was more important than pride--and the younger woman was glad Janeway knew it as well as she had come to. "The assembly is transporting now."

On the other end of the comm, a noticeable silence filled engineering. Havetsi and Chakotay might have even heard Captain Janeway let out her breath. Then, "The transfer has stabilized. We're shutting it down."

Chakotay heard the defeat in the captain's voice, but chose to let it wait while Havetsi still tapped commands into her systems. "How is it?" he asked, unable to read the display she was working on.

"I assess it now," the lady told him and nodded a moment later. "Ka, there has been a loss of four primary coils and three relays; the others have been separated and incurred no damage. They may be refitted and reinstalled."

Janeway continued to stare at the monitor, that time at the readings and telemetry Havetsi was

sending to her. From the laboratory, Havetsi had managed to nip the affected coils and relay assembly out of the deflector, transport them about seven hundred thousand kilometers away to a magnetically charged moon--and then work on them enough to stabilize and separate them.

"I'd love to have a look at your transporters someday, Captain," Janeway said, wryly for the irony of her situation. A hundred and ten years ago, after all, Desal was committed to herding goats. They certainly had recovered where it counted.

Predictably, Havetsi was both gracious and humble. "Desal's technology is the elder, good captain, and likewise bore fine teachers. It pleases to share our blessing with you. I do bear regret, however, that I had not before. In part, this is my responsibility.*"

Janeway couldn't resist her smile, even with her engineers hurrying around to commence their new round of repairs. "You and your people's generosity has been far more than we've known in this quadrant already, Havetsi. Thank you."

The communication ended soon after as Havetsi completed her work on the parts she had beamed to Duvrid; then she glanced at Chakotay. "Would it please you to return to your ship now? I shall be contacting my crew and taking the Ki'ial to recover your missing equipment and the fragments. We may share the walk to the transport."

Chakotay blinked his stare away from the monitor. "Please."

With a nod, she transferred the data to her ship and moved to retrieve her robe.

One of the children brought two tiny F'dehll gasks home from his play at the gates. They were the last two in a litter well past nursing, and the young lady simply wished a good home for them. Having run to his tola to ask if they may choose them, young Llichda proudly carried the puppies into the yard, much to the delight of his many cousins--and to Ara. They had not had household gasks for several years.

The pups scampered over and into the little stream that drained from the pond then proceeded to knock over baskets of trimmings, but even Anai could not criticize the quickly dirtying yarnballs. Their bright green eyes and happy little licks easily seduced her. She only warned Llichda and the other children to be certain they did not eat the fish in the pond and that they were cleaned before being permitted in the house. Her elderly commands given, she tossed the gasks a handful of cheese scraps she cut for them and asked Ezya to procure a wire brush from the replicator for their thick amber fur.

The pups were glossy with grooming and fattened with cheese, hard bread and joth milk by the time they heard some recently familiar noise from the street outside the garden. As the gate was opened and the greetings came forth, Anai noted that a rather relieved party had brought itself to the garden that late afternoon. Havetsi and Cera arrived with them, the former having also returned from her ship and apparently meeting her bondmate at the Institute on her way home.

As she supervised the selections her grandsons brought from the kitchen, Anai's brow rose to hear the comments between the tired Voyager crew. Though happy that they were able to repair the problem with assistance from the Desalians at the station and on the nearby Ki'ial, they were still chagrined that it had happened in the first place.

"Before we knew it..." was a common phrase, as was, "couldn't have predicted..." Even Voyager's captain and commander exchanged, "next time, we'll take it apart completely," and "the adjustments we'd made," and "I'm glad we were able to re-modify the deflector at all, considering."

Despite the curiosity her keen ear had brought her, Anai finished the serving table in good time, glad to feed the needy crew, to settle their stomachs and assist in comforting their excited day. Nevertheless, when she took herself back to Ara, who was propped up against a tree with the puppies sleeping on his outspread robe, she motioned Havetsi to kneel by them.

"What has happened upon the Voyager?" Anai queried.

Sighing, Havetsi relayed the unlucky yet ultimately productive day in as much detail as she could express briefly, causing both of the elders to scowl.

"That was preventable," Ara said first, his fingers still curling on the back of the little gask's ear. "They had not borne the preparation to properly commit to such power transfers."

"They bore impatience," Anai agreed. "Plainly, a rerouting of the intake array and polarity stabilizers before the transfer would have corrected this--after a thorough analysis of the entire deflector, of course, to assess its condition. They must not be faulted, however. Their former engineer was strident in her maintenance and caution and had taken much control to herself. Her authority had ever been a sensible choice for others."

Havetsi nodded quietly. "Yet the systems are repaired this sun."

"You have assisted?" Ara asked.

"Yes, my spirit-father. I and my crew were additional laborers."

"Good," he replied, a smile of approval marking his lips. Had he more power in his arms, he would have petted her nearby knee, too. But he stroked the gask again instead, grinned at its sleepy growl. He peered askance to her in his next thought. "It is curious why the defective assembly was not simply transported away from the deflector."

"It was," Havetsi answered, "by myself." She nodded at Anai's sudden attention. "The Voyager's transporter systems are not to be compared to our own. Aside from the basic transference of matter and material, they are rudimentary devices. This was not seen so clearly until this sun."

The elders stilled to think on that, sharing a knowing glance. Praising their grandchild again, they bid she return to her bondmate and take her evening meal.

Anai stood soon after Havetsi did, moving with the small tray she would share with Ara to the buffet. On her way around the table, she eased herself near the wearier of the two captains there.

"Kathri," she said, choosing some slices of sirril for Ara. He had been through enough that day that he deserved his favorite sweet fruit. "Havetsi has informed me of this sun's events. I feel for the trouble you have borne and for the additional labor you have been caused."

Kathryn gave her a small nod, though the other woman wasn't looking at her. "Thank you. But we've fixed the problem. Next time, we'll avoid that."

She watched the elder move her fingers to an assortment of flat breads, spotted red with some sort of

vegetable. So simple, so humble, Janeway remembered, her mind finally straying from the business of the ship. Though, she certainly hadn't forgotten their first meeting, nor the deference Babaki had displayed at the shrunken, creaking elder's presence. Anai could be formidable when she felt the need to be.

More, knowing more about what it must have been like for Anai, who had been born into a poverty most Federation citizens could not imagine, losing all her siblings, her parents and then her grandparents, her freedom and innocence, and finally the siblings she had adopted and into whom she had placed all her hopes. This was on top of being saddled with the unflinching goal of Desalia's restoration for over a hundred and thirty years, meanwhile keeping her spirit and good temper in tact. For it all and despite her misgivings, Kathryn simply respected the hell out of her.

"What are those?" she asked quietly, pointing at the little red spots.

Anai smiled. "They are irrod--a citrus peel kneaded into the dough for flavoring. You may be pleased with it, Child."

As Kathryn looked again at it before politely choosing a small portion of the bread, Anai stole a longer look at the woman. The circles were less apparent in her eyes, but the strain showed. The embarrassing failure of her planned repair to that essential system on her ship had taken more out of her than she would ever admit. The discouragement and the question of how to adjust her crew to their loss must have reappeared quite readily in her darker moments that day.

Anai had no doubt that in time they would adjust. Would it be in time? The Voyager would leave them and the Outer Barrier nebula and fly back into the claws of those who had made themselves violent against the solitary ship. And past that wretched space, who could say what other terrors awaited them?

Lost of crew, of experience and talent, their plight would be that much more difficult. Anai knew this as well as any simple fact, and she certainly knew the feeling of discouragement, of hopelessness...

Reaching out, she stroked the younger woman's arm. "It is meant you shall be well, I would believe, good lady," she whispered then moved herself back to her bondmate with their tray.

Ara did not need to ask when he saw her expression, particularly when she slipped some portions of their meal into the pocket of her robe. He nodded unobtrusively and pulled his hand away from the gask. "Yet bring the sirril in a cloth," he told her, a familiar old lilt in his tone as he cut his stare to her. "I should wish it."

She laughed quietly, glad to hear him improving with the day. Doctor Gihora had done well with him, indeed. "You are most adored by me, sweet Ara," she told him and motioned to a nearby Osna for his assistance as she extricated Ara's robe from the pups. "We require a moment more amongst each other before the painting this moon," she told her youngest child's bondmate.

Osna did not resist helping his elder-father to stand, though he did peer wisely at them both. "And where shall you take yourselves to rest?"

Anai barely smiled, though she wanted to. Osna, eighth prime minister of Desalia, had dealt enough with the Worlds Council and with his regents that he knew an unspoken directive when it slid around his feet. Though like many others he had been concerned about what reserve the elders had employed of the family since the arrival of their guests, he had also seen their devising for what it was and understood.

"The study shall be adequate," Anai told him.

"And private," noted Osna.

"Ka, Child. It shall be."

"We shall have transferred the appropriate components and bio-matter at your request. --This may be taken to your security officer, Child, for inspection. He shall likely be a fair voice in the further analyses, and he would bear the necessary authority to procure what changes are required."

"All we may and need share lies with you now, the remainder of what we may do," Ara told the two in the viewscreen.

The Doctor nodded, offering a small smile. "Thank you."

"Yes, thank you," Kes said. "This really does mean a lot, more than you probably know."

"Gye, Child," Anai said, "its importance is known. Despite any result, then this promise is meant, and was more wished upon its asking than shall be known by *you*." Straightening, she met the hologram's and Kes' eyes in turns. "Despite our trials and stubbornness, Children, for your sakes we wish you good fortune and wellness. More, no difficulty on our parts is worth denying you a hope we have already inspired. Fate shall see its worth now."

With but another nod from Ara, she cut the communication.

Kes blinked heavily in her misted eyes, trying her breath to slow her relieved heart. Beside her, the Doctor did not move but to reset the monitor. "We'll talk to Tuvok tomorrow," Kes concluded, collecting herself quickly. "Or I will. I'll make an appointment to speak with him."

The Doctor furrowed his brow. "Tomorrow? Why not now?"

"Tuvok is on bridge duty right now. And..." She shrugged. "I really want to hear the rest of the story."

He watched her start away, lighter than she had been all day--or yesterday, for that matter. "Kes?" he asked, diverting himself with his center console before she could turn back around. From hat posture, he barely glanced her way. "I'd like to see a copy of the transcript--in case there's anything there I should know about."

Her smile grew. "I'll bring it for you."

The torches flickered, just beginning to dominate the light in the yard. The conversation echoing inside was quiet yet cheerful. As always, Anai blessed it, those happy sounds in the garden she had Ara had spent years cultivating for just that purpose--those gatherings Bala and Bakali claimed to have taken for granted. Within but a few years, they had returned the garden to the way it had been before the war--save the opulent fences and other indulgences. The nature, however, was just the same.

Their dear elders did love their last fifteen ralkle among the living, spent in their home and that blessed place of family and community.

Ara and Anai felt the same for all their years there.

They appeared just after the dinner was completed, accepting Babaki's cheerful greeting. Anai embraced her youngest child fully then nodded for her to assist Ara. Then she eyed Havetsi, who eased herself near as the elders made their way through.

"At sunrise, as you journey to the Institute," Anai whispered, "take yourself again to the catacombs. There shall be another letter for you to take to Brymare'i. The Voyager requires transporters of worth and I would see the finest they are permitted to possess be adapted to their ship."

Havetsi grinned. "Nali ka. I shall suggest this to Kathri, as well--a captain to another captain should inspire less embarrassment."

"My thanks, good child." Anai returned her smile, but hardly felt it when she saw the dais approaching her. With all her duties completed but that, she again had to return to the one, that last one, that she had wished forever, yet forever had dreaded.

She yet did not know how she would finish her painting; the thought alone sent chills into her spine, made her pulse jump. Ara's hand drifted out and touched hers. Her fingers immediately wrapped around his.

Should it not be meant... she thought, and then breathed through her sudden anxiety. The garden gate opened; in the corner of her eye, a quickly moving Neelix told her who had brought herself at last. She stilled herself with all that her training had given her, save examining the reason for her anxiousness in itself. She knew well enough what was the cause.

"You shall begin, Anai," Ara gently told her, "and then it shall be completed as you see fit. Let it bring itself by nature's path, my spirit. No error can be committed through this way."

Anai breathed a quick, deep sigh. "Ara ka."

Not once in all her years of painting words for her family, her people, had she ever known such feelings as she placed her foot onto the cool, white stone of the dais. She had rather always been proud to perch herself there at her bondmate's side and open the minds of her own to the lessons and blessings of the lives she had seen, heard and learned and even experienced herself at times. It had always been a privilege of her survival, accomplishments and burdened spirit to turn Desal's heavy past into a blessed teaching, the distant past into a near one, or simply give various matters meaning.

She tried to feel it then, that humble pride, as she turned and looked out upon the faces that had come to hear her, who looked upon their elders with regard, respect and expectation, and from her family, love.

It was for them she did this, too, she reminded herself. It was for the benefit of their spirits, for them all, their children, for Desalia.

It was also for her and Ara's own consciences, she knew without shame. But to what extent?

It was not for her to know until the moment came, of course.

After helping Babaki seat Ara, and then touching her child's temple, Anai lowered herself to sit, pulling his hand to her thigh and closing her eyes as the silence filled the garden.

High above, the tiniest breeze stirred, rustling soft leaves. Then it faded away, coming and going like a spirit in passing. Anai breathed the sweet air it brought.

"Many stories within this one have not been told," she began, the creak of her voice betraying her intended softness. "Some of my steps shall be placed there this moon--lightly, however, as not all of my knowledge has been granted a full telling.

"As spirits walk through the forest of the living, paths diverge and wind away. They may meet, and then cross away yet again, at times perchance, other times with questionable welcome or farewell. On any of the paths chosen, however, entirely new foundlings and flora may be taken as our own, and for that do our blessed spirits continue on, even brave the rough thicket to find the clear pond, the mossy earth and the seedling. The traveler alone judges the worth of such a journey. In continuance, we invariably shall always return to the crossing, and perhaps next view a tree..."

She opened her eyes and found the commander's wondering gaze in her view.

"...for nature destines the roots to spread..."

& S tems

"...And the trunk is meant to create the branch..."

"They return our fire!"

"Brace yourself--"

Some seventy revolutions before that day, not too far from that place, the empress Yusi had stood at the center of her regal bridge. She bowed before the Unar commander who had sought and captured her, knowing her doom, secretly praying for her teenage son, who would inherit all from her--immediately, if necessary. In her ornate robes and heavy ornaments, she quietly knelt at the commander's demand.

That day, three generations later on the same debris littered, coolant steaming, sparking bridge, two filthy, coughing, exhausted Desalians clawed their way up from the floor to their seats and punched their panels, damned before they would accept defeat from the two remaining Unar ships, one of which for five years of that war had been a pest of a foe. Their friends in the field, equally staggering, echoed across the open comm, calling out the pest ship's shifting location.

The first ship was a more practical target, however.

Toma of Azlre narrowed his eyes at it. "Bringing us around to the trail ship's tail!"

"The Korchau's aft shields have been compromised!" Be'i cried out. Aratra was trying hard that day, but had not been lucky.

"How did that happen?"

"The hawk! --We are coming around it and moving away!"

As if hearing the singular prayer from the small, white ship, the looming grey craft turned from its prey

and began a new pursuit...

"Prihar i'i mogra'oc lull," Sashana'i swore between her teeth as she crawled into a small access port. "Reactors have made themselves inactive as well. I shall divert the power now!"

"*Defenses shall be required sooner,*" Aratra told her. "**Two more owls fly around our sphere and but as many rodents are here to avert them. --Be swift!*"

Sashana'i, born in the forced refugee city of Sacezia, granddaughter to Dulla and heiress to the ancient line of Allanois, had somehow become an astute engineer. *Of course, Be'i and Toma had been more influence than they are aware of,* she reminded herself as she unlocked one set of plasma constrictors and prepared to manually divert that system.

In a small way, Tom Paris and B'Elanna Torres had been bonded since their last day on Uillar, except only in her. In her desperation, having found two whose passion could assist her in resurrecting Desal, she had thrown herself on them and collected their memories, connected her own neural energy to theirs with what little ability she possessed, forced her own energy to support theirs. It had maintained their lives in the frozen smoke and desperate panic, on the battered ship that came for them, in the terrible wait until they were finally delivered to Cezia.

On Uillar, Aratra had found her, shuddering and covered with their blood, unwilling to release their energy from herself. Touching her temple, he instantly knew what she was doing and shuddered, knowing the consequences. By the nature of their union, Aratra would soon have their memories, too. Though they carried the lives of many scholars, they were not trained scholars themselves. Accepting the two's memories would not be a pleasurable experience.

As always, he accepted her decision--the necessity--and cared for all three of them throughout their dark, plagued journey. Finally, at Bakali's clinic, Sashana'i quickly disconnected her link with the two. They told the honorable elder nothing when she declared the outsiders' survivals a blessing of fate alone.

"But one more petra'a!" Sashana'i announced as she pulled another node in that cramped access hatch, feeling the wild turns he was making, knowing where the technique had been earned.

As was the way, she and her bondmate indeed had been affected by the connection they secretly shared with their siblings. It was incomplete, of course, not in the least a true bonding. Yet Sashana'i and Aratra had needed only practical teaching to know how to utilize Tom Paris and B'Elanna Torres' skills, though far more experience to accept their nerve. The extent of their siblings' violent pasts was certainly not a part of either regent's natures. They had taken great pains to know the better of it without being too horrified.

Conversely, it took but a short examination for Sashana'i to be assured that the two were acting in truth when they made their decisions about adopting Desal, eventually in full. Looking into their memories, she could see it, could see their need for belonging and pride, for self-acceptance and successful responsibility, for contentment and for love. In her own nature, Sashana'i also understood those needs.

So she had gladly stood at their bonding, even as she devised a solution for the fate she had created and the need Aratra felt as well to balance their particular crimes.

She meant to give them "the best of all possible worlds," as their birthpeople's saying went. If not that,

she would try for at least a few worlds. In either case, fate would indeed have a chance to make up its mind on what indeed was meant. However, Sashana'i knew that deep inside them, too much had been left incomplete in that other life. Even a peaceful passing would be one with unresolved dilemmas, not only on their parts, but among those they had been associated with and the families left behind, far away.

"The shield generator is activated!" Sashana'i cried as a blast took out yet another system, onto which she threw herself and called out to her crew for parts. Pulling and turning the assembly as quickly as her small hands would allow, she managed to bring impulse and primary power back online before the shields could be disrupted again.

The ship responded accordingly: She could practically hear Aratra calling out evasions and tactics three decks above her.

But she concertedly drove the sympathetic distraction from her mind for the time. For the present, she had a warp reactor to reinitialize, too, and that tended to be a measure more complicated...

"The Korchau responds!" Be'i announced with a sharp breath of relief.

"Sashana'i bears yet some ingenuity," Toma grinned as he pulled the Azallis around the shield bubble of a ship far too large to compensate for the angles he was pulling. Had he been any less concerned for the other ships left in that battle, he would have thought it was too easy, even wondered why such a hulking supply cruiser would be stupid enough to bring itself out to that fast, busy field. Or perhaps it was all they had left to pull out.

Then again, he knew better by then than to underestimate the Unar's ability to regurgitate a squadron of ships seemingly from nowhere. They had been doing that for three years.

"Into the nacelle grid," Be'i told him, her eyes pinned on the tender hull seam, the rest of her working on pure instinct as they neared-- "Plicta! Fire!"

"Impulse has been compromised!"

"Activating the thrusters. --Bolmra, concentrate the shields to our port."

"Diverting disruptor array to the drive. --Latsari, install the ninth canister!"

"*I have removed the spent canister now.And now the new is installed!*"

"Plicta, bring the torpedoes online and fire!"

A projectile was shot from the aft bay and whirled towards the soft belly of the Unar ship. They prayed as it flew into the dusky hull and breathed again to see the effect.

Moments later, the trailing ship exploded.

The shards of hull and parts flew at the Azallis' wavering shield bubble, buckling it slightly. After, they floated lazily, as if time had slowed. Then all but the ship's hissing systems seemed to stop. Simply stop.

Blinking, they looked down to assess the damage left behind. The Unar hawk ship had fled, Plicta noted. Their bloodshot eyes drew up to the viewscreen as they collected their breath in tandem. All that

was left of Unar was but the debris of the fifth ship they had taken that day. It was a fine success, despite the hawk, which had indeed escaped.

It was obvious, but no less surprising to them at times, how fate had yet again decided they remain among the living. By all right, they should have been killed years ago.

Not that they had ever minded surviving.

"*That vulture has escaped, Toma!*" came an Antral snarl over the still open comm. "*Again! It sulks away *again!* But I *will* have another lunge at him!*"

The captains of the Azallis shared a look. Their fellow captain had become determined to catch that deadly and persistent ship, had made it his goal in that war. Though he tended to disappear in the middle of a fight to chase his self-ordained challenge, they couldn't blame him--and were usually thankful for it. Once more, their own fine craft had been beaten beyond spacebound repair with the "grey hawk's" help, and two more resistance ships had been destroyed.

Yet more had survived than found the ancestors. They had to remember that.

"*Had I any more power left,*" Novren continued, "*I would hunt him! Drag him on his knees in shame--to your toes, Toma and Be'i!*"

"Ka, and you would see him crawl to Dviglar's internment cells to answer for his many crimes," she said tiredly, tapping her sensor panel back to life, and then kicking the base of the console to clear up the static.

"*Hear my words now, Be'i of Azlre, for his pursuit of you, I will do it, even if you will not. It will happen som--*"

"While this might be a pleasant thought, Novren," she cut in, "we bear our pressing concerns, such as surviving our systems' failures. May we work while you talk? It should not distract you too dearly, I should think. --Aratra? We read a surge in your primary plasma reactor... Aratra?" She looked at her bondmate, who also listened. "Do you receive? I have read... Gyi'at, that is an improvement. Aratra, please answer?"

"*We bear wellness,*" came the regent's ragged voice above the unmistakable hiss of crashed junctures. "*Enough power remains to arrive at laskeb, though it shall require... More repair shall be required before we may take ourselves to Cezia.*"

"We all shall, I would think," said Toma, trying not to wince at the burn across his jaw, already corrupted with soot as his ship screamed at him in insult. For a fleeting moment, he prayed uselessly for silence, merely silence again. Relinquishing that vain distraction, he began typing into his comm to contact the other ships, namely Miztri's, whose comm systems were down.

"When we are prepared," he continued, "I shall set a course for laskeb..." He turned an exhausted but resolved grin to his lady, "...which ancient territory now is free."

She grinned back, holding his gaze for another moment before pushing herself to her feet. "I shall assist Latsari now, now that 'Ahab' has decided to take himself bird hunting again."

He chuckled. It was particularly when he was too tired to shed some sort of wit that he was even more thankful for his lady's, even if he knew her lightness wouldn't last after she got to the engine room. It

never did, though she rarely showed her discouragement to the others.

Toma felt his knowledge confirmed not long after. He moved to his feet to follow her path.

But fifteen minutes later, he, Be'i and their crew had touched the temple of their friend, Tallyla, and blessed his way onto their ancestors. After a quiet prayer of words far too commonly said in those times, Toma of Azlre gently lifted the corpse, ignoring the stitch the weight caused in his side.

It was his duty, as elder captain.

Stopping so others could bless Tallyla's way, he took it to the stasis with the two others who had been freed to the ancestors during that mission. After placing the body inside, he watched the doors slowly close upon the corpse, remaining a moment more in respect for the memory of a man who had been a good one. They all were good, of course, but he never neglected to think that.

Moving away, he let it go with a long, heavy breath.

Their two week mission had exhausted their resources as readily as their bodies, with fights lasting hours, all the maneuvers he had ever learned put to use and every systems patchwork his bondmate might have conjured, eleven passings on their ship and several close calls which still made his heart rabbit when he recalled them. The others, from their bridge to the engine room to their passed friends, had likewise given everything of their strength and spirit.

A small part of him felt an immeasurable satisfaction for what could be called either fate or sheer luck. Naturally, Sashana'i often reminded him and Be'i that the people of their birth would have been proud of their achievements, and that they were the ones to make their success. They did admit to some, though they had always credited their crew in the same breath.

Every face still among the living realm was evidence of that praise. Their crew, haggard but hopeful after days of fighting in that hard-won field, had followed them utterly into the bowels of Prihar and back again. They, having given up so much of their own way to dedicate their lives and spiritual peace to a better future, were the truer heroes.

Even so, Toma did have to admit that he and Be'i had done rather well, too. He grinned to think what a captain he had become--among other things, many things, so much more than he had been or had ever thought he would be. Of course, he was able to accept and be thankful for what teachers he'd had in the past, as well as the learning he'd finally allowed himself in the present. He had grown, up and older--and far wiser.

It had come together rather well, he thought.

Be'i believed much the same, allowing herself a sympathetic grin before yanking out the panel from beneath the deflector control junction. With a nod to Latsari, she stood again and wiped away the dust from the monitor. Straightening it on its loosened bolts, she commenced with diverting their fuel supply to the secondary systems with fingers well past the sore stage.

In her darker moments, she wondered why she bothered to neaten that common mess. Each time they fought such a battle, their once beautiful ship ended up about the same--looking like it did when they found it at Dviglar. Perhaps it was but for a show of pride and lack of defeat. Indeed, it *was* pride and standing stalwart even in destruction. It was done not only for their own sakes, but for a crew that needed their strength and utter unwillingness to fold under the weight of Unar, who she openly admitted

had become a formidable, though still conquerable, enemy.

For that crew and others, she had related it to the demons they all bore within themselves, who created Prihar from their own downfalls and weaknesses, a thing she knew of painfully--and doubly--well. It seemed only natural not to destroy their demons, both an impossible and not very practical venture, but to put them to rest in a way that was effective and would rather give them further opportunity to learn better of them.

Well, at least once one learned to *accept* such a thing, she grinned to herself.

Outwardly, too, they would face their challenges with what wisdom they bore; they did not allow the effect of Unar to stain their ship as much as possible, as much as they would allow it upon their spirits. Unar would live another day--and the resistance would let them have that. All that Desal wished, after all, was a return to the former and adhered to territories of Irliae. It was not too much to ask.

Or at least that was what their elders had always suggested, and she had come to agree with it. She disliked it when she heard it first, but she soon agreed the proposed solution to the war was indeed an acceptable balance for all in Irliae, though certainly it included the resistance's success.

So, Be'i had overcome those darker days with her ultimate mood in good order, like that one, with that engine she had put back together piece by piece almost seven years ago--and chunk-by-chunk thereafter. It was how she managed to show so much temperance before her crew. It was for them and others, after all, that she was there and would remain, after all.

If only they might get the Unar to agree on the plan, that balance would come about.

Soon enough, she knew, it would.

She moved without hurry around the laskeb communications center panel, her dirty hand drifting over the edge until it touched the frame of the monitor she needed to read. Tucking a thin braid back into her scarves, she shook her head at what she squinted to see. In a way, it was unfortunate that the reason was all too easy to find.

Down the corridor, a door was released from its lock and grinded shut. The sounds of the celebration outside, the cheers and other reveling in the late afternoon haze of the capital city, faded quickly to the hard echoes of the old council hall where they were gathered.

"This is idiocy," Be'i stated. "Little wonder it has taken so many du'vee to secure this small area. They rejuvenate their deuterium, galacite and ferranide sources faster than we ever could."

"A compliment to us," Aratra noted, "yet not good to see."

Sashana'i also saw it and leaned up on the panel, elbows first. Too tired to think for herself, she looked again to her sibling. "How might those ore supplies be cut, Be'i? There are so many routes--reconnecting each time we sever them."

"Sollve'a and I may turn a front around the deep corner of Gozhor," Miztri suggested, but nodded as Toma opened his mouth. "The risk is known, my friend, yet to destroy that most direct link which powers

them would be a beginning."

"I would agree," added Givadra.

Aratra, sitting on an inactive panel to view the larger viewscreen before them, let his eyes roam over the paths he knew Miztri would devise. She and Givadra liked to slip in on radionic disruptions, common around Gozhor. But the Unar were accustomed to that trick--and the Merraj had lost its photonic shield grid over a year before, leaving it with only the standard complement. "It carries too much danger now," he finally said. "Moreover, without a complete takeover of the region, the route would recover. Unar feed like land eels--they re-grow their limbs for each amputation when they need only chew another vine for that nutrition. The food must be taken, not just the limb."

Medrove, still nursing a burn on his shoulder, tapped in a few parameters with a trembling hand. "I concur. Gozhor is not the place to strike--yet. We must find the source of the supply and rid it of Unar first."

Miztri nodded. "Perhaps you speak wisely."

But Novren shook his head, not looking at anything but the monitor under his eyes, glowing with the trail of remaining supply lines and communication relays. Each one was a pestilence to him, another chance for the Unar to recover--which they had several times since the war began. "I think we should take Unar where they live and now. Take our remaining ships and snuff out their fire where they breathe first."

"To what pleasing effect would you kill women and children, Novren Pridalar?" Be'i queried, peering at him askance. "So that the supply would continue with far more insult driving your victims' dominants? The vindicators shall follow you out as well--and I would not have you were you fool enough to lead them."

"Then we will regroup at the Onast Sector and take them from behind!"

"You might prefer your booty as such Novren," Toma replied, "yet you would be foolish to brandish such a meager weapon in public." With that, he transferred the data Novren hadn't read to the main viewscreen so he could see what the rest of them had.

"Vyuch gitro!" Novren swore, half laughing. Though Desalian, Toma was blessed with as sharp a repartee as any self-respecting Antral--or at least the man knew how to mock it. But looking up at the Unar configurations in full, his brow drew down to see that the insult was deserved. Whipping his head around, he turned a glare to his agent--*his* agent, to his sudden shame.

"Tridl!" he barked, gesturing in angry jerks at the man. "Why is the Onast Sector still encamped with those filthy Unar? There are over thirteen colonies! Six civilizations I told you to begin assessing last year!"

"Oh, and it is such an easy thing to do, Captain!" Tridl scoffed despite the murder in his superior's eyes. "With what power? For all the rationing--"

"Those are supplies that would have been well earned were you performing your duties as requested of you," Be'i responded coolly, "and repairs that would have been made *in spite* of your negligence were you not too far the coward to face your contractors."

Tridl drew a slow breath, calming the dignity that often suffered in the regent siblings' hands. He knew better than to engage the fire-eyed Desalian woman--particularly in front of her bondmate. "Then where will you have me go?"

Toma pulled the telemetry around so that they were looking at it from a flatter perspective; then Sashana'i took a step forward and pointed.

"Dajid is lesser developed in culture, yet has always borne great resources," she told them. "A minimal labor internment camp lies on the north continent."

"Which brand of camp, good regent?" Givadra asked, concerned.

"It houses the families of criminals to Unar," Aratra answered. "Largely Antral and Dajidians are interred there, though our sources have said there may be Desalians, as well."

"An camp of Antral families beneath our noses?" Novren growled, glaring again at Tridl.

"Yet the Dajidians' spon is quite pure, and once was mined heavily in that region. Perhaps freeing that camp and taking the spon mine would be a good beginning."

Be'i drew up her brow to hear that. "We had believed that Dajid was a low-warp society with Unar presence and good resources, ka, yet not a world bearing rich ferranide deposits."

Sashana'i flushed, stiffening as her eyes turned away. "You had not known?" she wondered aloud. "Be'i, I believed I had written about their spon exports."

Be'i shook her head, but let it go. It was not the first time that Sashana'i had neglected to tell them some small detail of one sort or another, particularly since the war began. Aratra had explained that with the mass of knowledge they bore and a lack of scholarly training, neither of them could remember anything from the lives they bore instantly. From what she heard from their elders and the recovered scholars and word painters--not to mention what Be'i knew of her own bonding with Toma--it seemed right.

Be'i wished for it, anyway. She always had disliked coming onto information after the fact, particularly in their present situation.

"Dajid is your objective, Tridl," Be'i said, "with s start in the liberation of that camp's inmates. Latsari will be applied to for to for our remaining plasma canisters for power--and we all shall add to it where we can. Complete your duty this time is all we ask." She tilted her head the other way, grinned slightly. "For Irlae and for all else you hold dear, good man, I should think you would find much to gain in it--and not lose."

Tridl's characteristic sigh was met by Toma's hard stare, intense above his mouth, pursed in neither a grin nor a frown. "You shall go," Toma told the trader, "and the people waiting for our efforts shall know freedom. You leave tomorrow, no later--"

"But my ship--"

"Shall be repaired!" Toma barked. "Neglect your duty once again, Tridl Himad, and I and my bondmate shall use your hard head as our next torpedo and your prick to stop off a leaking conduit--and do not tempt us to rationalize such a fate. You bear sufficient knowledge not to do *that*."

"And it would be good if you did not tempt *me*," Novren added, hot with his own humiliation. Were Tridl not as good as he was once he did get around to his work, Novren would likely have left him to the Unar years before. "Requisition your needed supplies and we will continue our plans. --This is a *command*." His fingers flicked at the nearby door with enough suggestion the his lieutenant jumped to open it.

Only when the trader had shrunk away to the corridor did Miztri allow her grin. "Toma, I shall not speak to Dalra of your corruptive tongue. He would have you quote the *Tenants of the Spirits' Path* yet again."

Toma's hard expression melted into a quirky grin as he held up his palms. "It was merely diplomacy, Miztri."

"Vya!" Sashana'i laughed, hearing similar chuckles around the room. They all knew Toma had no patience for Tridl--less and less so since inheriting Be'i's part of it.

Grinning at the better cheer in the room, Toma strode across to Novren and grabbed his forearm. "So, we plan for the Onast sectors?"

Novren returned the gesture and gave a firm nod. "I would rather my own homeworld be secure, but it will never happen unless we do follow through there, stuff Unar into its hole."

"And take their supply line," Be'i reminded them both as she came around her bondmate and looped her arm in his. "I would believe that with their supplies in the resistance's hands, the end shall be well brought. We should not become complacent this, rather press hard on the line claimed by us."

Novren smiled. "It will be a good thing to see, Mother Be'i."

She grinned at his slightly derisive nickname. He had once said she reminded him of any fine Antral matriarch let loose of her house, for she could be so willful. For some odd reason--likely her bondmate's fault--she found it endearing, coming from him. "Be safe until then, friend."

"And yourselves. --But are you departing already?"

"As Latsari and I repair our warp drive, yes," Be'i told him.

"We wish for home," Toma said, "and better repairs. The Azallis took many casualties on hull and life. Much remains for us to do."

"The plasma shall be left for Tridl, however."

Novren held up his fingers. "No. Retain it for yourselves. I will outfit him. --Please. I have less distance to travel. Go with hope and pride for this day, then."

"And you soon shall be followed," Aratra told them. "We face another day here without our engines."

"Perhaps we would assist," Be'i offered.

Sashana'i smiled, went to her sibling to kiss her. "No, Be'i. Go to your boy and our good elders. We shall be content in these celebrations--and in arranging the coming food for Desal's thin belly."

Be'i brushed her fingertips across Sashana'i's temple, touched her own to give Aratra a nod. "Then we

shall see you soon. Take care in your return. It is secure, yet it is rarely known what snake lies behind each stone."

"Yes, Mother Be'i," Aratra grinned then turned to say more farewells to Miztri, Givadra and Sollve'a, also prepared to return to Cezia.

Sashana'i followed them all with her eyes as they walked away, turning towards the corridor that would take them back to the bays. Her siblings were quiet but content as they might have been after such a stressful time in the field. Their coats swung easily against each other's in their separate gates; his kraja-marked hand rested comfortably on the curve of her back. As they turned, she rested her head against him and he held her more warmly.

Such a familiar sight, Sashana'i sighed to herself. She had to swallow the guilt that rose with it.

They needed someday to return to their birthplaces; their work in life would never be completed within Desal alone. With the recoveries of several old but very good Desalian transporter systems and her collected memories all working together... It was possible she could make it work. She only needed time--and time to convince them to accept that fate when the day came.

They had said outright that they did not wish to return to their people, even later, after their duties at Irliae were complete.

"We would of course wish to see them again," Toma had told her and Aratra one day as they strode back to Dviglar. His son was running ahead with Be'i, galloping through the grasses, his nut-brown hair but a messy nest on his uncovered head. "They shall bring themselves eventually, seeking their crewmates. Likely, merely records and word paintings would be found. Yet even were Be'i and I still among the living, how could we be useful on a Federation starship? As Desalians?" He shook his head. "No, we would rather spend our lives settled with the fact that our home remains here."

"Yet you have left much behind to resolve, Toma," Aratra pointed out.

"Completion of one's fate is not always required for peace," Toma replied.

Aratra sighed, shook his head. "There are many who would need you and Be'i, particularly for what you have said of your former ship and many matters of your past left far unraveled--or mysterious."

Toma considered that. "Then thorough histories shall need to be left behind us," he said, "as there is not a way to return us as we were, or erase the years we bear. Moreover, the issues of which you speak are over sixty years beyond this place. We may not survive so long were we to leave this very sun."

Looking out to the field again, watching Be'i capture their boy in her strong, thin arms to swing the giggling toddler around, kiss his head as she set him down, Toma's mouth turned up. He did so love to watch them.

Aratra was not done, however. "I should think you rather would not face that which you left," he said.

"Ka, this is truth," Toma admitted, turning his eyes down for a moment before finding Aratra's again. "Why would we choose to go back to a place where we felt so little contentment and carry on from a point of such great insecurity?"

"Perhaps not enough time had been available to you."

"Perhaps. Yet we reside here instead--as do our spirits, our son, all we call family now, our beings' truth. Never again shall we be what we were."

"This is why you fear returning to them?"

Were Toma disturbed by the question, he neglected to show it, but shrugged and looked out to his wife and son again. They were finally wearing down a bit. Still smiling with her exertion, Be'i had taken Ba'ela's hand to start them back. Toma grinned to see her bright eyes and happy face, her soft scarves and gown caught in the breeze, her solid yet skipping step beside their toddler, whose hand she held with her small, sure fingers. One would never have known she had endured a day of pain to see her just then.

"This is our home, Aratra," Toma said. "Be'i and I have already made our choice to remain; we shall in no way abandon any part of what we have made. It would please us to see our birthpeople someday, however, and put that memory to rest. We shall plan on that."

With that, he left the trail to greet his lady and child.

Naturally, Sashana'i was thrilled to know she would have her siblings for their time among the living, but it did complicate matters, made her plans increasingly ornate. Even so, Toma had given her an answer to that without meaning to. The problem was, figuring out *how* to accomplish that.

Such was a regent's curse, she knew as the sounds of the laskeb celebration began to echo through the communications hall again. But she was working on it. Her own feelings of responsibility--for them and all who would be affected by their loss--would not allow her to relent on the resolution as they had.

Someday, she knew, with patient and gentle influence, she would convince them of the fate she had planned for them. It had worked before, after all. And she definitely had the time.

When she could no longer hear Toma and Be'i's steps in the corridor, Sashana'i turned back to Novren. "So, friend, the polyphasic pattern enhancers and transport resequencers of the Kiburr-six salvage have been found?"

Novren chuckled and bent to pick up his gear. "I have my recovery teams searching it. I am still curious as to why you are so aimed at it--aside from its technology. Or do you plan to transport difficult minerals with the device?"

Sashana'i shook her head. "It is but a casual project, Novren," she shrugged. "My price remains generous."

"It is always a pleasure to assist Desalia's noble regents in their technical curiosities," the Antral captain smiled wisely.

Aratra rolled his eyes, laughing as he took Sashana'i's arm. "Should we ever use it to an advantage, we would share it with you, friend."

"Yes," Novren replied, "you would."

"Were it necessary," Sashana'i concluded for him, straightening her aching back, which would ache more before the day was over, she knew. "At present, we must procure equipment and power for the liberation of the Onast Sector. Shall assistance from Desal be required?"

"No. Tridl might have some more moths to toss from his fingers," Novren told them. "And if he does

not, Antral and Brija both have a refreshed complement of ships which will follow him there and help in what ways they would."

Sashana'i nodded. Like Aratra, she was wise enough anymore not to ask the Antral man of the method they would use. Though willing ignorance was less efficient, she and Aratra both knew it truly was better that they did not know what the Antral had planned for the first purging of Unar in Onast--and more, that others among Desal did not find out.

Hearing about the existence and conditions of the Antral prisoner camps alone had brought instant protest of the brutality amongst the Cezians and other colonies, forcing Aratra to erect a small internment of their own to balance that terrible nature with which Desal had become associated. There were very few Unar there, however. Desalians usually left defeated ships drifting after taking their primary power nodes and any crystals they might need. Their allies' understandably vengeful ways continued despite Desal's kinder efforts and encouragement otherwise.

Thankfully, Novren had likewise become wise enough not to tell them his details.

When they allowed themselves to think too much, they were often filled with wonder of each other. All their memories, their lives, their pains, their dreams and insecurities, their love, their passion--all of it could be recalled in the other with little effort, and some of that had naturally influenced their present selves. It sometimes surprised them how well that had happened--other times, it was unnerving to see qualities their partner had assumed, things they knew of themselves unconsciously emanating from the other.

She could see her hot indignation rise in him sometimes, when once he would have shrugged the issue off or relied on a quip. At the same time, his impulsiveness had settled into a quiet nerve she had liked in herself but made his intense moods less forgiving to those who crossed him. In her, he could see his casual charms poking through her frustration, making her more temperate in her anger and clever in attaining her needs, but a rather sharp tongued dealer.

Or at least they discovered those effects later. The bonding had not always been a smooth one.

As with most who joined, there were times in the beginning of great frustration and inescapable awareness. Until a proper amount of experience had been gained, the stress was inevitable. As they were not born Desalian and required more time for the proper neurotransmitters to form, adapt and make the needed connections in their deluged minds, the process was prolonged and often rather intense.

"Get out of my head!" he'd cried many times in tense moments, when their hostilities bounced between each other and multiplied as a result. "Just leave my brain to bleed now that you have it punctured like a yibak cracker!"

"Fine! I'll get the laser and cut the link this instant," she retorted, clutching her pounding skull between her hands. "You only make it worse! Just stop!"

"This is *my* doing?!" he demanded. "--Just shut the hell up, B'Elanna!"

For nearly two dua'ave, their poor elders had a fair portion of Prihar rattling their ceiling boards, stopping only when the youths wore themselves down enough that they would pity each other's

duress--and sense that, too. Then, they calmed considerably, their moods simultaneously turning comforting.

In that downtime, they laughed that they'd finally gone nuts.

Still, while the transition took a good deal longer than even the elders had expected, they eventually adjusted to the alien nature they had taken on--realized in full what they had done, the full effect of sharing their memories and binding their passionate minds together in an eternal bond. Indeed, years ago, they would never have considered such an insane notion.

To add to the whirlwind, not long after they were stable enough to delegate their work at Dviglar and return to their ship, they discovered they were expecting a child--shortly after Be'i had collapsed in the middle of a leaders meeting. They had been convinced that nothing else could shock them, but when Miztri amusedly gave the bondmates her diagnosis, Be'i swore roundly enough to even make even Novren and the other Antral take a step back.

In time, however, it became a welcome diversion. Once again grounded at Dviglar, Be'i and Toma were more than able to keep themselves busy with directing the resistance in tactical issues, teaching, repairs and continuing with the technical upgrades for Cezia and the other colonies. Be'i in particular was close enough to the elders and all their land-bound friends to be goaded into taking time for herself, her bondmate and their child. Eventually, she listened.

It proved enlightening. With the assistance of her enthusiastic elders, she had a pleasant, worry-free term, which was full of finding out exactly how blessed was that thing she and Toma had not wanted to bring into Desal's situation. Thinking on making a family before had only reminded them of every other thin child on the streets of Azlre--this aside from the busying war, where they were more than needed. Yet once her pregnancy began to show and her moods and equilibrium calmed, she felt herself fill with wonder at the feeling of a "kini'isa" growing inside of her.

Toma, grounded as well for his bondmate's sake, similarly discovered yet another thing he never thought, being born human, he would--the actual feeling of a child growing within another's body. It was not difficult to get used to, that. Rather, sharing the pregnancy and childbearing with his lady, as was always the way with bonded Desalians, was, in a word, amazing.

The word did no justice, however.

He could clearly recall watching Be'i sleep, seeing her swollen belly contract and bob with a kick that she had easily learned to sleep through. In his amazement, he remained awake, softly touching Be'i's palm, feeling...

There was no description for it, but it managed to bring him to tears every time.

He could feel their son's life, his energy. In the Desalian belief, the spirit itself was not complete until the little life which carried it was able to support itself. But Toma knew he felt the beginning of it there, knew what it would soon be.

Sometimes Be'i awoke to gaze into his eyes, smiling understandingly.

"And how fares our little shuttle pilot, Toma?" she teased softly as he kissed and caressed her tight, warm skin, which still quaked slightly. She had liked to jibe at him from the first kick that the boy's activeness was her bondmate's doing.

"He prepares now for his first 'bat'leth' competition, good Be'i," he returned, still halfway entranced from the residue of what he felt in her.

Amazing. It was hardly a word at all.

Then there was childbirth--a matter Toma of Azlre would not forget. To prove it, he still bore the scar on his chin from when her first labor throes sent him tumbling down the clinic staircase.

Only during that time did they realize that their ways had blended as they were supposed to. The shared recollections slowly burrowed down into their natural memories, like the memory of a very long and oft-played holonovel. It was just as strange sometimes but far more pleasant once they knew how to deal with it. The empathy likewise settled into a queer sixth sense as their neural pathways readjusted to the alien connection and the practices they employed on a daily basis.

Their physiologies had also undergone the usual sympathetic changes, which though easier on them than other reactions had been, was also something that took them off guard at first. Meeting each other's eyes sometimes made them blink with distraction. Other matters--such as his instinctual reaction speed, her blood-given stamina--were simply interesting physical subtleties they took as they came.

Of course, after another full day coaxing the Azallis up to warp speed, their only discernible sympathy was not landing on each other when they fell into their bunk.

She turned onto her back, eyes closed to the stripped-down ceiling. "When did you say this war should end, Toma?" she muttered, yawning behind it.

He yawned right after her. "Three or four suns past the last time I said it would," he said, still on his side, ignoring the old, common pain in his ribs, a twinge that was by then but a dim reminder of the cause.

Opening his eyes, he saw his lady, arms flaccid above her head, seeming to willfully relax every muscle in her small body. Her coat and gown were as filthy as her tattered wrap boots; her thin leggings were stuck to her shins with grease. Her face was utterly still, relaxed enough that it appeared she was frowning. He knew she was only as tired as he was.

With some effort, he pulled himself up to sit beside her unmoving body and began undressing her. Her eyes opened slowly to meet his, inspiring him to a pause. At thirty-five years, she was even more beautiful to him, even in exhaustion.

Like a fine wine, he grinned to himself, and even more pleasing to taste...

"We are to Cezia soon," he said, distracting himself from things he knew they were both too tired to even consider, "and P'llaja'i shall call us should we be required. Allow me to rid you of this now?"

"I had not fought you before," she said simply, though pleased he would treat her that evening. It was a common replacement for their intimacy when they were in the field, the undresser being the one with that last dose of energy. Closing her eyes again, a tiny smile pulled at her lips as she felt the fasteners come loose, his tender hands push away the too-worn cloth. She felt her skin sigh with relief as the cooler air bathed it.

He worked slowly, enjoying the sight of his gradually bared woman, hearing her purr as he finally opened her bodice and spread it away, toying briefly with her breasts before dipping his hands under her.

Massaging the long muscles of her back, he meanwhile pulled her willfully limp frame up enough that he could push her garments off her arms then lower her again so he could remove her leggings. Folding her items away, he undressed as well, grinning when he saw her eyes open just enough to watch him.

Exerting the last of her day's strength, she turned herself in the bunk to give him room to join her then sighed contentedly as his skin and their blanket both touched her. All of it needed a good washing, as always, but it was better than anything else they'd had in two weeks.

His closeness filled her, and her fingers crept up to his temple, stroked there softly. He leaned down to kiss her then made himself comfortable against her.

"When Dajid and the rest of the Onast Region is freed," she whispered, "there shall be more offenses to secure--particularly the Jebrrad and Far Barrier sectors. We should request finer repairs on the Azallis."

"Then we shall procure the trades and take our rest while we may," he replied.

"And Desalia..." She drew a long breath. "I feel as Novren does, that I would like to simply take it all, have it done."

"It was your suggestion we not be too impatient."

"Yes. I wish this peace to be a secure one, as do the others." She turned her head enough to nuzzle his neck briefly. "And yet, I do wish to see the databanks, read each word for all it should be. I wish to see Irliae celebrate its knowledge again. I think so much upon it, it lives clearly in my mind. Imagine the celebrations, Toma."

Toma breathed a small laugh at her surge of excitement, with the dream they and so many others had shared so long. "I already have, in myself *and* in you."

"I can hear Dalra cautioning me yet again of the sixtieth precept of arrogance in the shadow of the future," she quipped. "In spite of its use, patience remains a challenge at times for me."

"It shall not require too many more suns," he smiled. "And yet, it would indeed be an incredible celebration, with the music and foods and people cheering our freedom. You would wear your blue gown and gold scarves, and we would toast Sashana'i and Aratra in the square with real sirril wine and hear the songs echo throughout the city. --Yet at present, I would recommend we rest. We shall require our energy when we return for matters we now bear. Ba'ela, you know, shall happily sap every bit we gain."

Be'i felt her grin press up to her eyes for the thought, lightening to think of their son. Always, she missed him dearly when they were gone, ached to leave him and made herself more busy than ever to not regret parting even more. Only knowing they were steadily en route to him made Toma's mention settle without the usual pang of longing. "It is better to be impatient for him."

"He has taught us well."

Relaxing, she released her breath and thus the remainder of her day, and so he took her hand, moved his fingers into her palm, as they had been trained carefully to do. For their physical origins, not to mention accepting that they could learn in the first place, it had been a difficult skill to gain, though increasingly rewarding when their bodies adjusted and they finally began to grasp it.

She was pleasantly filled with memories close to being renewed again...of Ba'ela, their greatest blessing, and all the warmth, love, laughter and warm kisses resulting directly from him. A freshly

procured dinner and the sweet voices of family around them, and then journeying with their elders; their bed and old, clean linens, a sponge bath and making love on the floor, or on that soft bed, quietly now so not to rouse their boy's attentions...

He shared her mind more than willingly, adding long walks in the fields--or often running as it was of late, waking up in the cool, dry air of dawn, warm tea and greeting their friends in the square. He would bring her tea in the morning before the others awoke. If it was early enough, she would invite him back onto their bunk. They would later take breakfast on the floorcloth with their son and their elder-parents, spend at least a couple normal days before returning to Dviglar...

And they so wanted peace...

Perhaps that was what was meant, only that: Peace, for Desal and for them. They had a good deal of that in hand already. The rest, like the other many of their dreams, would likewise come as well as they might steer fate to allow them that--yet still, only as it was meant.

It was accepted.

It never failed to surprise them, what they had done in but five and a half years. Certainly, that fight had been nothing like the Maquis, but far more reaching and necessary in saving races upon races of peoples otherwise subjected to slave status.

She wondered sometimes if Unar would have crumbled after all, as Dalra used to predict on Uillar. Once the resistance struck them and decimated their workforce, Unar could never come back strongly enough to conquer their foe. They did considerable damage in their retaliation and still held the homeworld without disturbance, but they had never been able to come close to Desalia's colonies again.

Sometimes, they thought the resistance hadn't even needed to be too clever or careful--even if she was glad they had been. Despite the relative speed of the war, there had been a great deal of death on the resistance's side, too, particularly in the beginning, when many of the "captains" were still learning how to fight--much less fly. There would have been a great deal more loss had they not waited while the Unar fought each other and then stewed in their disgrace.

Toma and Be'i were doubly glad of their care to see how much better the ship looked the next day. Though they were not commanded to, the better rested of the crew had solicitously cleaned up the corridors and the bridge over the long night. As he unbuttoned his coat and took his seat to receive Dalra's morning report, Toma couldn't help but be grateful all over again for them all.

"*Our regents and my bondmate travel together and behind you,*" Dalra said over the comm, his voice like a soft, knotted blanket on a cool evening, that gentle tenor they had come to know so well, long ago. "*They have taken themselves from laskeb this past hour.*"

Be'i relaxed a little to hear that. She had not necessarily wished to leave them at laskeb, even if it was safe. "Has there been communication with Novren?" she asked as she continued to check the engine status from another monitor.

"*Ka. He has broken off his usual tangent and journeys this sun to Brija for repairs, thank the spirits for their many blessings.*"

Toma snorted. "I should believe it is too much of the 'spirits' that drive him," he joked. Be'i was the only one there to get it. "How lies the remainder of the field?"

"*Another line of offenses have opened at Ra'ezfi,*" Dalra reported, "*yet our Sureshan friends report this is well met. I should also think you would bear more of yourselves here, my friends, as the arrellaros approaches.*"

Toma smiled. "We should arrive in good time, I would think," he said, spotting a similar smile in Be'i. The holiday would be a welcome rest for all the crew. "We shall see you soon, old friend."

"*I await it. The spirits bless a quick and a peaceful journey.*"

"And your sun, Dalra," Be'i said, rising then leaning over to kiss her bondmate. She did not do so often on the bridge, though there was not a Desalian there who would blink an eye at such a thing. But she felt oddly compelled that morning. "Latsari requires me," she told him softly. "When our elders are contacted, I shall return."

"Until then," he returned, reaching up to stroke her markings, which creased with her smile upon the touch.

Indeed, it was surprising, but certainly pleasant, that they felt so much more confidence about that fight than they did with the Maquis. Tom Paris had but a few weeks there, but even in that experience, he had known that the result was a coin toss--and likely, only diplomacy would save the rebels in the end. They just had too much going against them.

One might have said that as well and far more easily about the Irlae resistance. But as the Antral had said, their sheer numbers alone were a benefit; their exceeding desire for survival and restoration of their proper way gave them strength. On top of that was their overall wish for peace in the region, which, sector by sector, was indeed becoming real.

Opening the hatch of the Azallis upon landing at Dviglar, Toma and Be'i knew that desire all over again. It was autumn on their lovely world, with its steady, dry breeze and warm sun; the full harvest from that spring's rains was under collection in the grasses around the base. The finest sight of all, however, stood on the edge of the fields with a small, tanned hand in Bala's elderly one.

Hopping down the short row of steps to the rocky ground, Be'i opened her arms to have them immediately filled with a joyous boy of four, so excited, his greeting was but a squeak. It was just as pleasant as anything else he might have voiced, just to know he was there and they were, too. Be'i felt an equal mix of relief and excitement wash through her as she pressed Ba'ela's little body close against her.

"How we have missed you, Ba'ela!" she breathed into his soft curls.

"It was but this sunrise when we spoke," Ba'ela pointed out.

Be'i laughed and relinquished her child just enough that Toma could kiss their son as well. "Subspace is a comfort, but not a replacement."

"This is truth, Nali."

"Has your elder-father filled your mind's lake with joth fur since we left?" Toma queried as he tugged at his son's shirt.

"Not that!" Ba'ela snickered. "Yet my stomach's lake bore much to fill it."

Be'i's brows rose. "Dov? And what *has* he filled you with?" she asked turning a look towards a laughing Bala. "It would not be sirril, would it?"

Toma rolled his eyes. "Sirril is good for him, Be'i."

"That is Aratra's excuse," she smirked, hiking Ba'ela more securely onto her hip, "and you shall convince me no better than he does Sashana'i." She gave the boy a look. "Was it enjoyed? I should hope so as it is yet a rare fruit."

Ba'ela's wide smile told her everything. Be'i could only laugh at it--and be anxious for her elder-mother's company. It would certainly be an interesting tale to hear, as Bala was not necessarily supposed to eat sirril at his age. Of course, even all her playful fussing was something else she could be thankful for and she knew it.

Later, as she threaded a thin gold headscarf under her thick crown braids, Be'i knew that their work would be far from finished even with a solid peace achieved. The economies, alliances, cities and even the attitudes of the peoples involved were all in serious disrepair despite the good morale flooding through better kept cities like Azlre. Sacezia itself continued to live poorly and the other colonies much more so. Equipment to treat their malaise could only go so far. They still needed the resources to make a full restoration, and the peace and freedom from threat to do that in.

In spite of Sashana'i and Aratra's increasing preoccupation with those concerns, their determination and plans to remedy that continuing tragedy, their ambitions were necessarily put off for their battles elsewhere. This was aside from Irlae's databanks, yet to be rescued. It had not been much of a shock to hear that Desal's own homeworld had been the storage place for the majority of the region's confiscated information, though it made the Desalian contingent all the more willed to rid the homeworld of occupation.

With some luck, some more analysis of what they were up against, the resistance would free Desalia-Four completely. With a good deal of work and more of their gentle but solid leadership, Sashana'i and Aratra would soon lead that restoration.

Gazing at her reflection, Be'i reached back and twisted the remaining length of her hair and scarves into a knot braid--decidedly casual for a Desalian lady, but one Be'i preferred to the intricate styles even the most humble women might wear. Smoothing out the tail with a comb, she dropped the heavy plait behind her. Idly, she stroked the squint lines that had formed under her eyes, which had taken on a decidedly hazel tone after her bonding with Toma. Though strange, it wasn't unattractive, she concluded after becoming accustomed to the change.

"Rai i'i yrmonr savu'it?
Szerr mrla a hzill re'o..."

To that song with chimes for the Arrellaros, the parades passed through the streets, echoing up into the loft as it did the first time they heard it. Those revelers would walk every avenue, passing through the many neighborhoods announcing the holiday.

It was not unlike most holidays, really, but it was nice to hear.

But she smiled not only for that witty old song. There was more chirping and chiming much closer. Behind her, on an expanded section of the loft, she listened to Toma tickling Ba'ela into his coat and boots, making the boy so excited by his tola's silliness that he tried to escape, only to be caught and

tickled again. Their son, wiry and agile, was pure play without much other trouble. Rather, Ba'ela was too busy having fun to consider any other sort of mischief--and suitably bright and curious that Bala had been pleasantly challenged to keep him mentally occupied.

Coming home to their child, so full of life and light, made the horrors and the troubles she and Toma knew well elsewhere even more worth their sacrifice. Since his birth, they had known this.

A year ago, they had helped liberate the forced labor colony of Satrif. An equivalent to Uillar in everything but its poisonous climate, it had also been the passing site of Yusi of Allanois, and where Dulla had labored for nearly six years. After the Antral's initial attack and removal of the camp guards, the Azallis was alerted to take prisoners back to Cezia. Seemingly a simple mission, it grew into a protracted battle when Unar reinforcements arrived, hot with the desire for vengeance and stung anew for the loss of its largest camp. Ten resistance ships had perished in a tense series of fights over four days. It left even Be'i shaking.

The Azallis itself--never landbound but for repairs and supplies--had been forced to land in order to pick up the remaining survivors. They almost didn't make it off the surface again for the crossfire. Thankfully, Toma spotted a window of opportunity the moment Latsari smacked the plasma flow initiator back into place, spit a few torpedoes back at the base as if to curse their trouble there and hurled them through the atmosphere to the safety of space. Their secondary systems screaming for attention, Toma did not stop until they were around the tail of the Rallave Jihag and into the next asteroid field--and left the controls only when Be'i eased him away. From there, they began repairing what they could, silent and mechanical for the after-haze of adrenaline and sheer stress, simply unable to stop.

They returned to Cezia all but crawling. Toma had been so ill and sore, and Be'i so exhausted and nearsighted, that they had agreed to allow Aprra and Cali to take them home in the hovercraft. They finally drifted off on the short run, tangled up together in the rear compartment.

Deposited at the square, they managed to drag themselves into the clinic, only to find their toddler holding the hand of one of the camp survivors, a small girl, and singing her a seasonal song he had recently learned. All the other haggard inmates had silenced to listen to the music, a sort they had likely not heard so well in years. One lady, about thirty, cried through her smile at the baby's song.

When it ended, Be'i took her own heavy, but happy breath, making Ba'ela turn and call out, "Nali! Tola!" That sweet sound almost brought her to tears, too.

When she caught her son in her open arms to lift him onto her thin hip, as Toma stroked his bushy hair with his trembling hand, Be'i looked into her bondmate's eyes and knew what joy was.

It was with that hope, that future.

Be'i stood from the makeshift vanity in the corner of the loft, barely hearing the creaky floors beneath her cloth shoes and heel-length leggings as she smoothed down her old blue gown, now hemmed at her calves for the inability to repair a portion of the skirt yet again. Sashana'i had procured the once regal artifact for her first tsaborr at Azlre, knowing somehow that her dear friend would love it once she was brave enough to try it. Be'i did and had worn that "best dress" every holiday since.

Toma loved it too, Be'i knew as she pulled on her newer dress coat--another gift from Sashana'i and Aratra two ralkle past. She was anxious to allow Toma to peel it off her that evening, kiss her lips, skin and flesh until she would be forced to stifle her moans and cries, lest they wake Ba'ela. Moments later, lowering her onto him with the surety that proved their years together, he would arch his back so to rub

his temple against hers, biting into the meat of her shoulder as she devoured the soft side of his wrist--partially to muffle her ecstasy.

How strange it was sometimes to know exactly how well he knew her...and doubly exciting.

It was not the time to think on that, however, she reminded herself. She stepped towards Ba'ela's section of the loft, past the baluster they had built around the floor flap, which now led to a steep and curving row of stairs, replacing the ladder. All were new constructions, erected soon after the boy had asserted his ability to come and go on his own. Before, he had slept with his parents or beside the elders' pallet--though he always ended up with one of the couples before the night was through.

"Are my men prepared for the arrellaros now that their appetites have been worked upon?" she asked, archly to tease their mood.

"We may be, good lady," Toma returned, giving Ba'ela a pat on the bottom to get him going. As if released from pins, the boy shot out of his cubicle.

Be'i reached out for him as he hopped around to her side. When Toma caught up, gave her an easy kiss and toyed with the low seam of her bodice, she opened the baluster for Ba'ela.

"Take yourself with care," she told him, as always, taking the heavy hem of her coat to follow.

"I have never fallen, Nali," he told her, turning back a beatific grin that only his father could have given him.

Thankfully, she was not as prey to it as others were. Rather, it amused more than bent her that "her men" always used it despite its lack of success. "Ka, and best this is maintained," she said. "Keep hold on the rail. This is meant, Ba'ela."

Minutes later, with a pat on his head, Toma set the boy free to run through the sunny square and meet his friends, already at play with the games set up by the dais. He darted into the crowd and between Bakali and Lledri with only a touch to his temple and a brief, "Zha lastnya!" The parents laughed at the prichava's characteristic sigh and shake of her head.

All that they wished was there, as was all they wished to do, their pasts and presents and whatever else fate was yet deciding to put upon them.

Nine years ago, Aratra had told them the first time about the oneness of life and lives, the interconnection of all things living, bound in time for only the time they were among the living.

When they let themselves think about it, their own part in it all could be overwhelming. At the same time, it was equally simple.

And blessed.

As his ship slowly maneuvered through the Gozhor Jihap, Sub-Commander Gychak allowed himself a silent sigh.

For five years, he had sought that voice. In the crushing battles Unar waged with Irliae, through all the humiliation, death and destruction of everything his people had built and enjoyed in his lifetime, he had fought bravely, proudly. He also had sought the man who possessed the voice that haunted him and teased at his doubts about Unar regaining their territory, told him his patriotism was useless, his efforts were in vain..

It mirrored all the doubts he could not admit to, but knew were there.

He encountered the drask shortly after he had renewed those many feelings. Through sheer chance in a wild battle, Gychak spotted the ship readings he had memorized upon his first hearing that oddly familiar voice. After that day, again and again, he had engaged the ship--the Azallis, he learned. In five years, he had come upon it over twenty times, and each time, their skirmishes had ended in a stalemate--thanks often to, ironically, an Antral ship whose captain proved to be even more annoyed by his presence.

Oddly, the stalemates pleased him. He did not want the Desalian "captain" to die before he could see his face. Unfortunately, the Azallis had never been damaged sufficiently enough that he could capture it, nor did the drask present himself at ground skirmishes.

A couple years ago, when the Zhighapan camps at Satrif rose up against its leaders, slaughtering hundreds of Unar, both Gychak and the Azallis had been there. The latter had landed to rush escaping Desalians, Brijan and Antral to its belly, the best look Gychak had gotten of the ship and its crew. Running to his own ship, he had been so close to the Azallis, he too might have boarded it.

But before the planet's defenses could recover enough to target it, it lifted like a feather in the wind...then spun and destroyed the array of ground canons and four grounded support ships with but a few well-aimed shots. As it veered through the fire and into the atmosphere, Gychak watched it rise from the bloodied ground, and he knew his latest in a series of defeats.

So humiliating. So close...

Such it is again, Gychak grumbled to himself as he ordered his crew to shut down another line of systems so they could continue at their present speed. It was not only the Azallis left on the field behind them, after all. Seven resistance vessels remained with it. As for his side, though his cruiser had taken out one of the Antral ships, the Unar front had been reduced to him alone--again.

It was either a curse or amazing luck. His comrades thought it was both.

The other resistance ships were left staggering, but being less damaged, they had won the day. Gychak left them to that honor. He did believe they had earned it--sacrilege, he knew, but he did not mind such thoughts when so brutally true. Meanwhile, he would live another day to face the man whose voice seemed intent on confirming Gychak's buried pessimism.

He would not speak of that, however.

The monitor beside him beeped, signaling their exit from the nebula. He barely glanced at the readings. "Set a course for Gozhor Haplit and then for Unar," he told his crew and watched the blazing nebula streams dissolve to a clean field of asteroids and some stars.

Other commanders would not have approved of it, but Gychak still felt that those more familiar suns were comforting. Even the stain of their incredible disgrace could not erase that love from him. During

the long, empty nights on the barricade of Uillar, the starlit sky was like a warm hearth for him as he lost himself in his thoughts--his doubts, his wishing, his aspirations, which all had no time or place within his duty.

Looking at the stars that danced in the screen, Gychak idly rubbed his charm through his pocket. It was under such stars that he had seen yet another man fall to the will of Unar and yet fight it too, sacrificing one thing to gain what meant more, no matter how humbling.

Pulling his hand away from the charm, he turned to go cleanse himself before their arrival at Unar...

"Where flies Commander Frouwid?" Gychak asked as he strode through the long corridors of the Wisnin base, painfully empty, he noticed as his grey eyes took count of all the missing ornaments--sold for supply, likely.

"He takes the defense against the Antral at the Gozhor Duag," his personal officer answered, one pace off his superior's heels. "He would take on the Antral uprising personally, he said."

Foolish, Gychak thought before his better senses could stop it. The Antral were a prouder race than any he had known: arrogant, strong-willed and deeply embedded with a despise of Unar even as they served. Their avoidance of disgrace was nearly equal to Unar's, too.

Then again, few other fronts were more pleasant by then. Looking at the Irlae maps, seeing their "fleet" configurations as they were, he felt his heart beating in his throat. Gychak knew his pessimism would someday be well placed only to look at their shoddy lines, their scattered sect deployments, their remaining territory, steadily shrinking. The "easier" lands in Onast and beyond would fall for their lack of support and stronghold, as Unar had always concentrated its efforts on its most developed neighbors.

He wondered how his own people could be so ignorant to the fact. They were losing. They needed to prepare for that, not weaken themselves further in attacks of mere revenge and so-called dignity.

Seventy years ago, it had been an act of pure brilliance. Stripping their new domains of their fine technology, records and educational systems had indeed weakened Irlae, thus solving their immediate and long-term problems. It put the drasks in their place, according to the commanders who had executed the plan. It enabled them to begin their cleansing through proper Unar domination.

Gychak had always wondered about that, however. When his people got what they had fought for, they had become more corrupt than ever--or at least this was whispered among certain small communities, namely his own when he was a child. As he grew, those rumors were brought to light, challenging all that his education had him know. Lives were lived through series of payments and bribes, sects struggled for dominance rather than intellect, their philosophy, holidays, art and family became all but non-existent in the shadow of the military, which spouted its purpose as some miraculous cleansing.

But even they knew that only Unar had been the ones affected by the streams of Gozhor over the millennia. *Why did other races need to be part of what was unique to Unar?* he had wondered in his idle time. He never did find an answer to that.

He barely knew his wife. Since they were joined, he had only visited her three times. She was not even a part of his house; he could barely recall what she looked like. Only on Uillar, staring at the stars on those bitter cold night patrols, had he had the time to think on her. Worse, their child was but a belated thought when his usual duties slowed enough to allow him a distraction.

Something within Gychak told him this was not a correct thing, possibly for he knew that it had not always been like that among his people. The whispering of the aged in his village, the nagging voice within him, the shrinking of what his people had decided should be theirs a century ago, all of it found him again as he stared at the sensor map.

Even having taken away the bulk of their technology, the drasks of Irliae were yet able to rise against Unar and strip them of their claims, sector by sector.

When he had come through the Wisnin corridors, Gychak had glanced in to see that none sat in the tialuo hall. Only a few years ago, it had been filled with his comrades, planning their next attacks, cursing the arrogant drasks who dared to think they had right in their claim to Irliae.

Most of those same men were dead soon after--killed by the very peoples they had sought to put back in their place.

Looking at the monitor in Commander Frouwid's office, Gychak could plainly see the Unar were the ones who were being put back. The resistance had carefully recalled the original of Unar territory before the war--and had respected it. Even Unar's nearest neighbors, the testy Antral, had not crossed the line.

They merely wished a return to the past, he realized, a resurrection of their more treasured time, and the Unar were yet to be a part of it.

It would be an amazing disgrace, Gychak thought as he deactivated the screen.

"We are approaching Dajid, Captain Tridl."

"Very well," the captain said, hardly bothering to stifle his yawn. "Initiate a full scan to be warned of any more Unar ships in the vicinity and take us down to the back of the mining complex. --Sabeg, shift our external energy resonances to match the camp barricade."

"And the remaining Unar?"

Tridl bit his lip. In his hurry, he'd almost forgotten about them. Turning a quick glance down, he saw that the barricade grids were not rotating; they could be transported through. Better still, he had upgraded transporters and the Unar would certainly not expect him to...

"Lock on to all Unar lifesigns and transport them into open space."

Silence.

Tridl turned a stare back to his slightly amused but somewhat hesitant tactical worker. He knew as well as any other that the Desalians in particular would not approve of the tactic. But it would get the job done, he also knew. It would be difficult to prevent after the fact.

"Do it. Unless you would rather *talk* them out of their posts? Only be certain that they *are* Unar."

The other man took a breath and did as ordered. A minute later, he nodded, a bit unsteadily, to his captain. "There are no more Unar on Dajid."

"Good. If the scans are clear, take us down to the surface."

Tridl Himad could be at times a lazy man. He was aware of this fault and didn't see much care in trying to change a thing that had been with him all his life, even if others cursed him for it. It never meant he did not care about his people or the war--far from it. He had been as active and clever in his service as any other self-respecting Antral.

What had kept the man those few extra days--certainly a couple more days wouldn't harm anything--was assuring that Unar ships had indeed left Dajid. The plan in itself, once he had averted detection, had been rather easy. All he had to do was slip near enough to the planet to transport a message for the prisoners and the artificial virus that had been designed for their captors. Then they needed to find an asteroid to hide in while the virus took effect.

Above all pride and arrogance, Unar truly did despise physical illness, and certainly, silica nitrate poisoning was scary enough to them. Ugly, too. It was only regrettable that the resistance couldn't use that trick again. Tridl did get a giggle out of it, though, imagining the horror in their slivered grey eyes as the welts formed. With but one provocation from his fellow Antral resistance ships, the Unar knew whom to blame for their blight and go to their ships for retribution. The poisoning, of course, would have weakened them by then. As they were efficiently picked off, all Tridl had to do was get past the few remaining guards.

He did wait perhaps a bit too long to return to Dajid, but he didn't mind knowing that most of the ships that had left that world were either destroyed or captured. For that matter, the diverse prisoners weren't suffering but to look at each other. The virus' truly deleterious effect would only strike Unar. But then, when he uploaded the Unar files from the camp the night before and saw who was there, he fell out of his bunk to rush back to the bridge and order his crew to scan the area again. It was definitely time to act, if only to see if the prisoners list was accurate.

All the while, he cursed himself for what the others had at laskeb--but for another reason. For his avoidance of the Onast Region, he might have had his payment--and his systems upgrades--a full turn ago. Had he known Y'dri and Me'ekra of Maha'aje were there, he would have gone the day after Toma and Be'i had commissioned him and to the maggots with the Unar.

Either way, he would get a couple bags of platinum silicate to take to Koba to assuage his debts with enough to spare to see about some more upgrades to his ship. It of course would also be good for Captains Dalra and Miztri to see their children again, too, but he did need the improvements...

Blinking when he remembered the inmates, he gestures toward his lieutenant and ordered, "Release the anti-agent into the atmosphere." He knew the virus was harmless, but he would rather not catch its outward effects. Not to mention, the people on the surface would be glad to have it gone sooner, too. It wouldn't take long...

No, he did like Dalra in particular--Captain Gihetra, too. He also admired the regents, who were properly clever but always good-natured and fair. It was the regents' siblings who were worthy of driving him mad, constantly prodding and pushing him and taunting him... *Well, they may well have been justified to some degree about that, but it is not reason to threaten my manhood--repeatedly.*

For years by then, as they fought under the fair hood of the illustrious Azallis, the regents' siblings had never failed to send him an occasional lecture--some firm enough that in his necessary stops at Azlre, Tridl often avoided meeting them. When cornered, Toma had the sheer nerve to explain in detail how useless a coward he was in front of his crew, while Be'i looked as though she would raise the fire of their

people's demon to melt out his eyeballs for not continuing the search they had contracted of him.

Worse, they sometimes exchanged their moods without warning--and Toma would look as though he were prepared to follow through with his rather creative threats.

Well, perhaps at times Tridl had forgotten their agreement, despite the purse they had offered...and they had never been outwardly cruel--and always generous with their repairs and praised him when he did follow through with their contracts...

How many years has it been since they contracted me for the Maha'aje siblings? he suddenly wondered.

"Lower the landing struts and prepare for grounding," he told his helmsman, though a nearby monitor said it was already being initiated.

The landing was a standard one, and Tridl pulled himself to stand before hooking up his topcoat, straightening his short, dark russet hair with his fingers. Then, moving to the access corridor with a long, proud stride, he tapped the control to open the hatch...then tapped it again and harder.

A waft of musty air filled his nose, cool and woodsy and everything he remembered of Dajid--though the last time he had been there was almost fifteen years ago and as a mere supplier. It was wonderful, fresh and wet, almost like Maha'aje. But there was still a labor facility before him, the brown metal buildings, which were not nearly as bad as other Unar camps. Rather, the entire settlement was decently equipped, bordered with small, stacked, box-like apartments and softened by the high coniferous trees all around.

He had heard tales on Cezia recalling Dajid as a once popular holiday locale, its space faring but lesser developed people quite welcoming. Tridl could see why. The sun itself, a deep golden yellow, practically asked him to lie back and enjoy it and the temperate breeze...

"Where have you been?!" demanded a woman, shaking Tridl from his reverie. Looking to the edge of the camp, a stately Antral woman with fading welts on her face stood glaring at him, her arms at her sides, her hands stiff. Even her long, copper ringlets stuck out in ugly clumps to kick up her indignation. "The Unar ships have been gone for nearly two days--and the guards for more than an hour! And you *left* us like this?"

"I would hold your tongue, woman," Tridl replied. "You here have no idea of the Unar's capabilities. You were not suffering, and I would not have risked capture when it was not safe."

"I was not suffering," she responded, "but not everyone is alike, you stupid cur. Some of the people at this camp *did* suffer heavily for your little trick--and you sat around playing with yourself in the interim!" Sighing hard, she gestured aside, spun and strode back to the gate. "Well come on. I happen to know your Desalian booty. The good thing in this is that we have a route out, too, thanks to them."

"Oh, you would have been extricated," Tridl assured her, skipping to catch up. "I, Tridl Himad--you might want to know--was assigned this section of captive space by the resistance, who have engaged the Unar ships that left here."

She turned an eye back, softened slightly at that. "Oh?"

"Why yes, lady," Tridl said graciously. "I only asked after the Desalians when I recognized their names in the databanks I accessed after scanning the surface. The camp complement came with the other

files.... And so they have been here."

She nodded. "Long before I arrived with my cousin's crew nearly six years ago," she informed him. "They have been in service here nearly seventeen years now. They reside with the other Desalians."

She entered the shaded forest complex without any fanfare, smiling to her friends and laughing to answer their obvious questions. Holding her hand out, she accepted the hand of a blotched but healing Antral man, who bent to kiss her. "Then we are finally getting out of here?"

"Yes," she answered, reaching up to rub at a spot under his eye and nodding at the result of her attention. "But I have to take this Captain Tridl to the Desalian residences first. He really was looking for Y'dri and Me'ekra."

The man grinned then winced and touched another welt on his cheek. "Well, as long as we get off Dajid, I do not care about the reason."

Tridl hardly heard him for suddenly finding his attention on the so-named Desalian section. Less sturdy than the other buildings in the camp--squat and ugly in comparison--it bore a thin court where a number of long-robed, thin-faced Desalians stood, patiently awaiting the man's arrival. From the group of adults and children, two dark haired individuals of about thirty years stepped forward, parting from their mates--one of whom held a small girl in his arms.

It was becoming stranger and stranger to him, seeing Desalians in such a state, he thought. Indeed, in spite of the trouble the regent siblings had put to him over the years, even they were fair-minded people with excellent intentions. Seeing those people--there were even infants and elders, Tridl noted, similarly poor, dirty and compliant--he did feel the usual itch of compassion for them.

"I am Me'ekra of Maha'aje," said the man who stepped forward, his tenor so like Dalra's it made the trader smile. "My sister, Y'dri." That said, the two bowed deeply to the man, touching their temples in the traditional manner.

"Though I should think it would be wise to ask," the lady said, "why one might seek the humble such as us by name."

Tridl couldn't have stood taller as he drew a deep breath to address them. "Me'ekra, Y'dri, I am Tridl Himad. On behalf of the Allanois Regency, I have come to reunite you with your parents, Dalra and Miztri of Maha'aje, survivors of Uillar and captains in our glorious resistance for freedom."

"Is he serious?" said the other Antral man into his lady's ear, making her snort quietly and tell him to be silent.

"They have spoken longingly about their parents," Yasis reminded him. "Be respectful."

The Desalians ignored their comments, too shocked to hear their parents' names, much less the rest of it. They even looked at each other to confirm what the trader had said.

"I speak the truth," Tridl assured them. "Your parents live--and have little idea of your whereabouts."

Y'dri looked at her Antral friends. Both Yasis and her mate shrugged; the former finally gave a nod. "He would not have bothered otherwise," Yasis told her. At that, the Desalian lady opened her arms and took another step forward, tears suddenly filling her deep brown eyes. Without any more warning, she embraced the trader, one set of fingers pressed to his temple.

"Zhra'i ka, nazha Tridl," she whispered. "My most sincere thanks." Parting from him, she again looked at the Antral couple standing by. "And now you, too, dear friends, shall join us in deliverance. No more might have been wished...except..."

With a look to her brother, he immediately understood. "Good man, bear you medicines aboard your ship?" Me'ekra asked.

Tridl blinked. "Why yes. Have you illness here?"

"Of course we do!" the Antral woman snapped. "You're the one--"

"Good Yasis," said Y'dri, touching her arm, "all shall be well." She looked at Tridl. "We shall prepare ourselves in humble thanks to the spirits for all your deeds, good man. Yet assistance in treating further the ruse you employed would be required. One among the Antral has taken it poorly. It would comfort more spirits than one, your goodness in this, including myself, who is a trained healer among these prisoners."

Me'ekra nodded to add to his sister's request. "Your favor would be compensated for with my labor. This body is lean, yet bears great strength. Ka?"

Tridl almost laughed. But he had to remind himself that the people there, while quite aware of the resistance, had been completely separate from it. They had no idea. So, he merely said, "Your labor is not required at this time. Your presence and well being is. Prepare yourself to leave and bring your ill aside. They will have any treatment needed."

Y'dri smiled, touched his cheek again then bowed to leave them. She did so speaking quickly in a form of her native tongue that Tridl had given up on years ago. As the Desalians moved to gather their belongings, he gave another look to his fellow Antral citizens. "I do mean that. The ways have changed, with a good deal of work and some interesting luck. But you will learn of that later."

"I could get used to it," the man said, whapping Tridl's arm in acknowledgment before sweeping his woman into his other arm to take a deeper kiss from her. She returned it freely and almost didn't let him break away. He grinned and gave her chin a tap. "I will start getting everyone together."

Looking the trader up and down, she nodded. "As will I. Captain Tridl, I recommend you make yourself ready for some passengers."

"It will be my pleasure, lady."

Yasis breathed against her first response to his bloated gallantry then turned to follow her lover.

Within minutes of the announcement, the Desalians had boarded the plain, hulking cargo bay and promptly began helping the crew prepare the remainder of the ship. Y'dri and her mate Ellreda in particular took every care to have the few frail elders of the camp settled comfortably, then Y'dri hurried across to prepare a space on the floor near the medical stores as the long belly of the patchwork ship filled with the others from the camp.

As the ship's engines began to rumble awake again, a patient was carried in. Outstretching her arms, Y'dri helped a dark-haired Desalian man with a steady frown ease the slight Antral woman down and into the bed. "She shall bear wellness, good man," she assured, a smile touching her lips. "I should procure it far more efficiently now with proper devices."

The Desalian man touched his marked temple then the patient's bare one. "Ka, Y'dri, you shall," he muttered, "else I shall procure the bitter reminder of your failure for the remainder of your humble existence."

Yasis rolled her eyes. "Silence your ravings, Gatra."

Y'dri simply bowed to the threat, however, calm as before, though her smile was gone. She then looked up to the captain, who had come to see the sick person. "Our lady has borne a poor reaction to the ruse," she explained. "I would believe she suffers an allergic effect to the nitrates. Thus, an additional dosage of anti-toxin and a tissue regenerator would be appreciated, good man."

Tridl nodded numbly, gaping at the open sores on the pale-skinned woman, seeing her trembling under the drab longshirt and worn trousers. When Y'dri pulled the lady's heavily scuffed boots off, he saw the scabs had reached even her toes and winced. He had seen many, many sick Antral in his life, many dead as well, but none from his own doing...or at least never a woman. He cringed to think that only an hour before, he had laughed at the thought of the Unar he had sickened. He hadn't thought that one of his own people might suffer such an allergy.

Turning to the metal cabinet, already open, he sighed. "This is my doing," he told them. "I must carry the fault for waiting too safely too long." He looked back at the angry man. "You must not blame this healer, sir. I am a man with faults--but not one to deny deserved responsibility."

"You should need not feel sorrow but for ignorance," Y'dri said. "As for Gatra, his blame is the way of his family, rightfully so in our debt. He shall chastise me regardless of your culpability."

Tridl understood immediately. "Your family was in exile," he said to the Desalian, properly marked but as forward as any... *Well, as any of my own people, in honesty.* Though he appreciated the spiritedness, it seemed unnatural, to use the Desalian phrase.

Gatra nodded once. "My family was the Ella'omb," he said, raising his chin, "exiled in the short reign of Troka."

"Ah, but those days are over," Tridl told him. "The Allanois are the leaders of this resistance--it was their decree that raised their people from their contrition to return Desalia to its truer ways."

"It was Allanois decrees which sent my family into nothingness!" the man retorted, ignoring Yasis' groan of disgust. "Our fortunes taken, our names wiped from our histories--for our wish to help your people! How can you defend them?"

Tridl's eyes narrowed as his lips curled up. Not that he would like to *be* Desalian, but he knew Sashana'i of Cezia, and Aratra--and they certainly were not anything of what he had learned of Troka or that other disastrous regent. Rather, they had been more than generous with him--and even the siblings were fair when he traded well.

"You spit your bitterness for that you have lived on Dajid?" he said. "Dajid, sir, is a *paradise*. You have no idea of the contrition your grandparents were *spared*. You have missed that much entirely."

"What it may or may not have been," Gatra replied, "Desal took it deservingly."

Tridl sighed and almost spoke again, but Y'dri reached over and touched his leg. "I would not waste your wits, good captain," she said quietly. "It would be pointless, and his words are familiar to me."

Tridl snorted. "Yet he will need to adjust his...nature, when we come to Cezia."

"Should we be a corrected race," Gatra stated, "then my belief and expression would be freely accepted. There are none in Desal who might silence me--nor could, for their own acceptance of contrition. They know well of it for the disgrace my grandparents suffered."

Tridl smirked, but followed Y'dri's advice and said nothing. Seeing that man so willfully ignorant made him feel better about his mistake.

As the young healer began sorting out and activating the tools he handed to her, Yasis' companion arrived with a girl perched up on his hip. "If you are done torturing Y'dri," the man said as he emptied his arms--one of the girl, the other heavy with their belongings, "there is food over there for us. Maybe you could get some and bring it back for dinner while we set things up here?"

"I shall, Kurt," Gatra nodded and turned on his heel. His dirty coat caught the air as he moved himself out into the thickening crowd that had gathered around a long food dispenser. A moment later, he disappeared among them.

"My thanks," Y'dri said without looking up from the effects of the regenerator, which were just taking hold on the woman's skin. She continued the treatment, careful around the freckles all Antral bore, which ran along the underside of her jaw and curled beneath her cheekbones. She smiled at the success and strung her fingers through her patient's dark, reddish brown curls, caressing as she continued. That done, she picked up the subdermal injector. Checking it first, she placed the head of the cylinder to the woman's throat and pressed it down.

Moments later, the patient awoke with a start. "Gye ak," Y'dri breathed gently, continuing her work. "The resistance ship has brought themselves and I treat you now, Susik."

"Marise?" she croaked.

"I am here," said the little girl, crawling up into her view and pulling a section of long, thick curls away from her face.

The mother smiled for her sake then checked her friends with her eyes. Blinking slowly, she gave them a nod and asked, "Did Gatra come, too?"

"He is getting food," Kurt said, kneeling down on her other side. "We are leaving Dajid--finally. All of us."

She drew a deep breath, swallowed in her dry throat as she took the girl's fingers into her own. "Where are we going?"

Tridl stepped forward to answer the handsome, serious woman. "Cezia. I need to bring Y'dri and Me'ekra to their parents. After, I may take you where you want to go--though I will say first that Cezia is the safest place for even our own. Crowded, yes, but well secured for those not actively involved in the resistance. Where the lines are drawn now, even our beloved Antral is difficult to maneuver about. We will be taking the route around Suresha instead."

She said nothing at first, looking again to her friends, her daughter, and then the healer, who continued to work at her left. "Secure is good, and Gatra needs to be near his own people again," she whispered, "as they are doing something about the Unar."

"I hope so," Yasis said. "His mood has grown too acidic for anyone's good of late, particularly his own."

Y'dri, not stopped in her duty, shook her head minutely. "This is a curse we deserve, good Yasis."

The patient sighed as the Desalian lady took her hand to treat it. "Not anymore, Y'dri, if your people ever did," she said. "Moreover, *you* never earned any of his spite. You have always been good and always helped--even when the others questioned us. I will never forget what you did for us...for me."

"Listen to her," Kurt said then looked up to a keenly interested Tridl. "Gatra is not as bad as this, Captain--not all the time."

"I should hope not," the captain replied. "I have never seen a Desalian so...opposed. Has he good cause?"

"He was living with some Dajidian friends for a few years after his parents were killed," Kurt explained. "The Unar picked him out and sent them all to the camp. The others were released and his sentence was extended for life for being exile by blood. This on top of the reason his family was on Dajid in the first place, he rakes over the retribution issue. But since we received your message, he has been insane about being surrounded by his people again."

Tridl nodded understandingly, but said, "Desal is very changed."

"He will have to taste it before he eats it," the man replied then looked down to his friend. "But whatever happens, you know Yasis and remain by you and Marise, as always, yes? Any issue with him is mine to deal with if you need it."

She nodded. "Yes." Looking up at the captain, she offered a small shrug below a weak grin. It warmed, however, as she looked at her daughter. "Would you like that instead of Antral for now, Marise?"

"If you are going there, Mother," the child answered coyly, scratching at a healing welt.

It was her father's smile, the mother knew. Marise was so much like him.... "Then Cezia it is."

"Thus there we go," Tridl said, as if it'd been her choice and command. He always had been prey to soft-spoken women, and the lady there not only seemed by her demeanor and the others' treatment of her to be of high family rank, but was also a mother of an even lovelier little girl--another of Tridl's personal weaknesses. He had three sons.

Before he left, he leaned down to pat Y'dri's shoulder. "You will be well compensated, Y'dri, for this woman's health," he told her.

Y'dri closed the regenerator, finished her work with a caress to the woman's cheek and an affectionate smile. "Gye, good captain. It is reward enough to see our Lady Kichyrn well and her child with her. Take yourself to your work and I shall take respite and prayer with my mate and child, my brother and his lady. In this, we shall all be where we belong. This alone is what is required."

Tridl liked that answer, too. "You are right of course. Until we are to Cezia, then! Be well, all of you. I will have more food and linens sent. Make any further requests known to me and I will see what I can do. We will arrive in one gruvnu."

"One gruvnu?" Yasis queried, squinting up to him. "I believe from my own travels that Dajid is not near at all to what was...*is* Desalian space."

Tridl snickered to himself. "I plan to move us *very* quickly," he told her. "For your own convenience, of course, as this discomfort was unintentionally my doing."

Yasis sighed. "If only that you do not kill us on the route, I will not complain."

"I assure you," he grinned, "I have as much to live for as yourself."

"I am certain you do," she replied with as much mock sincerity as she could muster, going so far as to bow for the aspiring gallant as he moved away to the lift door. "Dublachk," she muttered, making the girl near her giggle.

"He is a dublachk with a ship, though," Susan said as she reached to sit. "We will not be here long--and anywhere is better than that camp, even a Desalian colony."

With her friends' help, the patient rose unsteadily upright. Seeing her sway, Y'dri quickly gathered a few blankets behind her so she would have support. "You shall require rest in your convalescence, Susik," she said softly, pressing her back against the soft pile.

"You are too good to us," she told her while opening her arm to accept her daughter beside her. "You know that, I hope?"

Y'dri giggled softly. "Gye, I would not believe I possess more than any other, good lady, though I would suggest you listen to my words were you to feel indebted for my thoughtfulness."

Susan, though still feeling dizzy than she had in a long while, smiled back. Even when the Unar were nipping at their heels for more output, Y'dri had always been both sincerely solicitous and wise-eyed to them all. Me'ekra had told them once that their mother always had that way about her, too. She had always wanted to meet those two's parents for that alone. All of a sudden, it seemed they would after all. *To hell with Gatra*, she thought, enjoying the idea of a friendly place again.

"Very well, Y'dri," Susan finally conceded. "Zhevra ye'e."

Y'dri bowed, her fingers stroking her markings as she ignored the lady's usual errors with Desalian manners. Her attempts were pleasing enough.

As she straightened, Gatra returned with their tray of food. He waited for the healer to notice his presence and move herself, but then simply got to his knees and set down the tray. "She is treated, lady. You may take yourself now."

Obediently, Y'dri rose to her feet, offering the others another bow. She opened her mouth to speak, but Gatra glanced back at her first.

"Certainly your family would bear more use for you," Gatra said quietly, knowing well that an outright dismissal would not bode well with his lover, who had always sought to protect her daughter's ears that way.

His quietness did the trick, regardless. Y'dri stopped herself, released her breath through her nostrils, trying to clear the mist in her eyes she could not help when she sensed his impatience. "Your forgiveness, Gatra of Ella'omb," she whispered. "It is futile, yet this is applied for with all sincerity."

Gatra said nothing, but did nod, excusing her. Seeing her small form walk away in the corner of his eye, he moved into the spot she had occupied and pulled up the tray. Seeing his lover healed and awake,

he finally smiled. "How do you feel now, Susik?" he asked, reaching up to her temple.

Susan motioned his hand away with a wave of her own and a flick of her fingers. "You can stay if you want to, Gatra," she said coolly, "but do not think to touch me right now, or in the near future. You have been a selfish, boorish ass for two days without fail. And now you dismiss my friend like trash at your feet? I hate it when you do that to her and you know it."

He bit his reply, seeing Marise' downturned eyes and frown. "I have been too stringent," he admitted, handing her a mug of sweet water. "I ask your forgiveness."

"Again," Susan noted.

"Ask *yourself* forgiveness," Yasis snapped, "as you have been like an Unar to an innocent woman." Taking a mug without his offering, she added, "We have not waited six years on Dajid to see you abuse the people partially responsible for our liberation. So accept some of that manhood you treasure so dearly and forgive the unconscionable cruelty your Desalian natives have given you compared to our good hearted captors."

Hearing the venom practically drip from her cousin's tongue, Susan knew without guilt that she couldn't add anything to it, and she didn't bother to try. Her silence was enough of an agreement. Instead, Susan simply sipped the water Gatra had brought and stared at her child's mop of chestnut hair, pressed gratefully against her breast.

Good hearted captors, indeed.

"You shall adore Cezia," enthused Me'ekra, his warm voice easily carrying over from the glowing corner of the cargo bay.

He and his own had set up a small section aside from the others, as many of the Antral and Brijan prisoners separated themselves from them, or even directed them away. So, as always, the Desalians managed to carve a nook for themselves to tell their stories and share their traditions and small comforts around a heat globe, despite the people who surrounded them. Susan had been told once that it was simply their way, to make what one could of what little they had.

It was a familiar thing. The difference was that they accepted their state much more readily, maybe because they were accustomed to less, because they had nothing to compare their misery with but locales.

"It bears a fine, white sun to warm its skin," Me'ekra continued, "and lively dry air whose breath smells of crisp sap and earth, fresh silver grass, flower-strewn mountains--and a population as moderate and giving. Ka, the short time of my boyhood there is well remembered. I bore my twelfth year--and Y'dri was to take her final kraja of youth. Upon that sweet soil, we stepped from the trade ship, our parents' hands in ours..."

Susan felt somewhat better after having something to drink and a good meal--maybe too good a meal, in fact. She knew Marise unthinkingly had eaten far too much; Y'dri had to return to help ease the ache that followed. Though they ate decently on Dajid, it still wasn't as much as Tridl's crew had offered and they had naturally taken, their eyes being far bigger than their bellies, so to speak. But all went well

enough that Marise kept the food down and fell quickly to sleep at her mother's side, sucking her pinkie finger as she sometimes still did.

Looking over, she saw Kurt leaning back against the wall, his close cut hair sticky for having been out in the rain that morning, his eyes a bit hazy for his tiredness. His chiseled face was a little gaunt for the same reason, making him look a good deal older than he was. Yasis was sound asleep at his side, her curly red hair lumped at the top of her blanket. Gatra, lying apart from their group but nearby, was snoring softly.

"How are you feeling?" Kurt asked.

"Well enough. I itch, though."

"I can get you something for it."

"It can wait," she said, still staring dreamily at the glowing circle on the opposite corner as her fingers turned in her daughter's locks.

For several minutes, they listened to Me'ekra's story, how he and his sister discovered wonderful and new things on the relatively comfortable colony of Cezia. As children, of course, they thought it was an adventure, that new refugee planet, even if their clothes were in tatters and they were hungry and ill. They were only there a year before the Unar arrested their parents and sent the children with some other family of imprisoned conspirators to Dajid.

Their parents had been sentenced to the forced labor facility of Uillar--and the shiver the mere mention gave Me'ekra's audience was equal to the one shared by the two who watched them from afar.

It could have happened just as easily to us, with Marise sent away, never to know me, Susan knew, feeling her heart shrink at the horrible scenario that could have been. How lucky we have been...and I hardly ever realize how much. A decade those poor parents spent on that hellhole, according to Tridl...

Looking at each other, they knew precisely how well they remembered it, even if they were on that nightmarish world but a few minutes. And from there...

"So," Susan said, relaxing into her native tongue, "I guess we're off again for who-knows-where."

Kurt nodded, turned his eyes back to the congregation. "Looks like it. Doesn't sound too bad, this Cezia. Maybe we'll be able to stay if all goes well."

"I'd like to," she sighed. "Gatra would hate it, but that would be his problem if I end up liking it. I really want to stop feeling so homeless."

He snorted. "We were on Dajid six years."

"You know what I mean," she responded, "and that was no home. I want to use my knowledge again and stay somewhere where I don't have to look over my shoulder anymore. I want Marise to go to school if that's at all possible, for her to have friends her own age and a sense of freedom, too. I hate that she doesn't have that. I always have hated that."

Kurt looked at her again, seeing her eyes lit darkly in the glow before her, her skin pale even in the warm light. Her blink was slow; her mouth, stopped for the moment, was straight despite her emotion.

"It'll be all right," he told her, catching her attention briefly. "We just stick together, see what we can't do about it."

Somewhere above them, an old-fashioned ventilation system activated, filling the long bay with a gush of warm air. In one dark corner of the area, two former prisoners of Dajid winced at the sensation.

They could hear the voices all over again, voices nine years old but never dulled in their memories. What others often called the sear of Uillar was equally fresh, that roasting sun and the dust...that terrible dust...

It had happened so quickly...much too quickly...

A grin ghosted across her mouth. "Just keep it together, right?"

"It's always worked before, hasn't it?"

"For us..."

It had always seemed to happen too quickly, Susan thought, when they had not been still, those dots of life between periods of languishing, both good and bad.

Looking back, the quickness was what she remembered most....

Her hands still stung from hitting the hard, red dirt, which swirled around in that open "examination area" like an invitation to death. Her lungs felt like they were being set on fire every time she gasped a breath. The sun felt as though it would char her fair skin off. Pain flared behind her eyes, rebelling the hot, hard light.

"Who the hell do you think you are?!" their chief engineer demanded as she stepped up to look up at the giant guard, her posture and hard stare as defiant as ever. "We didn't mean to fall into your territory, and we didn't do anything but try to turn back around. We are *not* for sale!"

"You are in Unar territory *now*," said the commander, imposing, white-faced--like a demon glaring down at an avenging angel, Nicoletti thought in her terror. The enormous hand holding her thin neck was strong enough to break it. She would be dead--easily dead--with just a flick of the officer's fingers. Worse, those people didn't seem to look like they'd have cared one way or another, the way they had surveyed their captives. It was definitely up to her commanding officers that time.

"If you'll just listen, all of this can be worked out," Torres said quickly, visibly reigning herself in, sighing a hard breath. "Just let us conta--"

A guard's hand whipped out and struck Torres soundly, making Nicoletti jump back into the grip that held her. The half-Klingon hit the ground with a bloody thud as the guard moved up to take another shot. The shock in Torres' face was not like anything she'd seen, nor was the panic Paris displayed...

Before she realized what she was doing, she heard herself screaming, "Stop! We'll go with you!"

"You were going regardless," said the commander.

"Asshole," Kurt muttered under his breath, resisting every urge to shake off the guard's grip, smart enough not to try.

Paris rushed up to grab Torres off the ground, but before either of them could move again, the guard struck Paris in the back with a long swing of his rifle butt. As the pilot and engineer fell together, choking on the dirt, Nicoletti felt herself being yanked back, dragged on her boots, choking in her own right from the pressure on her neck.

"I'll come with you!" she cried out. "Please, just let me walk!"

"Only if I ask it of you, drask," growled the guard.

She whipped her eyes back to the wall. Torres and Paris were but heaps on the dirt, unmoving, the guards reaching out to them...

"Keep it together, Torres!" Bendera suddenly yelled, more angry than insulted at that point that they had to go out like that. "We'll do the same!"

Nicoletti felt tears sting in her eyes, partially from the hot, stinging dust similarly filling her already depleted lungs and partially for the terror of being separated from the others as she was. Well-trained as she might have been, there was nothing like the experience itself--and that one was kicking her in the chest full force.

"Just keep it together!" Bendera yelled again, just before Paris and Torres disappeared from their view. Then they were gone.

Turned suddenly, they found themselves side by side, staring at the ship that had brought them. Unceremoniously shoved onto a small stone depression in the hard red dirt, Bendera managed to be quick enough to catch Nicoletti in his strong, lean arms.

Clutching his sleeves, she didn't try to straighten herself at first, but collected what breath she could before looking up to him. Breathing firmly, he gave her a sharp nod. "We'll be okay, Lieutenant," he said, not really feeling it, but wanting to believe it enough that it showed in his tone. "We'll stick together and see if we can't do anything about this, right?"

She gave his arms a squeeze, finally coming out her shock enough to think clearly again. He was right. They would have to come up with some kind of solution...if that was at all possible. Considering they would *not* be at Uillar, they'd have a better chance at doing something. Once they got to the bazaar the Unar commander had mentioned--wherever that was--there might be a chance to.

Looking up, she tried to meet his eyes, though the harsh sun was burning into hers at that angle. "Just keep it together," she agreed.

She met them completely when they rematerialized in the same stark grey cubicle they'd inhabited on their short journey there. Her hands dropped to her sides, but he still held her, as if making sure she wouldn't fall completely. Feeling her tense up as the engines somewhere below them activated with a decisive whine, he held her attention, not knowing what to say, but wanting to be sure she was still there.

It wasn't the first time he'd been to hell, after all, though he had to admit, those Unar were possibly as scary as any Cardassian he'd encountered. Worse was that they actually *were* in control of that place.

Yeah, you just keep it together, yourself, he thought, wondering what the hell he was in for that time. One thing was clear right off, though: Nicoletti was probably in a lot more danger than he was. Superior

officer didn't matter much at all right there and then--and for that matter, he wasn't an officer, just a Maquis in a black and yellow uniform. He'd definitely have to look out for her, the way she was reacting.

Nicoletti drew a breath as the world slowed down again, trying hard to think about what had just happened to them. It was unreal. One minute, they were pulling out their equipment to mine the plasma field, just as Lieutenant Torres had planned; Paris made yet another one of his usual quips then asked Torres which stream they should aim for. She looked at the readings again and pointed out a stable signature. But just as he began to approach it, another plasma stream ripped out of nowhere and dragged them into the rapids of the field. They skidded over the plasma eddies like pebbles rolling down a washboard. What seemed only like a few seconds later, they were skipping over the skin of an asteroid, nauseous from the distortions that had turned their systems upside down and inside out. Before they could catch up with themselves--remember they should breathe, much less control the fires sizzling all around them--they were in a brig, and then on a place a guard had called Uillar.

Now we're going to be sold... To what?

She drew a slow, deep breath to collect herself that time. In a way, she didn't want to know what was coming, considering how the man called Hychar had looked her over. He'd done everything but lick his lips.

Suddenly noticing the pair of concerned eyes before her, she nodded. "I'm all right," she told him. "Just a little off guard."

"Okay," Bendera nodded, finally letting her go so she could sit on the thin wall bunk.

"I think the first thing we need to do," she whispered, at the same time firming herself with another breath and a quick mental recollection of what basic survival training she did have, "is to assess any way we can get out of this immediate situation. If we're going to a bazaar, there'll be other people there. Maybe we can get help from them."

He agreed with a nod, taking the seat by her. It was obvious, really, but he let her think aloud, since it'd probably help her to.

"When Voyager is able to come after us, we'll need to be able to contact them. If their other installations have anything like the force fields back there, we'll have a lot more trouble."

"B'Elanna and Tom won't be able to," Bendera agreed again, but cursed his comment, seeing Nicoletti freeze. "Look, they're tough. I happen to know B'Elanna. She'll do more than get by--and Tom's no fool, no matter what people try to make out of him. They'll hold their own. They just won't be able to contact Voyager. So, yes, we have to stay able to do that if it's possible."

She believed him--or at least she wanted to. "So it's up to us. And the first thing we need to do is see if we can get away from..." She waved a hand in the air.

"Worst part about it is not knowing what to expect," Bendera said. "Living in the colonies when the Maquis was forming taught me a lot about that. Best thing you can do is just to take things one minute at a time and keep going. As soon as you stop, you're in for it."

Nicoletti grinned at that. "That sounds like something they taught us in survival training," she said. "But they also told us when to stay still to get our bearings, figure out which direction to go. God, I hated survival training. I had to take it twice"

"Great time to tell me that, Lieutenant," he joked. She didn't smile, but she didn't look embarrassed, either. "Look, even Starfleet can't train this into you--and God knows what I learned I learned on my feet. You're right, though--you have to know when to stay tight and get your grips. Keep it together, see what we can do when we get to it."

"Agreed." She leaned back to share the view of the bleak grey wall in front of them. Why she couldn't think up anything nice and official to say just then--even channeling all her professors and commanding officers wasn't helping--was beyond her. Much as they trained young officers to handle captive situations, giving her name and rank and looking for options in a territory she knew absolutely nothing about wasn't going to do much good.

Bendera was right--they'd just have to keep moving...after they were released from that forced stillness, which for the moment, she didn't mind, and she eventually closed her eyes against the maddeningly dull walls....

"What the hell is that?" Popping up from his place against the wall, Bendera's eyes shot wide as the hissing echoed through the cell, and steam began to creep from the corners. "Nicoletti! Wake up!"

She was already awake, staring at the corner where a nozzle had appeared to allow in the white, gaseous vapors. Her heart beginning to thrum in her chest, she remained still--forced herself remember that same, once failed survival training: *When there's nowhere to run, don't waste your energy.*

The gas seeped steadily. Gradually, it filled the space of the ceiling, began rolling down the walls. Bendera had already moved himself instinctively to the ground in the middle of the cell. "You bastards," he muttered. If they really were going to be sold, he knew the Unar wouldn't kill them--but wanting to scare them or make them miserable was a sure possibility in the mean time. He never put the same past the Cardassians.

Nicoletti didn't follow him to the center, knowing with a certain dread that the fumes wouldn't stop until the room was filled. So instead, rigid in the bunk, she yanked her tunic up to filter her breath.

Suddenly, despite her acceptance of a moment before and as the chalky gas began to sting her tongue, throat then lungs, she somehow realized that she didn't want to die. Oddly enough, the thought hadn't occurred to her until she knew the fumes here invading her, when she began to choke, couldn't get her breath back, couldn't breathe again without taking more...

Never in her life had she consciously known that she didn't want to die.

The cold, chalky mist poured over her and she burrowed her head into her tunic. It crept within her tightly shut eyes, drawing tears. "Please..." she heard herself whisper, drawing more tears still, a deep shudder of fear. She heard Bendera coughing, but didn't look over as she started coughing, too, feeling the spearing mist invade her uniform layers and trickle down her skin like a swarm of gnats, creeping into every pore...

Then it stopped.

The vapors were allowed to sit a moment; then they were sucked swiftly away, leaving the two prisoners trembling and coughing up phlegm from the chalk left in their lungs and throats. When they finally dared to open their swollen eyes again, they found each other's stunned facades--brutally clean. Their skin was pinkish and raw, their eyes bloodshot.

"What was that?" Nicoletti gasped.

"I have no idea," Bendera answered, looking at his hands, his uniform, softer after the...whatever it was.

Whatever guess she might have voiced froze in her mind with the materialization of a bowl in the corner. Looking at Bendera, she suddenly realized it had probably been more than a day since they'd eaten. He realized the same soon after and crawled over to make sure it was what they thought it was. Experimenting with a chunk of the white substance, he nodded to Nicoletti and moved to share the bowl with her.

Not that it was good, the plain little lumps of nutrition--if they were even that--but it was filling. They ate it numbly with trembling hands, not daring to look at each other. Instead, they retained what dignity they had with their silence.

Some time later, the gases were turned on again. And again...and again....

And again...

And again...

"Damnit! Why don't you people cut it out!?" she finally cried after they lost count, well over a hundred activations and who-knew how many days later. Even their stories to distract each other had died quickly off, their plans useless and their nerves as raw as their skin.

They'd sworn after the first several times that it was a trick of some kind and they had to overcome it, not let it get to them. After several more, Bendera made her promise not to give in, tried to bolster her as best he could--and several more after that, he stopped checking on her. He himself didn't have it in him by then but to smack the wall to counter the pain, cursing between his gritted teeth. As for herself...

Nicoletti sucked another hard breath despite her seared lungs, sore enough with sobbing, and yelled again, "You want to kill us, then just kill us! Do it!"

The gases began again...

Yet another umpteen activations later, she was silent when the steam began to hiss from the ceiling tubes. Sitting on the grate floor, slumped over the hard bunk, she shuddered through her coughs and waited for it to end. Somewhere nearby, Bendera was coughing, too. She didn't look.

She didn't care.

Feeling an irrational surge of despair and utter powerlessness, Nicoletti simply buried her tears in her sleeve. She couldn't do anything else about it and stopped thinking even about that. It didn't matter; none of it mattered...

Why am I giving up? What kind of officer am I that. But I'm not an officer anymore--not here. No, I am,! I am, I am, I am...but not, not until we...no, not here... "Oh God, please...just...do it..."

Her thoughts turning too hard inside her to make any sense, she pushed it all away to simply let the gases stop, only to hear them start again and again.

It was all useless by then, resisting it.

One of those times, it would end--or they would end. She knew that, too. Something would have to end one of those times.

"Up drask!"

Her limbs trembling, her breath coming in short, hard gasps, Nicoletti pulled herself to her feet beside Bendera. She belatedly realized they had been beamed straight from the cot she had occupied to what looked like another shower area, a light grey slab rock room with slightly raised pools at either end and a door at the middle, slowly filling with other non-Unar.

At least three quarters of the others looked like hooded apparitions, Bendera thought, still trying to stop his own trembling with the welcome distraction of new information. The Bajoran occupation and its victims flashed back into his mind at first sight of those ragged, huddling people, who didn't speak or resist, only waited--probably knowing there was nothing they could do, he figured. Before he could get a chill from the idea that those people's state was what was in store for him and Nicoletti, he felt a hand grab him at the upper neck, and then heard Nicoletti screech a short cry.

Just as she reflexively arched away from the guard's grip, as she was led closer to the middle of the room, Nicoletti caught the eyes of a tall, copper-haired woman with a river of ruddy freckles on her cheeks and jaws. She was plainly dressed in a long shirt and trousers with a wide belt tied on her ribs, like the others by her, but was also staring intently at the two of them. And, having examined them, she unobtrusively brought herself nearer.

Nicoletti couldn't think to interpret what the woman was thinking for the feeling of her heart hammering through her chest, the blood draining from her head...

Bendera had noticed the young woman too--and frankly, if he'd been in a DMZ dive, he'd have beelined right over to her, not the other way around. What he would have done to be in a DMZ dive, though--and not just for the lady...

"Do not fight the routine," she told them when she was close, and then silenced when the guard holding Nicoletti immediately ordered her to.

Bendera caught it--and somehow knew that the woman, though not much over twenty, knew her business. Unashamedly letting the Unar do what they would, the strength of her stare convinced him to hold himself in check. On a sudden urge, he played a cough--covering his mouth with his comm badge-filled hand, and then sucking the piece into his mouth. He pressed his lips over his slightly parted teeth and kept his tongue far back into his throat to manage his urge to gag on it.

Seeing the woman across smirk at that, he nodded with his eyes, hoping she understood as well.

He'd have rather fought his way out--but if they didn't check his mouth, keeping his badge would be the next best thing. So he let his arms fall to the side when the grip on his neck loosened slightly.

Suddenly, Nicoletti felt the Unar practically rip her tunic from her vapor-scorched shoulders and arms, and then her turtleneck. "Don't!" she gasped, seeing her familiar black and gold then grey, land on a quickly growing pile in the center, seeing the glint of her pips and badge disappear under someone else's coat. "No..." *Not that, oh God, not that...*

His neck released, Benders tried not to look towards Nicoletti as he was forcibly bent over. He could hear her crying out and trying not to, and then an "umph" when she hit the hard grated floor. He hit it a moment later to feel his boots, socks, trousers and shorts yanked away from his body, and then the cold, uneven surface pressing painfully on his genitals. Flashes of stories about Cardassian interrogations and tortures swept through him and he nearly swallowed the comm badge for it. Only hearing Nicoletti struggling by him kept him from resisting.

Guess this is one of those times we stay still, he growled to himself as he felt the hand on his neck again, standing him up.

"God no, please, no," Nicoletti was whispering between her teeth, and he would've whispered something back if he could have. "No, no, no. No!"

"Up, drask!"

"I am *not* a drask!" Nicoletti finally shouted, on her bare hands and knees, not moving from the ground, feeling as if she'd *rather* have a heart attack from the panic before following those hairy, rough-handed guards to wherever they were--

With a hiss, the Unar grabbed her hair and dragged her up anyway, turning her towards a tub filled with what looked like a liquid form of the white gas they'd been exposed to in the brig.

She suddenly forgot both her nudity and the sharp pain in her scalp as she tried to scramble back from what she was powerlessly nearing. Even as several other women silently entered the shallow bath, she could already feel the liquid searing her raw, red skin and shrunk against it, kicked back, flailed her arms. The large guard didn't seem bothered, pulled her swiftly across without another word.

"No!" she screamed only seconds before she was unceremoniously shoved into the white pool, landing flat on her stomach and forearms. Whatever was in that water was even more heinous than she had expected: She heard herself screaming and curling up before she realized she actually was.

If there was a hell, she knew she was burning in it.

Her arms quaking, her body following soon after, she'd have gladly gone back to Uillar to prevent what she felt there, like acid crawling into her very bones, making her head throb and spin, her stomach lurch and tears roll like lava from her searing eyes. Any thoughts of Starfleet discipline and dignity, things she'd thought a couple weeks before to have had pretty nicely under her belt, along with handling herself in captive situations--all of that had fled her for the pain and terror that had taken over, as did every sensible thought she might have had in any other situation.

When she felt a long bristle brush press hard against her back, she collapsed to her hands and knees again, her back arching with sobs.

What seemed like an hour later, she was tossed back onto the grate floor and allowed to dry. She couldn't move, refused to even let another puff of air waft against her, and so she lay shaking and crying, wishing she could just faint like any normal human--and wondered why she hadn't by then. By all rights, she should have.

A gentle hand touched her head and she jerked forward, sucking a breath.

"It's just me, Lieutenant," Benders said, shaking the spit off his communicator while fighting his own

trembling. His skin felt so brazed, he might as well have been one huge cut with salt on it.

"I can't move," Nicoletti whispered hoarsely, feeling herself begin to cry again just to hear herself saying it. She couldn't stop it or the convulsive tremors consuming her. "I...can't...they... I can't move..."

"You will have to," said the woman who had spoken to them earlier. Kneeling before Nicoletti, just as naked but oblivious to it, she bent down to meet the trembling woman's eyes if only to try to strengthen her with her stare alone. "You have survived the ritual cleansing--which is well enough considering they have already been stripping your skin. I have felt your pain the first time and understand your turmoil."

"The first time?" Bendera asked.

She nodded. "The first time, when you are not Unar, they strip your skin to purify you for the baths. The pain will pass, but you always remember it. After that, to enter the bazaar, you need only bathe."

"You're here *willingly*?"

"I have purchases to make," she told him, looking them both over, particularly the trembling, tearful woman. She sighed, deciding. "But I suppose I will be making different ones than planned." Leaning even closer, she whispered, "If you want to survive with your wits in tact, stay silent and let me purchase you. I could see by your clothing you are not from this region--but worse, you do not know the way about this, which itself is deadly. When they open the doors, I will have you purchased into training. It will be done quickly and we will leave immediately. Obey me and you will live."

Nicoletti looked up into the woman's serious stare and drew an unsteady breath, trying to make her brain catch up with what the young woman had just said. A few seconds later, she just nodded.

A few seconds after that, the guards brought several stacks of clothing into the room then left again.

"The drask clothing is there," the woman said, pointing. "I will supply you with better when I can. For now, wear them and say nothing. I mean this--nothing. And act confused. They will demand your compliance if you fight, but seek you to be trained if you are only ignorant. It is the way of our lives here--unless you are clever and play their game with your own rules."

Nicoletti slowly pushed herself up to a hip as the woman and Bendera walked away to the stacks. Numbly examining his slim, firm frame, she couldn't help but notice the difference between him and the other humanoids taking the "drask" clothes. Though well postured and highly observant of what was happening there, most of them were malnourished and sickly pale. All of them had thin blue markings on their temples; a few had more on one of their hands. They had been silent throughout the "ritual," and obediently dressed themselves without any show of emotion.

The woman who would buy them was not emaciated like the marked people, but slim for her height with a patrician profile beneath a mop of long, red hair and rosy freckles meandering beneath her cheekbones and jaws. While dressing in her previous clothing with seeming indifference, she snuck a small, supportive smile back to Susan. Then she whispered to the others nearby. Looking back again and over to Bendera, they gestured minutely with their fingers.

It finally dawned on Nicoletti that the woman might just be the chance they needed--and then she wondered why it'd taken so long for her to understand that. Shock, maybe...most likely. Her more cautious side in her was screaming she was deciding too quickly on all of it, though every other nerve in

her wanted to, just looking at the other horribly thin drasks and feeling her own skin still crawling with the feeling of the brushes. She knew they needed a way out...

Any way out.

The mere thought of being away from their captors made the risk worth taking, made her mind collect. *Yes, it'd be the best option, the officer in her said as it slowly came back to her. Escape the present danger, assess the situation and make new plans.*

Bendera's face spoke of the same buried hopefulness as he came back with their "clothing," and politely dropped her small stack on her legs as he passed behind. She silently thanked him for that, though there were definitely no more secrets between them.

Once she had clumsily donned the sheer tube of a dress and tied the accompanying sarong over it--that with the helping gestures of their mysterious friend--Nicoletti gave Bendera another nod, much like the one she'd given him in the brig.

"I'm okay," she told him, hoarsely, but so wanting for sincerity that she held his searching stare until he finally let her be again.

Her eyes fell when he turned, however, as if he alone had been holding them up.

The rear door of the washing room opened and she didn't move to look, even as the rays of sun fell across her back. The two large officials stomped in, throwing hard shadows across the room and silhouetting their hulking frames as they moved into the center of the open space. She only saw their boots.

"Drasks--line."

Compliantly, the thin, marked people filed in next to each other.

"Act confused--remember?" Bendera whispered to Nicoletti, who blinked, her attention regained. She turned the wrong way and took a couple steps.

"Drasks! In the line!"

Bendera pointed for her and she played a look and a nod, hurrying into the end of the line, where she bumped into the person before her. "Sorry," she said.

"Nizha ye zal," the woman whispered kindly.

"Silence!"

The woman froze and Nicoletti clamped her teeth together so not to make another sound--also so not to get the woman she had used for show in trouble again. Her efforts by then were in vain, however, as the official strode forward, yanked the marked woman out of line and threw her onto the floor.

Only Bendera's hand, pressed to her thinly covered back, kept Nicoletti's mouth closed, her teeth, chattering by then, tightly pressed. Instead, she told herself repeatedly to breathe as the Unar walked slowly around the emaciated woman's compliant body.

"Mines," he told a guard, who whisked the woman away.

With a jerk of his chin, the official moved back to allow the traders to come forward. They only glanced at the two unknown people then went on with their usual business. The red-haired woman gave them a glance over, too, but after seeing the others there, visibly checking her purse, she sighed and gestured to them.

"These are untrained," she told the official, her head bent while still observing the two drasks with a steady frown. "I will train them for a standard charge in the house of Kichyryn for repurchase in one Antral revolution. I am Yasis Onistra and my trades are known here. My cousin, Aldrun Kichyryn, has served Unar capably and for him I make this trade with your approval."

The Unar looked over to the two's wandering eyes, the female's trembling, the male's fumbling; then he looked back to the ugly yet compliant Antral woman. "You would return them to this location for repurchase at fifteen kibo above the standard novice rate," he stated.

"Your command is respected and will be gratefully followed," she answered and offered him her purse. When he held out his hand, she poured her oblong kibo bars into it. In return, he gave her a square, black crystal, which she hooked onto her breast pocket.

The official stepped to them and pulled two black cuffs from his pocket. "Training," he said and locked the rings tightly on their arms.

Bendera popped his attention back to the Unar and the convincingly irate young woman. He wondered how many times she'd done that before. She was acting her part to the hilt, looking pissed off and resentful, with no hinting glances to reassure them that time. More, she silenced anything he might have said with a decisive flick of her fingers.

"You will follow me," she commanded. "Deter from my path and I will lose forty kibo for having snuffed your miserable forms from existence."

She'd have made a good Maquis, Bendera mused as he replied with a single, slow nod.

Turning on her square heel, she led them out of the room and through the bazaar. Far less than they had expected, it was nothing but the barest of open kiosks with antiquated parts, poor, blank-eyed vendors and a throng of Unar at every corner. The sun above, dry but cool, did nothing but hurt their eyes and make Nicoletti shiver when a cold wind whipped down into the tight square of short, flat buildings.

Looking over, Kurt felt some relief to see Nicoletti seeming more alert and examining the stalls and the people they passed. Now that they were seemingly out of the Unar's hands, she looked to be coming back to her senses. Even her face had gained back some color.

Soon enough and without any warning, they came to a gate. Giving the guard there her chip to examine, the young trader gestured to a small, pill-shaped freighter waiting by. "This is transport," she said loudly. "You will take your first lessons with my cousin's crew and in my aunt's house, the remainder. Do not make yourselves a waste of money, else you can eat your shame in the waste yards of Gamich."

Spinning again, she brought them to the long row of steps that led up into the upper midsection of the craft, which Nicoletti first noticed were heavily rusted. Stepping aside, the woman let them board first, as if to be careful they wouldn't run away, and then hopped up after them. Before her feet were on the deck, she punched the button for the door. It ground up and slammed shut as she skipped forward to the center corridor.

"Take us from here!" she called forward.

"Starting this instant," came a smooth baritone from a bleeping bridge about five meters to their right. He spoke again, but into a comm. The belly of the ship answered. It chugged lazily to life and grew into a steady roar a few moments later.

The woman turned back to Nicoletti and Bendera, finally allowing her grin to appear. "I congratulate you," she told them triumphantly. "You are officially fugitives of Unar."

Bendera audibly let out his breath. "Thank God." He would have hugged her if he didn't have to steady Nicoletti, swaying slightly as the internal gravity readjusted. "Anything's better than property."

"I understand that well," she said, pleasantly plain as she held her palms upward with a deep nod. "I am Yasis. The man you just heard is my cousin, Aldrun, captain of this ship--which is assigned to standard ore transport, but, as you will see, is a bit more than that. You will meet the others who work in the engines later."

Fighting her dizzy relief as she realized that they had escaped, Nicoletti straightened and tried to show some sort of dignity for a change that day. "I'm Lieutenant Susan Nicoletti," she said, her voice still trembling, but trying. "This is Crewman Kurt Bendera. --Thank you for helping us."

"Rather long names," Yasis commented and gestured to the short corridor.

"We've been separated from our ship and the others on our team," Nicoletti continued. "We would be very grateful if you could help us contact our people."

Looking back, the young woman gave them a long stare. "I had a thought at first sight that you were not of our region. We have only heard ancient tales about crafts going though the Barrier. You are from outside of it?"

"The Barrier?" Nicoletti asked.

"A shield of plasma which surrounds our region of space," she explained as she took them toward the bridge. "It is impenetrable with our ships, so we stay away from it. But you got through."

"It wasn't exactly our choice," Bendera said, "but yes, we did. Our ship will probably follow us, if it hasn't already. They'll be looking for us. But in case these Unar find them first--"

"Which is likely," Yasis said.

"Is there any way we might send an encrypted message through subspace--contact them if they are here?"

Yasis nodded. "We can work on that," she told him. "The Unar are pests in their patrols but arrogant enough in their power that they do not normally look for anomalous signals, so you do not have to do too much. But I would tell you now that any signal would be dispersed in the plasma fields--as are most ships when they stray too near."

"Voyager could get through it," Bendera told her. "We just need to let them know we're okay and where we are."

"That may be done, if we are able to repair our main relay."

"We'll help you with any repairs you need to make this happen," Nicoletti promised, "and we'll pay you back--generously." The moment she finished, she grabbed a bulkhead as the ship suddenly lurched to take off.

Yasis smiled broadly and took her arm to escort her the rest of the way forward. "That would be a pleasure, in light of what payment we require. You might have noticed this?"

If Nicoletti hadn't known better, she would have thought the bridge at the head of the transport was a storage closet. Barely large enough for its two forward chairs and the machinery crammed into it, the auburn-haired captain had to duck to look around--and did so directly at Nicoletti, who stood in the thin doorway, staring back at him. Her eyes briefly widened as she straightened. Another moment passed and he released a soft breath.

He did not avert his deep green gaze as he asked softly, "Where is the laridium?"

Yasis bit her lip. "They were out of it?" she ventured in her light lie, letting her glance jump toward the other two.

There, the captain rolled his eyes. "I would curse you had I no reason to trust your instincts, little cousin," he said, turning back to his console. "So make me trust you again."

The young woman garnered her strength with a quick breath. "Do not call me a liar: They apparently are *outsiders* to *Irliae*--and for whatever they are, they were having great difficulty," she told him, tactful for the other woman's sake and nodding when his stare widened to reconsider the two. "I could not leave them as such for the Unar, Aldrun, their being so ignorant of their hatefulness. Had you gone, you would have done the same. Dorchan and Malhid and the others at home--Kebis, even--will probably curse me to the dust of my body, but it was our earned money--and mostly *my* earned money for my service at Tralbil--not anyone else's."

"And so...?" he started, intent on his work again as he set their course.

"Cousin, we can collect our own plasma, which is a hundred times superior to that dung Unar use."

"It is also a detectable upgrade," he reminded her.

As Yasis sighed, Nicoletti bit the corner of her lip in thought then moved forward a step. "Detectable by what?"

"Unar scans, of course," the man answered, quietly confident and slightly condescending for the silly question.

"What *kind* of scan?" Nicoletti pressed then added, "I'm an data engineer, Captain. My friend here is a systems technician. We can help you mask your plasma output ratio so that they would have to be looking for you personally to know your trailing signature. Meanwhile, we can look for our ship using the same equipment."

The captain and Yasis returned their stares to the outsiders. "It is your *trade*?" Yasis gaped. "You are true technicians? Oh, my instincts be damned for finer luck!" Laughing, she shook her head, touched both their arms in thanks, hopping in delight. "You would help us honestly?"

"It's the least we can do for your saving our necks," Bendera answered, surprised that she had to ask twice--and then he remembered when he was on an equally battered ship, how he felt about the blind

offers of favors. "We'll do what we can. Fair trade."

Yasis turned another look to her cousin. "Well, Aldrun? May I keep them?"

Aldrun laughed, easily relenting. "Welcome aboard, man and lady."

"Lieutenantsusannicoletti and Crewmankurtbendera," Yasis corrected then snickered to see Aldrun not catch the joke and stare back at them with a raised brow.

Nicoletti didn't smile. "Nicoletti or just Susan will do," she said, "since we'll be working together for the mean time."

"Kurt's fine," Bendera added.

"Kurt, Susan," Aldrun nodded as his eyes roamed over the female portion of his guests again; then he gestured to the seat by himself. "Kurt, who is dressed well enough, will join me and learn my systems. During this time, I will take us where we can mine plasma. We have six gruvnu before we are expected at Antral for reassignment. Yasis, take our beautiful yet inappropriately outfitted Susan aft and find her some clothing; then show her our engines."

His simple and assured command given and another glance the lady's way, he turned back to his work.

"I have a change that might fit, though a little long," Yasis smiled and took Nicoletti's hand--then held it more warmly to feel a jerk at the casual movement. "It is well, Susan. You are relatively safe and my cousin and I are of a good and clever Antral family. Well, *all* Antral are forced to be both clever and mercenary since the Unar forced their 'plan' upon us. But it remains: You have nothing to fear in us." As they moved through the rustic corridor, she laughed again with disbelief. "Engineer! I almost wish I were Desalian, that I would have spirits to thank."

"I'm sorry?"

Shaking her head, she turned them into a small bunkroom. "Only an expression," she said and walked across to a nearly empty closet. Reaching in without much decision, she pulled out a long, faded red blouse, a waist sash and a pair of brown fitted trousers. "This will do well enough." With a shrug, she handed them to her guest and bent into a small trunk. Digging under a couple thin blankets, she tossed a slightly worn bustier onto the other clothes. "We will adjust the hems later, but roll them now. And for now..."

Yasis reached over and unclasped the band enclosing Susan's cold upper arm. With a smirk, she pulled it away and tossed it behind her, where it clinked into a corner and bounced away unseen. Susan looked down to the red indentation it left behind, nodding her thanks. She had almost forgotten about it being there, but was glad to see it gone.

"Better, yes," Yasis said surely and gave her new friend a nod to continue.

Seeing the Antral lady was not poised to leave, but moved around her to pull a slate from the wall, Susan shrugged to herself and began to carefully change out of the clothing she had been assigned.

"You said you were a part of a team," Yasis said as she prepared the bunk and breaking what she thought was an uncomfortable silence. Though she seemed better just then, Susan had been affected by the cleansing without a doubt. Yasis could still see the woman's fingers trembling. "Did they escape?"

Susan's answer was quietly put. "Actually, they're part of what we need to look for, too. The Unar captured us all and separated us at the prison they took us to."

"That is not uncommon." Yasis hopped down from the end of the bed to open a trunk. Among some more blankets and underclothing, she extracted a long tube. Tapping Susan's hand, she squeezed out a fat string of amber oil. "To soothe the cleansing, friend. You will need only use it a few times. It is very effective."

She looked blankly down at the oil then began to massage it into her arms. True to Yasis' promise, it numbed the pain almost immediately. "Thank you."

"Maybe we can devise a trade," the young woman offered as she went back to setting up the bunk above her own, "collect some funds to purchase them when they are shuffled. The Unar stir their drasks when they feel the mood to reassess their power. Where are they interred?"

"They called the planet Uillar," Susan told her then blinked to see the Yasis' jaw and freckles visibly flush. "What?"

She sighed a deep breath, shook her head. "Any other place but that," she whispered. "I am sorry."

"Sorry? About what? --Please tell me."

"None but a Desalian," Yasis said, "for their physiology, has survived the conditions at Uillar. Even the Unar take treatments and undergo several ridiculous cleansing rituals to serve their duties there." She lowered herself to look into her new friend's paled face. "Again, I am sorry, but it is unlikely you will get them back."

"God, what else can happen here?" Susan whispered, shaking her head to feel her throat tighten. "I'm supposed to be handling this, I know, but I can't. I don't know what to do, and I know less now because one of the things we need to do isn't going to make it." Feeling Yasis' long, warm fingers rest upon her shoulder, she looked up to her again. "Are you sure?"

"I wish I was not."

She swallowed her tears for her officers--tears, shock, horror, everything that had never been allowed to fade since the moment they were first captured and had well begun to wear at her. She and Bendera might well be the only ones left. Or at least soon, they would be if they couldn't find Voyager soon.

Susan turned at Yasis' gentle nudge and allowed her to spread the healing oil over her raw back. "We need to find our ship," she said.

"When you are dressed, we will begin that immediately," Yasis told her and eased her around. "In spite of my jesting, I do understand the term 'lieutenant'--and that you serve under another. It is how the Antral once worked, too, long ago. Did you serve under the other two?"

"Yes," Nicoletti said. "But they...well, I guess you could say they're friends, too. I don't know them very well, but we're all a part of a ship trying to get home. We have that much in common."

The young woman held Susan's sad gaze. "Then I am sorry that you have been forced into this place," she said. "I will tell you of the plight of Irlae, though it will not bring you any comfort."

"From what I've seen..." Nicoletti started then peered at the lady, at least five years younger than

herself--and thirty years older for the presence she held in place of her giddy laugh. "Your people, at the bazaar. You trade for servants there. You run a slave trade?"

Yasis nodded, none too proudly. "The Desalians commit themselves to labor to feed their families. Unar put their conditions upon them when they conquered them--after we first were conquered. It is complicated, Susan, but for this moment I will say that we needed Desalia's help before, and for their pacifism and our lack of technical superiority and numbers, we are all subject to Unar's wills. Now, we still need Desalians, in more ways than you may think.

"This is not a good place, where you have found yourselves. It is full of pain you probably cannot imagine, if the ritual scrubbing had been your worst trauma in life." With a long sigh, Yasis helped Susan to sit and handed her the tube to apply the oil to her feet. She then sat beside her, touched her shoulder again. "We will work so to make your comrades proud of your efforts and vindicate their plight," she promised. "And if we are very fortunate, your ship may come in time to find you and your friends themselves."

Susan's hands stopped on her knees. "I hope so," she said. It was an empty statement. She honestly did want to hope, but after what she'd seen and been through so far, she couldn't help her pessimism, nor her shame. She indeed probably had little idea what those people had lived through. But that was what she had to work with, so she silently resolved to simply do what she could.

Naturally, it would not be so simple. The moment she stepped off the last rung to the engine room, Susan turned to see five filthy, freckled "mechanics" and an engine that whined and churned instead of pulsed. A steady stream of coolant hissed from open injector brackets, corroded housing tubes and tape-bound wiring hung together like hammocks under every juncture and the charge relays crackled, making all the monitors--such as they were--flicker...

If she hadn't already had enough shock, Susan would have cried--fell down on the floor and cried like a child.

The desire to do just that settled soon enough, though--along with a good deal she couldn't puzzle out and simply shut aside. Instead, she stared at the clunky engine, the half-lit systems, the makeshift panels with manual switches and the sooty deck. She didn't even want to see the drive chamber or the reactors.

Releasing her short breath, Susan swallowed. She closed her eyes for a full second; then she opened them again.

"I need diagnostic equipment," she muttered.

When Yasis retrieved it and put it in Susan's waiting hand, she nearly dropped it for her trembling. "Go get Bendera, please," she said tightly, clutching the scanner against her sinking gut. "I need help reconfiguring your relays. Then I want to clean this place up."

Yasis nodded. "I will help you, too," she said, offering a grin when Susan looked at her, "my friend."

When Yasis was gone, Susan looked down to the alien tool to figure it out....

A month later, she barely had to look at it.

"Did they finish the injector refit?" she asked, tossing the recharged scanner onto the bunk so she could pull on her trousers.

"Last evening," Yasis answered, "after you retired. I think we will have the finest ore bucket in the region once you and Kurt are done telling us how to run our ship."

"You asked."

The outsider lady had met her quip, even if dully. It was the way about her, Yasis had learned as she came to know Susan. She was a rather plain-hearted woman, though polite and extremely intelligent. Her sleep was more often disturbed than not, but she spent her days productively, with tasks laid out and followed through in quiet automation. She did have small breaks in her concentration, though they were always inspired by others who whispered she might break if touched the wrong way.

She noticed that Aldrun brought out Susan's wits, though, which was undoubtedly a good thing. Kurt watched after her, too, made himself obvious and gave her a pat on the back and some cheer in the way of support or thanks. For them, Susan did return a small smile--sometimes.

"I will see you below?"

"I won't be long."

With a nod, Yasis slipped out to let her friend finish dressing.

Susan barely felt as though she'd slept.

As she dressed for yet another day mining plasma, she ticked the numbers off in her head. It had been a month, plus the time it had taken from when they had crashed in the shuttle to when they had met Yasis.

Just what I signed up for, she sighed, somewhat bitter but not really frightened anymore. The routine helped that--as it always had with her. The figures she droned into herself almost every day she woke up in that uncomfortable bunk feeling dirty always helped somehow, too. Rational, predictable, answerable... *So that makes...almost six or seven weeks since we left Voyager?* She could barely count it anymore, and wondered why she bothered. Antral time was a pain to calculate around her natural clock, this in addition to those ships, that place, their situation...

The antiquated power refinery, even with her and Kurt's improvements, were unnervingly slow. The other systems in the ship could likewise use a century's worth of upgrades. After hearing what they had about the occupation, though, they knew it would stay precisely that--a century old ship without much chance of anything but better care.

She still wondered about that woman in the baths--a Desalian woman, she knew by then--and what might have happened to her. From what she already knew about Desalian service, the woman had probably sold herself to feed her family, only to be committed to a camp where she would have no payment and no release. Yasis said not to feel guilty for the woman, as it was likely the guard simply didn't like that Desalian's appearance and used Susan's mistake as an excuse--and a way to hurt Susan, too.

Susan couldn't forget it, though, and always felt ill when she remembered what she'd done.

Torres and Paris were probably dead by then...dead on a planet only Desalians could survive. Maybe

that woman had gone there. There was no sign of Voyager--anywhere. No word at all. They couldn't scan the space, of course, not with those useless and barely operating short-range sensors, which incredibly worked on charge-tube plasma relays. Susan still shook her head when she looked at them. She had read of such technology in her history courses.

In her worst moments, she had checked to see if the Antral crew might have been blocking their signals--and didn't know whether to be disappointed or happy that they couldn't have done it even if they wanted to. She also knew the nebula they'd been in wasn't affecting it. The radiation wasn't that unstable to cause such a disruption. Kurt's comm badge, they concluded, should have also been unaffected.

In the past week or so, she had started to neglect checking on it. She cursed herself every time she remembered and hurried to the panel--then cursed again to find nothing.

Tying the closures of the red longshirt Yasis had given her, Susan stared at the wall, knowing numbly that they weren't getting out of there. They were stuck there, on that ship, in an alien underground.

Susan missed what the Antral called paradise desperately, would have done anything to get her old and easier life back again, replicator rations, dull diagnostics, Torres barking at her, more reports than she could finish, followed every few nights by a visit to the holodeck with her friends. Even the battles with the Kazon would be a comfort at that point for knowing eventually a sonic shower and a comfortable bed awaited her after fixing a ship that was worth the effort. She could practically feel those smooth, clean sheets and a comfortable pair of pajamas every time she closed her eyes and ignored her oily skin and the heavy odor of engine soot in her borrowed clothing. She could feel the peace she once had in sleeping.

But those simple comforts felt father and farther away from her.

Janeway would have come for them by then. Even without the plasma, she would have had Voyager repaired within a couple weeks. Or maybe they thought they'd all been killed and moved on and left them there. Nicoletti could see how they could come to that decision. Captain Janeway would have hated it, but if it were for the best, she would have acted thinking for her surviving crew. It was a Starfleet attitude that Susan understood, even if she hadn't been practicing the same policy of late. Not that it mattered there. Not anymore.

At the same time, Susan hoped she was only being too pessimistic. As she left the small quarters for her more recent routine, she knew her pessimism was merely the truth. Any lingering hope was forged simply out of her need to survive and look forward to *something* in that dead-end situation.

Meeting Aldrun in the corridor, she offered her usual dim smile and nod. As always, he bowed deeply and welcomed her to the morning.

"Nice to be here," she replied and continued to the stairs that led down into the deep belly of his ship, even if a stupid, nagging part of her wanted to turn back around and apologize. Aldrun had been courteous and tolerant of her coolness. He was also downright chummy with Kurt, which annoyed her for a reason she couldn't explain.

She took herself back to her work despite all of that, and did what they would need to keep that rustic collection of parts together--though they would never be what she wanted them to be.

Aldrun noticed this every morning he came to the engine room, humming unconsciously to himself as he examined the stations.

His casualness was deceiving, as he truly was curious to see what latest thing had been done to his ship. While it tinkered through one of the string nebulae near the Antral home system, the two had done an enormous amount of work on its systems--more than Aldrun might have dreamed of any crew, much less an accidental charity of his cousin's.

Indeed, what the outsiders had done merely with what they had on hand and the plasma they collected and refined was stupidly miraculous to him. Ironic, that, for the two in Antral eyes would not have been extraordinary at first glance. But Aldrun had been watching them, too. Kurt was quick to think and strong for his build, the captain could see, and he had a contagious humor that people followed. Susan, though a hand shorter than his cousin and delicate in gesture, was remarkably astute, creative and adept at shutting off every sense to concentrate on her near-constant work.

He wished that he could give them access to everything the underground possessed. Perhaps, if the outsiders' luck were very poor, then someday, he would be able to take them to a ship that was not already assigned to Unar ore transport--to ships the Unar were not aware of. What good things they could do in their misfortune--though indeed their lot was a pitiful thing--could be a great progress for Irliae.

Shamefully realizing precisely how much the Unar had purposefully retarded Irliae, Aldrun pressed *himself* into their service, wanting to know everything they did, asking them to show him everything they were doing, asking the lady to explain every detail, to instruct him in their ways.

"What now, Captain?" Nicoletti asked, willfully pressing her shoulders down as he looked over her work. She could practically feel his breath on her neck as he hummed a tune in a purring baritone--and as always, he was slightly off key to her well-tuned ear. He did it so often that the annoying measures often followed her to her sleep. "Are you afraid we'll sabotage the ship?"

Aldrun chuckled. "If this is sabotage, then it is the finest I have known."

She peered back at him. "Not that you would know the difference," she returned, but sighed at her insult and how that reflected on his manly features. "Sorry."

He still felt it. "You believe I am not intelligent for that you have had more opportunity in your fewer years?"

"No," she said, soft for her shame. She had quickly learned how frustrated the Antral were, and that just in the crew of ten on that ship. Their situation, knowing the Unar had confiscated almost everything their people had ever achieved but their lives and basic culture, really was pitiful. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that. I...I forget sometimes."

"I forgive you," he said gently. "This is not your home. I understand that you speak from ignorance as easily as I am ignorant. Now, Susan, please tell me what you are doing. I want to learn more, everything you can teach and my ignorant mind can grasp."

With a short nod, she did just that. Helping them might as well have included teaching them to keep up her work--things they could have done themselves but simply hadn't been taught to. More, when she thought about it, she did want them to know all they could about the systems they had to use every day. They never had that opportunity, even with the means at their fingertips, living in that place as they had to... *As Kurt and I do now, too*, she recalled, and then stifled the resulting chill. "Bring me that spectrometer and I'll show you what to do with it."

He chuckled to himself, but said nothing, suspecting she would not be amused. "Yes, Susan," was all he

said.

At another terminal, Kurt and Yasis shared a wise grin and turned quickly before the other two noticed.

Susan caught it, though, and smirked imperceptibly. They were like two kids on a grand little adventure sometimes, laughing at in-jokes and teasing the adults. Worse, Bendera was four years Susan's elder. She hated him a little for his ease. Certainly, he had kicked and growled at the empty signal they'd sent out and checked every time they got the chance--he more often than she did, in truth. He still examined his badge to see if the ferranide charges were working.

But once he had gotten into the small routine--wake, eat bread and drink rizki, work, take dinner, talk a while, sleep--Kurt relaxed, and he had even taken to telling them about his experience in another war he had fought, far away. It was a fight the Antral only wished they might have and listened to word for gruesome word. It always ended the same, wondering where Voyager was, if their friends and their remaining away team were still alive.

Still, like most of the other Maquis she'd known on Voyager, Kurt rolled with the punches, so to speak. He was in a place with people he liked, doing something to help what seemed like a good enough cause and made him feel useful. As for wanting to get back, he had already admitted that he needed to get over it and move on. If the chance came someday, he'd take it. Until then, he'd make what he could of the relatively good thing they had there.

She had done the same if not more--but felt nothing behind it, even after she knew she would never go home....

"Susan, we have to start considering it," Bendera told her. "I know it's not easy, but if Voyager's not here yet--"

"I know," she said, cutting him off without thinking to.

"Maybe sometime we'll be able to get out of here and catch up with them," Bendera offered then looked at the Antral captain. "Until then, we do need a more permanent arrangement."

"I would not argue this," Yasis said to them and her cousin.

"You want to stay here, with us?" Aldrun asked, kicking back to lean against a wall. "If so, I will of course have you, even unto Antral. Aside from being good company, you have helped us a great deal. I would be foolish not to admit to that advantage; however, you have become our friends as well, and for that, too, I would protect you. You will always have work and camaraderie on my ship, even if you likely will never see your potential here. We simply do not have the technology you enjoyed before."

Bendera held the captain's measuring stare. "Much as I liked the idea of being around modern ships again, I can handle it. --Susan?"

She shrugged. "I guess we don't have a choice."

"You would have to be seen as Antral, however," Yasis said suddenly, looking at them both in turns. "I fear our own people would not accept you even if they thought you were from the Borderlands. Even as orphan Antral, some will be paranoid about your foreign status. Worse would be their fearing the Unar possibly discovering you and taking their usual liberty with us all in that event. And if the Unar do catch

you, they will take you both for service without question, if not worse."

"She is right in this," Aldrun nodded. "We can keep you on my ship, safe and anonymous among my crew, but if we are taken for inspection, there would be nothing for us to do for you without getting the entire crew killed. We might be punished only for harboring you."

"So much for the bright side," Susan muttered, her stomach already shrunken at the word "inspection."

Yasis looked at her, motioning to her hair and fair skin. "Even if your coloring appeals to them, if you are seen as Antral, they will not take you as a whore."

Her stomach turned yet again for that thought, though she did ask, "Why not?"

The Antral's lips twisted derisively on that thought. "They do not like the reactions they get from our 'secretions'--and I am thankful for it."

"Where's the pen?" Susan smirked, but then said, "No, if that's a guarantee, I'll take it, even temporarily. I don't ever want to go back to that bazaar--and I definitely don't want them touching me--ever."

Aldrun gave her a long look and continued to until she met it. "You never will, Susan," he promised. "I will make certain neither of you serve in that capacity. Yasis can bear that bazaar for she was born to this place. But you should never return to it--even if you are ostensibly Antral. There is more appropriate work for you to do, even if quietly."

"Thank you," she said, meaning it as much as she knew he did. Beguiling as he could be, she had come to know Aldrun always meant what he said.

Yasis let her hands fall onto her knees, settled with the plan she'd already decided on. "So, we will refine a jolt more plasma to charge up the surgical laser--if I can find the thing?"

Aldrun nodded, but then considered it. "We have no anesthetics on board," he said. "We will have to wait until we can slip into Antral."

Yasis was almost defeated--but then suddenly smiled. "But cousin, whatever became of that tialuo we found discarded?" Looking at Susan, sitting upright in her chair, her still unfinished meal in front of her and her lips pressed flatly together, the younger woman crossed her arms and considered her friend. "In truth, Susan, I think we all may like to have some wine."

Susan looked back, her expression unchanged. "You mean non-replicated wine?" she said then shook her head. "I've never consumed alcohol. It might not be a good idea."

Bendera gave her a half-meant grin. "Anesthesia, Susan. Think of it like that. Frankly, I wouldn't mind a dose right now. And trust me--you could use it, the way you've been operating."

She gave him a stare for that one, but finally sighed and shrugged an agreement.

Two hours and two bottles of "Unar urine with a sweet touch" later, Kurt and Yasis' laughter was bouncing off the rusty walls and pummeling her in both ears.

The drink was truly a poison, but Susan cringed her way through half a glass of the wretched stuff so Aldrun could get the laser work over with--which she consequently didn't remember him doing. By the

time she finished the glass, she forgot that she had emptied it--and didn't notice Yasis slipping more in. She could barely recall her own name by the time Aldrun was ready for Kurt.

Not that her name was important anymore, she thought in her increasing stupor.

Kurt and Yasis, however, had exploded into evil little plots for their enemies, leaving them howling as they became sillier. Yasis hadn't stopped giggling since refilling Susan's wavering glass and encouraging her to drink, wickedly enjoying the sight of the engineer losing her usually staid grip on the world. Meanwhile, Aldrun went to work on Kurt's face. The former Maquis was likewise feeling the drink so well by then, the captain might have sawed straight through his skull without hurting him. Aldrun was careful anyway.

"Maybe the Cardies and the Unar aughta get together--co'pare notes," Bendera chuckled, cocking a grin behind him. He was too inebriated to move otherwise. "Maybe give each other some examples...howta' make everyone's lives hell? Invasions, rapes, deceptions, psychotic ambitions on howta' take o'er the un'verse."

Yasis snickered even as she swallowed another mouthful of the wine. Her feet propped up on the end of the chipped stone table, her boots off, she turned her slim foot on its side to play with the worn-out surgical laser and settled on punting it away when she failed to pick it up with her toes. "I concur--but only if our furry natives visit *your* side."

"Since I won't be around to see it? Sure. I'm buyin'."

"Ah God, I'm gon' vomit," Susan moaned. She was sprawled on a long wall bench, trying to scratch at the swirls of pigment spots permanently burned into her jaws and cheeks. But her hand couldn't get up that far.

"Hey, Nicoleopard!" Bendera called out, snorting at Yasis' query of what a nicoleopard was. "Help us plot tha' Cardie accords! You're Starfleet, know all 'bout this crap. --Or maybe yah don't."

Drawing her bleary eyes across the room for help--any kind of help--she only saw Aldrun, silent and very still, sipping steadily from his glass now that his work was completed. His stare locked on her, he smiled appraisingly to see her face.

Susan groaned and let her head fall again.

"You know, you people help it--the Unar," Bendera told the young woman next to him as he let his hand slide over her shapely leg.

"As opposed to letting them roll over us in the same method as Desal?" Yasis laughed, turning her knee a bit, so that his fingers went where she wanted them.

He gamely only drummed his fingers in that direction. "Ya know what I mean," he insisted. "By doing jus' what they want ya to, you're as ruled over and controlled by them as anyone."

"The men of my people are too arrogant and cocksure to even consider the Unar rule over them! Cej! They would rather sell their mother to whoredom!"

"Yeah, but you keep sellin' people, the Unar'll always have a workforce--and they'll always be strong. Gotta take 'em out where they breathe."

"The demons do not breathe--they eat and shit their own noxious gas. --And I do not sell slaves--nor would any in my family. Had you not been there, I would not have remained for drask purchases but moved on for lariduim, for we are mine agents. But this is not the point."

Aldrun still said nothing, still did not break his stare from the top of Nicoletti's head.

"I mean it," she mewed loudly. "I'm going to lose it right 'ere."

"Shut up, Nicoleopard," Bendera returned. "There's one in e'ry bar. --Just swallow it an' take it."

"Me?!" she screeched, having heard enough...even if he'd just started. Susan pulled herself--barely--to her elbows. "Swallow it?!"

"Yeah. Get over it an' just relax for a change. Wha's done is done. Time t'move on."

Nicoletti gargled a laugh. Her head lolling, she tried her damndest to focus on her crewmate. "I've *been* swallowing it," she told him, sucking down her bile for more and wondering what she was saying even as she was saying it. "I *always* wind up in not wha' I thought, as if I ever really thought 'bout anything. I wan' one thing, I got another--an' I *took* it. All I ha' that was mine was Starfleet--an' even then they said I'd be better in engineering than the sciences. An' look where *that* landed me! Stuck in this God damn, dirty, awful place the res' of m' life. Listen to 'em, Susi--they know wha' ther' sayin'..." She lowered herself onto her face again. "Damn him. No, I miss him. I miss...Dad. I'll ne'er see him af'er all this, an' it's his fault. --So go screw y'rself, Kurt!"

Yasis' mouth was between a smile and a smirk as she observed her very flaccid friend, collapsed again and moaning on the bench. "I thought you would like to loosen your nerve, Susan," she said. "But it seems I should have you drunk more often. It is more than you have said since you came here."

"I'm gonna vomit," was her reply.

"Very well," Yasis snickered, pulling her feet off the table. "Come, Kurt, and you and I will plan the accord of bastardry while I cut your hair. I do not enjoy your hair."

He rolled his head back. "Wha's wrong with my hair?"

"You are taking after a Sureshan--and that is bad." She flicked her fingers at her cousin's dark auburn tufts, cropped close to his scalp. "That is *handsome*. Yours looks as does a rabbit's. I cannot have that."

"Oh. A'right. Shoul' we bomb the talks, tho?"

She laughed aloud, even if it made Susan groan again and futilely bury her head. "I like your initiative! You are an Antral truly--even if you will never be one. Is that possible?"

Smiling boyishly, he drew himself up from the table to accept her outstretched fingers. "Who cares?" he said softly.

"Certainly I don't," she giggled and hurried them out, crashing softly into the jamb before remembering she had to open the door in order to exit.

Susan sighed heavily in relief to hear they were gone. "Yes," she breathed to herself, "who cares?..." Groaning again, she rolled herself onto her back and exhaled deeply--then swallowed, hard. She really didn't want to throw up. "God, I'm drunk," she whispered, her eyes rolling back into her closing eyes as

her entire existence spun in heavy circles. "I need to get to sickbay. Doctor, I need a...cup of coffee...an' anodyne relay..."

Aldrun watched her for some time after before pushing himself to his feet.

When her eyes slowly opened again, she saw the familiar rust red walls of the bulkheads. Her eyes drifted shut again--but then flew back open.

The bed she was on was soft...and it was not the room she shared with Yasis.

"Cuuv," whispered the Antral captain from her side. Sitting on the floor, his head rested in the crook of his elbow on the end of the bunk, he still watched her, his sleepy green eyes so steady, he looked ready to hypnotize her. His fingers straightened to stroke the cloth at her hip. "My cousin and Kurt occupy your quarters tonight, so you will remain here, Susan. Please, rest yourself. You were very drunk."

"I still am," she muttered. She felt worse than she had when she first came through the Barrier, and she couldn't for the life in her remember anything but the first sip of that terrible stuff Yasis was so thrilled to find. "You're not, though."

"I have taken tiscaluo several times."

"You don't seem like the type," she said, not sarcastically. For all that he may have been, he was always calm, thoughtful, even when he was bothered.

"I am not, truly," he admitted. "Men of my people are often expected to show their magnitude in such ways. Yasis and I come from quieter blood."

She snorted softly. "Are you trying to seduce me again, Captain?" she asked, knowing it was a stupid question, considering she was lying in his bed. More, everyone on the ship knew that he had been paying particular attention to her--attention she had allowed, even if she wouldn't have thought to do anything about it when...

"Yes, I would like to make love to you," he replied frankly.

Nicoletti's eyes did not open. "I'm too tired," she said. *Even if you'll be thinking about it now*, she told herself as suddenly and before her better senses could push it away. Had she been on Voyager still...but she wasn't there and it was true that she really didn't want to move. Her whole body felt like it was still floating--starting with her stomach.

"You are too tired for even life, it seems," he commented, boldly pulling himself up to lie beside her. He stared down into her reopening eyes, noting the darkness of the blue, so exotic and pure. The plainness in them did not discourage him, either, even if it was strange to see in such a lovely woman. "You never have taken your own chances, clutched to your life for what it is worth, even when you had all and more than your heart desired. Have you?"

Her mouth pursed. "I guess you're going to tell me I should now?"

"It is not my place to put words in the mouth of a lady," he said politely. "But I hope you would indulge me."

She forced her eyes to open more that time, if for anything then to be fully conscious and believe that

next crazy thing that was happening. "You want to have sex with me--now?"

"As I said before, I would like us to make love. I want to give you some joy that is lost in you. --Yes, Susan, I see it, along with a beautiful, intelligent woman. You have yet to feel it, however."

She almost laughed, shaking her head. "I'm drunk, tired, half mad--and now I don't know how to live because I'm not passionate. Well, maybe it's true. But maybe I think this is just too insane to deal with right now."

"Perhaps you would prefer an insanity of my making," he purred mischievously as he placed his large, warm hand on her belly. "I would not have you without your wish, but you deserve to be pleased as a woman should be, to live as a woman should, even in these times."

"I don't know what kind of woman you're talking about if you think sex is all a woman is living for."

"It is not--but it is a good thing to live *with* when done well," he tenderly boasted. He could feel her muscles quiver and surge against his hand, and practically smelled her resulting heat. "I would like to try to give you that. Though you are not Antral, I find you very alluring."

"A nice specimen, hmm?"

"A beautiful woman of alien extraction whom I find compelling."

"Aldrun, I'm tired," she sighed, though she felt his hand, pressing gently, heard his warm words and gestures boldly search her reactions, as he had since they came aboard. Looking at him again, she couldn't deny that he was attractive...and wise to her...

God, I know I'm still drunk...

"Then you should have little to do while I give what I have to you," he replied, unbothered.

...though the bed was comfortable, and she didn't have much else but a life on that hulking ship with one outfit of clothing and no hope of leaving, of returning to anything she knew and had realized belatedly how much she'd taken for granted, like the Alpha Quadrant, Earth, her father, to whom she'd written a cursory note just before leaving.

But somehow, considering the man above her, it began to fade, the doubts, the memories...the pain...

"Okay."

Aldrun's brows rose; then his stare narrowed. "Look into my eyes and say that, Susan."

She did and suddenly felt a shot of sobriety to find his sultry gaze practically melting into her. He was serious, of course. To her surprise, she felt all her reasons to deny his suggestions dissipate in the warmth of his presence. She *had* allowed his nearness; without wanting to be, she had been attracted to him, and Aldrun *had* been good to her and did seem to care about her feelings and well being...

"Okay."

His hand slid up to the knot clasps of her blouse. "Tell me, Susan," he said, his deep stare still nailed to hers as he managed apart the ties.

She blinked. "Tell you?"

He pulled another tie apart, moved his cheek to brush against hers. His lips flicked up when she sighed. "Tell me," he whispered to her ear. Another knot gone, and then the last, and he spread her shirt apart then turned his fingers down the clasps of her bustier, finding her skin.

She shivered. "Tell you what?"

"Tell me to explore your every pleasure," he breathed, his humming baritone lulling her even as her heart jumped, "to discover you, as we are different. Tell me to bare you to your skin, to drink your arousal, to make you my woman...to bring your body alive, Susan--and mine in turn. Tell me you wish to move away from what has held you. Tell me you do not want to be tired any longer..."

Her fingers touched his neck and ran down under his shirt to hold his shoulder, silencing him.

"You're good at this," she whispered, her eyes fluttering as his hand slid around and over her breast. The rush of blood from the resulting wash of arousal almost knocked her out again.

"Thank you," he replied. Again, he stroked the healthy swell, appreciating its softness, and he would have moved on were it not for one curious reaction. Pulling his head away, Aldrun looked to confirm what his fingers had discovered. "It is...erect, as if to give milk," he noted, circling her nipple with a fingertip to see her respond, her lips part, feel her heart, high in her chest, beat faster. "Is this pleasurable to you, Susan?"

She nodded, quivering at his examination, and then gently smiling at his curiosity. It was crazy, insane, happening too quickly--so quickly, she would have had to think to remember each thing that had preceded that, preceded them, her and the quietly roguish captain, gentle and wanting to make her feel better, for her to tell him her desires. With but a touch, she was reminded how different their races were--though she could already feel growing heartily against her outer thigh one indisputable similarity.

There were a hundred things in her recent memory that could have disrupted what was going on there, but she didn't think about it, only drew a deep breath and pressed approvingly into his touch. Drunk still or just pleasantly affected, it felt good, and she felt she deserved some pleasure for a change, which he was all too willing to give.

More, the look on him just then as he began to "discover" her, so gently, pleasantly... The rest slipped quickly away from her for the sweetness in his face and the assuredness she somehow felt in it.

So, when his cheek stroked hers again, she turned her head, hesitantly at first, to touch her lips to his. He pulled back just enough to meet her eyes, silently querying about that other pleasant surprise.

"You did say you wanted to learn from me," she said and almost matched his broad grin...

Waking up the next time, warmly enfolded by a long, muscular frame, she didn't know what time it was and didn't care. The rawness she felt on her flesh that time was indeed a vast improvement, as was the sensation on her neck--Aldrun's smile.

The rest--the longing for home, the feelings of powerlessness and the lack of progress in that awful place, the anger at what had brought them there and the memories of that bazaar--did return. But it became increasingly temporary, once she knew how to distract herself from it.

Though silently aware that she had begun with him in such a manner, Aldrun supplied her need without

shame or hesitation. With time, he knew it would be more than that. The beginnings were there. With generosity and sincere affection, there would be love. Humans were not so different to his own people, he suspected.

He was correct...

"What is the time?"

"Time enough for you to remain, my Susik."

"I should--"

"No, no, my precious. Remain. Remain."

He began to hum, softly, a tune she had taught him and he had learned so well. Melodic but deep, it was like a lion's purr burrowing into her core as his steady breath drifted over her skin. His large, smooth hand stroked her tenderly as he began another verse, his song vibrating his chest, against her back, so warm...

"But we might be expected--"

"Nowhere, my sweet flower. We have no assignment this day. Remain...with me."

"Aldrun...ahh..."

His repositioning her legs from behind stilled her instantly--and more than willingly, knowing rather well how much she liked that very Antral position of lovemaking. He often had her greet the morning with it--caressing the rest of her flesh into a state of complete arousal before driving her to a surprisingly guaranteed orgasm with his long, gentle rhythm and purrs in her ears that were nearly as pleasing.

For all the Antral's usual boasting, Aldrun was damn good at pleasuring her womanly body: Waking up in that traditional position never failed to make her live, indeed.

For that matter, her abdomen had grown to the point where traditional human positions were uncomfortable.

They had argued over other traditions, however. Antral women typically did not join their men after they became mothers until the child was in school--and even then, most did not. Though rulers of their house, wives were expected to bear and rear their children in good order and forsake all other work until the youngest child had at least five years.

Susan, having established herself firmly in their two years on his homeworld, had followed the "ruler" part and remained unmoved on the other. Frankly, she wanted her work as much as she had come to need Aldrun.

Even Susan's "brother" tried to explain it to the man, knowing his friend was both concerned and frustrated with the very stubbornness he had encouraged in his woman.

"She was born and raised Human," Kurt told him privately during one of their ore runs. "No matter how good a wife she is going to be to you--which she has been already--she will always have that. You would be a fool to make her give that up."

"I only think for the child," Aldrun said, "whose loss would be far greater than any other."

Knowing how protectively Susan held her belly as she walked around the house, even while discussing business or evading the typically sharp "foreigner" comments from visitors to the family's public hall, Kurt knew that was right enough.

"Regardless, she will hate every second of being forbidden from doing what she loves, Aldrun," Kurt said honestly, "and she will hate you for it, too."

Aldrun grinned. "Yes, she is...foreign. And a careered woman is indeed the woman I love, you are correct."

"Then let her be a little foreign," Kurt told him. "Do what you have to to protect her, but let her keep being the person you know. She is happy as she is--and you have helped her have that. Do not deny it when you have already allowed it."

"My mother will not approve of her working with an infant."

"She is having your child. That makes her the head of your family unit as far as the child is concerned. You only have to approve it and Mother Kebis will have to make her own decision on how to handle that for the Kichyrn family as a whole."

Aldrun's smile grew. Indeed, his mother was already sold on his woman--and more so since they learned from the midwife exactly what Susan carried in her big belly. "True."

Satisfied, Bendera left his friend to his work on the bridge a few minutes later, only to be met by Yasis in the corridor. Smiling brightly to him, she leaned up to rub her nose in the dimple of his smile. "You did beautifully, lover."

Kurt returned the nuzzle and took her around the waist. "Just trying to keep us all together," he shrugged and walked with her to the bays, which they still had to load for their next ore transport to the Unar depot at Monichik. Just another day, really.

Sometimes, when he and Yasis talked about it, he knew all over again how strange it all was, the changes they'd gone through over the last couple of years. In his eyes, it hadn't been all bad, either. It was in some ways like being home again, working on trade ships and returning to a proud, intelligent but thoroughly frustrated family. No matter how much time had passed, the insult of being under the dominion of another race would not be abated.

From his own upbringing, Kurt could understand that.

There had been changes, of course: As merely a man on Antral, he was required to act like a brute in public and defend his "woman" against any slight for both their sakes--and her family's. Being several centimeters shorter than the average Antral man was no help. He kept his hair cut close to his head, managed to get a tan in the cool Antral sun, learned the language and about all the city's families, rogued around for supplies and equipment every chance he had and had sex more often than he ever thought it was natural to...though that generally wasn't a curse.

He still didn't feel different--just more extreme than he'd ever been.

Similarly, Lieutenant Susan Nicoletti, someone Bendera had once seen as purebred Starfleet, had also allowed the change upon herself, if not more. Kurt suspected from the start that she'd given up in that

brig, long before they gave up on Voyager coming or Torres and Paris surviving Uillar. She'd known, but just didn't want to admit, that they were stuck.

Thankfully, she'd made what she could out of everything that came after. Getting involved with Aldrun, then arriving at Antral as his partner in both work and body offered her a high place in the family. From there, she took everything step by step, accepting the support of the people around her like a crutch at first, and then moving forward on her own as she got her bearings.

Antral in itself took some getting used to, naturally, their old-fashioned, gender-related power structures, similar to some Earth cultures centuries--if not millennia--ago. Though the men held the power in all offices of government and trade, the women, particularly the eldest woman in the house, held the power of the family absolutely. They did not hesitate to wield it. Aldrun's long-widowed mother and Yasis' aunt, Kebis Kichyrn, held her position like a mighty sword in the shadow of Unar occupation, proud and sharp to anything that crossed it.

Their lives mainly lived in the great hall of the once fine house, Kebis' voice echoing within it may as well have been the voice of God. More, she knew it bore no question, and she often reminded them from her seat at the head of the hall that the family roles were what that held their family and people together through those dark years.

Considering the state of Antral, Bendera had to say she was right. The once beautiful, architecturally sublime world was little more than a huge mining facility. Though the Unar did not use their people as they did peoples like the Desalians and the Koba, the Antral had been stripped of their technology and their databanks, limiting both their knowledge and mere ability to learn any more than what the Unar wanted them to know. They were lucky if they could get their hands on an extra power chip for the house lighting. They could not find work without Unar approval, and even then they were forced to make their livings in the slave and ore trade without any profit, but just enough to eat decently, continued possession of their dwellings and, well, their lives.

For such a proud people as the Antral, this continuing humiliation only grew worse with time. Any of their traditions, no matter how ancient, was like a lifeline to what was left of their culture. Kurt had learned from his friends and "family" there that most the peoples in Irlae had done the same, grown firmly traditional in order to keep their cultures going--though some to a fault. Kebis had definitely used it among her three sons and one daughter for everyone's good, however, even if she could be rightfully willful about it.

Conversely, Yasis, who was known from puberty to be infertile, would never have the power that came with the honor of childbearing. Of course, it gave her the freedom to go where she pleased, too, which Yasis never thought of poorly. Considering the lack of pressure on them to bear children, Kurt would have had it no other way.

Conversely, Kebis Kichyrn, having received communication that Aldrun was bringing home a woman, had taken one look at Susan Nicoletti and kissed her soundly on the mouth, thus making the orphaned, foreign Antral girl her own child. "To the Unar latrines with any dissenters," she announced and began arranging a series of introductions for the newcomer to the family with the help of her relatively mild-mannered daughter. Though the women's wills shocked Susan at first, she did gradually acclimate to the role of second daughter, the eldest child's committed woman behind the matriarch's natural born daughter.

Interestingly, Bendera could tell from the start that the wise-eyed mother knew their freckles were fake and that he and Susan had a great deal more education than they professed to. Kebis didn't ask and

pretended not to care what Aldrun had been up to. The matriarch's firstborn had finally gotten himself a woman he wanted to keep, who bore a sort of beauty that was admired on Antral, and whom she liked, so she designed for them to marry and bear children immediately in proper Antral fashion.

It took a year for both to happen. However, Kebis had taken to Susan's quietness and assured intelligence so dearly that she blamed Aldrun for the delay.

By the time Kebis had gotten what she wanted, Susan could easily grin about the matriarch's ambitions. Against custom, however, she continued to work on the junky old ship in spite of her pregnancy and argued with Aldrun each time it was suggested she stop, insisting that she would be miserable locked up in the house as a "breeder." It was, in fact, the only disagreement they had, and it persisted for months.

However, though Aldrun continued to harbor his concerns, he did bend to his woman per Kurt's advice. He loved his lady too much not to, had already spoiled Susan with whatever he could fairly gain (and sometimes what he could get by untoward means, Kurt knew), gave her more than enough respect and stability to regain her former confidence and some.

Susan even took to music again, a pleasant surprise to the family once she figured out how to play the ijades Aldrun had found in a scrap heap and she had repaired. Music soon filled the spaces between dinner, talk and memories on many nights in the great hall, with all the family gathered, warm, wise and fiercely knit with love, devotion and desire.

Though haunted and intellectually frustrated at times, Susan knew that she had started over pretty well, had made the best of her situation. Kurt, her standby and "oldest friend," was also glad to see she'd taken some control back to herself after those several weeks where he found himself wondering about her sanity.

With her ascension to motherhood a few months after his conversation with Aldrun, he didn't doubt it at all....

"Her name is Marise," Susan gasped. "For my mother, Maris. Marise."

Kebis smiled proudly to her daughter as she took her third born grandchild into her hands. "Marise of the Kichyrn family," she said. "You have done well, little Susik."

"Thank you, Mother Kebis," she managed and let her head drop back onto Aldrun's chest. He had kept her steady in her shuddering crouch, sitting on the edge of their bed and holding her under the arms as she screamed for hours in possibly the greatest pain she had ever known. Even the scrubbing at the bazaar at Horaet couldn't compare to the searing pain that went on and on in waves, making her feel as though her entire body was going to split in half. It was a day of agony she would never forget.

That time, however, it was different and she knew it. That time, she wanted that pain, had waited well over two thirds for it and got the ultimate reward--her daughter, a tiny girl that Kebis was taking out of the room to the hall outside, where the others waited for the child's presentation.

For it all, Susan smiled, truly smiled, and deeply felt it as she let Aldrun pull her backwards and up onto the bed so the midwife--a Desalian servant sworn to discretion--could finish the unusual birthing and heal her wounds.

"My precious," Aldrun whispered gratefully, "my beautiful Susik. You are life to me, pure life."

For appearance's sake, he did not cry, but pressed his cheek to hers and closed his eyes, laughed gently when he felt her smile press against him.

Outside the door in the family hall, bared of ornaments since the Unar invasion but alive with family and friends who had come for the birth, she could hear her baby still gasping and crying as the others silenced to hear the matriarch. As it had been when they celebrated Refevan's birth, Susan knew that Kebis was holding the baby in her long, expert fingers, above her head as she announced, "Marise Kichyrn is now given to our family by Susik and Aldrun. Give praise to my third grandchild, my first granddaughter, who will be strong and fine among us!"

"I am the proud one," Susan whispered to her husband in his tongue. She stroked his cheek with her own. "You have helped me feel real, Aldrun--you and now Marise. I have never been more alive."

His returning "kiss" brought tears to her eyes through an exhausted, thankful smile....

She had her father's dark green eyes, his tawny complexion and freckles--though pale--and his funny, pursed mouth. From her mother's side came her wavy, chestnut brown hair, bone structure and relatively small frame. It was commonly boasted by Kebis that Marise would be a beauty to behold in all of Irliae and would attract only the finest of men--or at least the matriarch swore she would personally see to that. And, though strong and vocal, Marise took to walking much later than most Antral children.

Kebis teased that it was for Susik and Aldrun never allowing the child's feet to touch the ground.

"Eah-wa!"

"Eawa naisil pon," the mother encouraged with a giggle. Her baby girl had a determined look on her face that might have rivaled Kebis that day. Her tiny feet struck each step about the same way, too. "Aud Marise naisil dir Eawa."

Susan and Kurt were kneeling on the hardwood floor of the hall, "passing" the toddling, tripping Marise between them. Yasis clapped and laughed along from her seat nearby and Kebis grinned up from her sewing.

It was then that Aldrun walked in with a fair-haired Antral man.

Glancing up as her baby landed in her arms, Susan smiled brightly at her husband in greeting. Looking by him, she knew immediately the swagger and posture of Novren Pridalar and gave him a moderately respectful nod. She had met Aldrun's boyhood friend and the self-instated leader of the underground already.

Yet this was no ordinary visit, she could tell with another look to Aldrun, who strode to her, his coat like a noble sail as he lowered himself to face her. His hand rested on their daughter's curls as he brushed his cheek against his wife's, seductively, as always, but laughing too, once he was there.

"Desalia has risen," he choked in his joy and laughed again to meet Susan's widened eyes. "The Allanois Regency is resurrected and has called its people from their living grave. We are going to fight the Unar."

"What?!" Yasis gasped and stared at Novren as she slid from her perch to her feet. "If you are jesting us, Novren, I will kill you with my bare hands!"

"Silence yourself, maid," Novren said.

"Be easy, Captain Novren," Kurt warned, still digesting the news but not too shocked to protect Yasis properly. "She might not have a child, but I am still the man who beds her--and can make or break your ship with a plug you will never see for your ignorance."

"It is the truth," Aldrun promised them all. "The underground is preparing as we speak to prepare to fight the Unar. Novren's people have had news from the Desalians themselves that they are going to begin sabotaging the workforce--just as you have said we should, Kurt. But when they are ready, we will all fight together--for our freedom."

Aside, Yasis laughed happily--and Kebis echoed it. "The day has finally come!" the matriarch declared. "And we *will* overcome our enemies, without doubt or dishonor!"

Susan smiled, too, easily caught up in their excitement. Living on Antral for over three years, she and Kurt had become equally interested in such a rebellion. They knew well that Desal and its former capabilities--and its numbers in and out of Unar service--were the key to any possible success. With that about to happen now, she was sure the whole of Antral would come alive to revolt for their freedom--and that alone was a thrilling thought. Better still, she and Kurt would finally get to do more than they could ever get away with before, once they were able to break off from the dreary, Unar-assigned ore trade routes. Susan's brain immediately starting listing things they should do, supplies they should collect. "When will the fighting begin?"

Novren snorted. "As usual, the Desalians want to wait unto their eternities. The workers are starting their infestation now, to inform the people already there and collect tactical information about the Unar sects. But our leaders will not be meeting with the Desalian regents for another two seasons, when they have rebuilt the ships they have at Cezia and Irlae is organized to their satisfaction."

"Rebuild their ships?" Yasis asked. "Desalians? They are even more grounded than Koba and willingly so, we had thought. Have they found their histories somehow and relearned? How could they know how to resurrect such technology--and for that matter, make it effective?"

"There have been many stories about this young Allanois and her family," Novren admitted, "but no answers. It is known, however, that she is a true regent and family head."

"Then she carries the memories of those who preceded her," Kebis nodded. "In the old day, before their pacifism turned against them, it was a tradition for well-educated houses to pass the sum of their lives and those before them telepathically to the next generation, so not to lose their histories. There were entire houses of clerics dedicated to this practice once, who held and recorded memories of countless Desalians. If this young regent has such an inheritance, it is not unlikely that she would use it--and pass her knowledge to others."

"However it is," Novren continued, looking at the four of them, "I will need you to regroup at Leberrad. Many of our underground ships will be going there to plan and organize. Your wife, Aldrun, is very astute, as is her spoken brother. We will need their services in a greater degree than ever, in spite of her status in nursing your child."

Susan straightened, pulling Marise up onto her hip. "For Antral and our freedom, I believe I could sacrifice some of my domesticity," she deadpanned.

Kurt snorted.

"I will miss Antral and our family," she added, "that is a plain truth. But I will do whatever is necessary for the resistance. --Though not without the company of my child. Marise goes where her father and I go."

Novren glared at her. "Your infant, Lady Kichyrn? Foolish, foreign woman! Little wonder people think on your questionable birth, as you would be such a mother--"

"Much more than *your* wife," Kebis cut in with a glare of her own, stopping Aldrun's ready reply, "who remains childless seven years though she waits in perfect fertility--*Captain*." Before he could speak again, Kebis held her fingers toward him. "Do not curse *me*, Novren Pridalar, in my house, nor on this day. No place, especially Antral, will be safe when the fighting begins. Susik has every right as mother to keep her house whole and under her eye. I grant my second daughter and my eldest blood child Aldrun that right. --So silence your whining."

Kurt wiped his eye, chuckling beside a hardly restrained Yasis. They always enjoyed Kebis--especially when her observations were not pointed at them. Looking at Susan, though, he could see that she really did want to go, she wanted to fight alongside her husband, to free their people. Her deep blue eyes held steadily to the cocky leader's, all but saying, "What she said," when Kebis finished.

He would cheerfully have challenged anyone at that point to call Susan Nicoletti Kichyrn "foreign" again.

"Very well, Lady Kichyrn," Novren muttered.

"Yes," Susan said firmly, "it is."

One season later, she clutched her child so tightly against herself, she was afraid she would crush her. Marise cried and kicked, but it only made Susan hold her more firmly and press back against the wall to save her neck. There, her heart had stopped, her blood had drained, her entire being was caught in the middle of a tremor as she watched her husband pull himself from the floor of his ship, a trail of blood dripping from the corner of his mouth.

She could not even cry for being so frozen in her terror.

When Aldrun stood, his head was bent low before the Unar who had decided to inspect their ship. Hundreds of runs between Antral, Leberrad and Tralbil, and they had chosen *that* day to stop them for an inspection. Susan cursed Novren Pridalar a thousand times inside her mind before her beloved Aldrun spoke a word.

"My woman and crew are ignorant," he croaked, "but yes, I have succumbed to the greed offered to me by the savvy traders of Koba. I took on improvements so that I could make more assignments and thus better my existence greedily. This is my doing and now my shame, Commander Ogakosb."

"For this, Aldrun Kichyrn," the hatefully pleased commander replied, "you are hereby stripped of this ship. Your 'woman,' her spawn and your crew will be hereby sentenced with you to the internment camp at Dajid--indeterminately."

Aldrun closed his eyes, burying his wish to kill the officer before him, fighting his pain and the stark humiliation--the worse of which he could not tell. But within the fog of his indecision, he heard his daughter's crying and clutching, his wife's soft, gasping breaths, unspoken pleas and utter fear...

"I accept our punishment at my own disgrace, Commander. This ship is yours, as it has always been...and which privilege I have abused." Aldrun barely got the words out despite his reasons for saying them, but it worked well enough. The Commander let a pause stand for nearly a minute--which with Unar was a good thing. They struck immediately when displeased.

Finally: "You and this...crew, for being Antral contractors of former regard and for your compliance, have five minutes to collect items for living on Dajid. No more."

They desperately grabbed everything they could fit into their arms and over their shoulders before being transported into a brig--the sight of which sent Susan into a fit of shivering she had not felt since...

"It is well," Yasis assured her as Kurt tended to Aldrun's broken torso. "Dajid is a soft labor facility. There are Unar there, but it is internment for the families of criminals."

"But what of Aldrun?" she whispered.

"He being injured, he cannot be of use to them in a forced labor camp," Yasis hedged with some effort, knowing what a blow to an Antral heart meant. She had seen the same paleness on other occasions, seen the gradual descent that followed such a bruising of the Antral coronary sac. The commander knew precisely where to kick Aldrun, Yasis knew, feeling a deeper fury than ever before to see her noble cousin now bearing it. But she didn't dare explain, nor express her heart, feeling Susan's shuddering begin anew and seeing her shake her head jerkily. "Susik, you are Antral and a mother. They will not touch you or Marise. Our internment is an easy one. We will be safe."

Susan drew her eyes out to the grey walls, to the corners. The room had no tubes. One wall had an open grate door. It wasn't the same sort of brig. She had her baby, finally asleep for all her crying, in her arms. She had her husband, injured, sitting painfully up against the wall but able to meet her eyes with a small assurance.

"Yasis is correct," he whispered, hoarse yet tender in his pain. "It is well, my Susik. You are provided for and will not be harmed."

If she hadn't felt so deeply before, she believed so surely just then that she loved him. Aldrun, who like Kurt had protected her, but had also adored her, done everything he could from blind love alone to make her feel pleasure and happiness. How he had succeeded, in so many ways in but a few years, was too much to say.

Sometimes, she still wondered why. Perhaps she'd just been too glad to accept what he'd given to think when she became what she never imagined she would be as a Starfleet officer--a faithful wife, proud mother and dutiful daughter-in-law. He had pressed her into it in the beginning, maybe even taken advantage of her condition at the time in his desire to make her better in the only way he knew how. But that mattered little to her, as she knew what it turned into...all and everything they became, and made.

Susan loved him completely, body and soul, would ever be grateful for her husband, to the end...to that moment, disgraced by Unar for their sakes, going down without a fight for them...for her and their child.

Feeling her heart swelling again to see his beautiful eyes, so gentle...always so gentle to her, his little smile to spite his injury and horribly paled face, then hearing him breathe, "Come, my precious," Susan crawled to him and huddled herself and Marise as near as his injury could allow. Finally, she let her tears fall.

Feeling Aldrun's large, warm hand weakly touch her soft curls, hearing him begin to hum a song to her for comfort, she descended into sobs.

She knew her husband's physiology well enough by then. She knew...

"My Susik..."

Aldrun reached up to stroke her pale, tear-streaked face. Having lingered for seven gruvnu, he had finally bid farewell to his crew, to Kurt and Yasis, and then to his sweet little Marise, which in itself nearly was the end of him. Only his wife and the healer remained in that little chamber room then, with the cool rain of Dajid pouring outside, numbing the air with its patter. Thankfully, with the healer's arts, he was also largely numb in his weakening state.

"My lovely Susik...you must let me go now." She shook her head. "It will happen even so," he whispered.

"I cannot. Aldrun, I just cannot."

"Then come to me, my Susik..." He tugged her hair tenderly, bringing her nearer. "Put yourself to me, as you did that second time we made love.... Do you remember it?" Her little laugh and nod made him smile slightly, too. "Bring yourself on top of me...as if we were making love. Let me find death in joy, of remembering my worship of you...and knowing that you still live, and will live."

"Aldrun," she wept, "I cannot lose you, too. I cannot..."

"You must," he said, his eyes shadowing as she looked at him again. "You must, for Marise--and thus for me. She is...what we are and always will be. For Marise...you must continue, bravely, as my mother did...when they murdered my father.... And you should find another--"

"No," Susan told him outright, cupping his face in her hands. "You will be my *only* husband."

"But take a lover," he said, trembling with the words, but meaning them. "I would never wish you to be alone, or barren. You deserve pleasure, Susik. Take it...when you are ready. Know I approve, and allow yourself to remain...a beautiful woman, if only to spite them."

"I do not need to spite them, Aldrun," she said. "It is a waste of time compared to what I *can* do."

"You," Aldrun stated, "are far greater than they will ever be. You have defeated their purpose by living and growing among us...in your perseverance despite their aims to crush you. Even in my death, they will not conquer us."

She sighed. "Perhaps."

"Come to me, my wife," he breathed. "Obey me in this. Put your body to mine...and let me feel your warmth...your precious life, one more time...please."

Susan finally, carefully, moved to straddle him, holding herself up on her elbows above him. The smile that found him at that and the gentle pressure she offered, made her gasp another cry. She still held his eyes, though. "You are my husband," she told him, "and the father of my child. You will *never* die, in my mind."

"I must," he whispered, "if you are ever to live in joy again. You must allow me to go and promise you will live, for Marise...all that is left of me. Please let me die...with contentment. Promise me you will live, Susik, always live."

Susan collapsed almost completely atop him, her cheek to his, her fingers clutching, holding her tears if but for a minute, and that only for him. "I promise," she said for his ear alone, and then, meeting his dimming eyes once more, she tried with all her strength to smile. "I will live, despite it all...my Aldrun."

With what strength he had left, he put his arms around her and pulled her cheek back to his.

She remained with him like that long after his arms had fallen away and his breath had stopped.

It took the Desalian healer to finally pull her away....

They were not well liked there from the start, those well-dressed traders who came with their fine belongings and a healthy, coddled baby, and then immediately asked for their help--demanded it, in fact. Not only the Antral and Brijan, but also the Dajidians had no sympathy for them in that. More, none of them appreciated that half-mad Antral mother who refused to work--making trouble for the rest of them while her husband slowly and uselessly lay dying in their quarters.

Her family did all they could to point out the baby's needs and argue that the mother was incapacitated alongside her dying husband--and by Antral right did not have to work when possessed with a small child. Kurt and Yasis and the others on the crew immediately offered to take her portion of labor.

It was with that show of generosity that a Desalian man living in the Dajidian quarter approached them and pointed out the Desalian residences, suggesting Kurt and Yasis to go beg for assistance in that corner. They would find a healer among those people, he said then wished them well as he left them.

The man had seen the lovely young woman holding the child on her hip and supporting her invalid husband's head as they entered the camp. He could not have imagined what she must have been going through, locked in the family's allotted apartment, knowing her husband's doom and worrying for her baby, but he did pity her and respect her family for protecting her. Not even a lifetime at Dajid in Desalian disgrace could have embittered his blood so much that he could deny the lady some comfort, even if it must be procured from his grandparents' penitent people.

It was a young woman called Y'dri who came at Kurt and Yasis' request for a nurse. She sadly told them what they already knew--she could not treat the wound. However, she could alleviate his pain with the natural remedies she could procure, and with ancient Dajidian medicines to compliment procedures she had been taught by the elder Desalians among them. The remainder would be only what was meant, she consoled them, as she regretfully had not the equipment or the ability to perform the internal surgery he required. To the family, what little she could do was far more than they could.

Without complaint or desire for retribution, her infant daughter in a sling or on a blanket in the corner, Y'dri of Maha'aje remained as Aldrun's nurse and Susan's handservant throughout the man's descent, which consumed nearly a season. She remained after his passing, as well, when the wife remained too weakened to function beyond nursing her daughter, crying and sleeping. With Kurt and Yasis working through the days, they had formally employed her, knowing Susan shouldn't be alone.

As the widow would not even leave the tiny residence they occupied, Y'dri agreed. For weeks, she

labored to make her lady eat, to neaten and arrange their small quarters, to clean and cook, sew clothing for the toddler and cloaks for the family and to help the lady with her hair--but indeed, mainly to be near.

"Bring yourself, Susik," Y'dri said. She knelt by the Antral lady, who steadily watched her child sleep. Y'dri often came into the quarters to find the lady pinned to the chamber's opening. "You must bring yourself to the other room now, to give your child's spirit peace while retired."

"I do not want to move," Susan replied dully. "You do not need to stay. I have eaten."

"Gye, I must stay," Y'dri countered softly, "as my work as a healer is incomplete in your continued lethargy."

The tears, still too easy, too sudden, reappeared in Susan's eyes as she finally nodded and left the room, pulling the curtain as she left. Y'dri would persist, she knew. She was good at that--like Aldrun had been, so easy and certain. Sitting on the pillows Y'dri had brought them for the living space, she stared through her bleary eyes at nothing on the opposite wall. There was indeed nothing for her to see.

"I miss my husband," she whispered. "I miss him more than I missed home. Home! It seems so unimportant, nothing to me now; I can hardly believe I missed it at all to think of how I long for Aldrun.... How I hate the Unar for everything they have taken away from my child and me. Y'dri, I feel like a part of me is missing, but there is nothing to fill it this time. I do not know what to do, to do anything anymore. I miss him so much it hurts--physically hurts. I feel a kind of pain I have never experienced. I did not feel anything like this even when I came to this awful place and knew I could not return. That was nothing--*nothing* compared to...to this emptiness."

"Ka," the healer said, "good Aldrun is in all ways but Desal your spirit's partner."

"How can I keep going like this? How can I just 'move' when I feel like half of me is gone?"

Y'dri did not answer at first, thinking carefully before answering. As it was with Antral, she knew her own belief in the matter would not be accepted, but she knew no other words to give. So finally, she said, "The living world is not made to be easy, good lady, as is known too well by you. It is made to design us, to shape all that we know."

Seeing Susan's eyes pull up at that, Y'dri smiled gently. "Ka, it is the way--and while not *your* way, it is believed by my people that all which is in the living world is but preparation for tsa'aita, the realm of spirits among the stars. Your good husband--in my belief--lives there now, in wait without time, free of the bonds of physical life. He now stands with his ancestors and shall stand by your side again when fate calls you to him, and bliss shall follow between you for eternity."

The woman's soft words were as tender as they were humble, non-assuming under a pair of round, hazel eyes that seemed to melt into her with a deep sense of caring. She still shook her head at the implication. "I wish I believed, Y'dri. But I do not. I am sorry."

"No apology for your way is needed," the lady said, still kindly enough to make Susan rake down her emotions again. "Yet perhaps you would bear belief in your Aldrun's living spirit here--in your beautiful daughter, whose spirit was made of you both. His good words were heard when he spoke to you of this, and he was most wise: You must bear your life for what remains of him--his memory, which must survive, and for Marise. Else all he gave you which you treasure shall have been in vain."

Y'dri took Susan's wet face in both her fair, callused hands. "The living world seems at times designed for strife, dear lady, and yet our lives must be lived, pure, in truth, not only for the past or for what we bear now, but for what shall follow us."

She stroked Susan's cheeks lightly with her thumbs, an Antral show, she knew, of sisterly affection. "You bear tiredness now and have well earned your rest. Yet you must heal and survive as is good Aldrun's passing wish. You shall, I would believe, with your own near to you, your child's sweet spirit by you and with your own goodness to open your path. There shall be healing, Susik, with time and love."

The Desalian woman lowered her hands and brought Susan into her arms. She held her there, stroking the mourning lady's hair until well after she was asleep.

The next day, Y'dri took her lady to be outside for the first time in weeks, to feel the sun....

It was some weeks later that Susan brought herself to the work detail--more truthfully, she woke up feeling a sudden need to work again, to be busy. She immediately learned the labor and performed it silently with Marise in a sling--thoughtfully made by one of the Desalians when Y'dri, free of her duty, mentioned the lady's intention. With little interference from the guards and some freedom within the routine, the mindless work proved somewhat comforting.

Even so, it was months after that before she finally made amends with the other slighted workers there. She did it only for Aldrun's crew, Kurt and Yasis, and especially for Marise. She couldn't care less about the others' selfishness, even in light of her own.

Two years later, she took up the ijades again. Yasis had taken it from their ship's quarters when they were captured, but Susan had not touched it until Marise found and asked about it. Taking it into the court after dinner one night, she played an old minuet from her childhood with trembling fingers, breathing against her stirring heart. Finishing, she smiled at her daughter, told Marise how much her father had loved to hear the music, had held her from behind with his cheek to hers as she taught him the song, hummed it softly in her ear.

Moments in her life with him that she would never forget. Moments when she knew her happiness.

"Like when I am with you, Marise," she said softly.

Watching nearby among the other inmates who had gathered at the pleasantly unusual sounds, the "exiled" Desalian man they had come to know as Gatra felt his breath catch to watch her. Her deep brown curls, plaited at the sides and rolling comfortably around her shoulders, shone red in the firelight; her fair face, dusky blue eyes, so sad but smiling tenderly to her child, remained in his memory long after he turned away to return alone to his quarters.

He watched her every time she played thereafter....

"You want to *what?*" Kurt's eyes narrowed at the humble man's question.

Gatra placed both his hands flat on the battered table they shared, a symbol of his sincerity and respect. "I ask your permission to approach your cousin with intent to give her company--nothing more unless she expressly wishes it. This I promise, at pain of your punishment."

Kurt shook his head in disbelief, but turned when he felt Yasis' hand on his arm. Sitting by him, she pulled a section of her hair behind an ear and leaned towards him. "Why?" she demanded. "While a great resistance surges over Irrlae, we have been rotting here past four years. Now you crawl from the shadows panging with love?"

"I wish to believe she has mourned her husband well enough."

Yasis rolled her eyes. "You, judge her readiness? A Desalian without respect for your own people, judge the heart of an Antral? You have stared at her--yes, I have seen you, Gatra of Ella'omb, and so has she--for much of this time. More, I must ask, as she is a woman of her own standing: Why approach us?"

"It is polite to do so--even amongst Antral," he said. "I most respect her enduring love for her husband, the father of her child. Her talk of him, however..." Gatra looked plainly at them both, his fair brown eyes unblinking. "She touches my being. Even should she never reciprocate for her own self-bonded spirit, I...I feel a need to be near her, to possibly give her some happiness, if I can. Yet I would not wish to do a thing either of you would disapprove. In the same four years, I have seen your closeness to her."

Kurt leaned back to peer across at the man. He knew Gatra wasn't a bad man at all. Despite his coolness towards the Desalians in the camp--who respected his distance accordingly--he was thoughtful. The very fact he was there was proof of that. He had sent them to Y'dri when Aldrun was dying; on another occasion, he had bribed some guards for antibiotics and a bioscanner when one of the Desalians was having labor complications. He helped to get things done when he could, acting as a go-between for the several races there. In his daily manners, however, he could be thoroughly rude to the kindest people in the camp--his own people--because of politics played out over seventy years ago.

On the other hand, Susan might well give him some of *her own* manners, and that in a manner he knew Susan had always been good at.

So, Bendera gave Gatra a blink then a flicker of a grin. "Hurt her *once* and I will rip you apart appendage by appendage."

Surprisingly, Susan accepted the company--in the form of friendship, in walks with Marise and dinners with the family. She took full advantage of his desire to be solicitous to her and tossed him away when his manners were bad, particularly in front of Marise. She would not hear him be cruel to the Desalians. Though she usually didn't approach their side of the camp unless she or they were in need, she knew how much Y'dri's service had given Aldrun comfort at the end of his life, had helped her in those first dark months on Dajid, and what a dear friend she had been ever after, all done without asking anything in return.

She understood how Gatra's accounts of his grandparents' exiles from their homeworld by a "mad regent," his parents' deaths and his being treated like a pariah afterwards would train his current behavior. But those problems were not hers to deal with. Gatra's complaints meant nothing to her.

Faithfully, he renewed his attempts, penitent and solicitous. Compared to what she knew of her Antral family, of Aldrun, it seemed sometimes like groveling. Gatra didn't seem to care. Then again, neither did she. She held her position regardless of how pitiful he became.

She shrugged about yet another quarrel she'd had with Gatra as she leaned back against the wall, not long after tucking Marise into bed one night.

"If he wants my 'company,' then he will have to think about *me*. I am not about to disrespect Aldrun by

taking a lover who does not know how to hold his stupid tongue in front of my daughter. --I cannot believe I am talking about this in such a mudball of a camp."

"Better than talk about work," Kurt grinned.

Yasis snuggled back into Kurt's arms. "Who would have suspected, Susik, that you would be so Antral in the end?"

Susan smiled slightly. "Or maybe just me," she said.

"What do you mean?" Kurt asked.

"Before we ended up out here," she said quietly, twirling the end of her worn sash around her hand, "I never really took my own life into my hands. I could speak out and cut someone down when I needed to, but I never really took control of the larger issues that affected me. It was too easy to let other people have it." She looked directly into Kurt's eyes, then. "Since we came here, we learned pretty quickly how stupid it is to live like that."

"Yes."

"Aldrun taught me how to really be my own person--encouraged me to, even when he disagreed with it. And I never knew how much it meant to do that until...until later." She shrugged again. "So if Gatra wants to get on my good side, he will have to do it my way--and then maybe I will bend a little. I have earned the right, especially since he is the one who wants this."

"And you do not?"

She sighed. "I have missed being with Aldrun. I know I will never stop missing him, and yet I think I might get something out of it. Aldrun thought I should."

"Perhaps more than sex will come of it, too?" Yasis asked, ironically hopeful. She also missed her cousin, whom she had also considered her dearest friend. But Susan was still alive and young. For that matter, Gatra, healthy in frame, dark-haired and olive-skinned, was not at all a sore thing to look at--even if he was a chore to listen to.

"Well, he does have some nice qualities. I would like it if I did." On that, though, Susan grinned despite herself. "But I will take the sex first and judge that before I decide."

Laughing at her uncharacteristic humor, Kurt reached over and patted her leg. "Good for you."

So, a year into their friendship, she accepted Gatra's additional advances. This change surprised him at first, and then made him boyishly nervous, wondering if they should continue their affair on that course, if she was ready. Having definitely become unaccustomed to *that* sort of uncertainty in a man, Susan just shrugged and let him get over it. She was in no rush.

He got over it soon enough.

The first time they made love, she cried, not for anything but for having expected the same pleasure that she had so treasured with Aldrun. She had unconsciously expected Gatra's hands to feel the same, his rhythm to be similar, his scent and sounds to be familiar. Gatra was not a poor lover, but he was different enough for her to know he was not her husband. She missed Aldrun all over again for it.

With time and Gatra's incredible patience--one thing Desalian she knew he had inherited--she did come to enjoy him more, even appreciate his many efforts to please her, in lovemaking and in public. He was always good to Marise, who, having to spend her childhood in that camp with poor food, pitifully few clothes and no real society, became Susan's only true concern and subject of planning.

Surprisingly, Gatra was a fairly good teacher, too, and often made up for his deficits by assisting Susan and Kurt with the girl's education. One of Susan's pastimes in that largely cloudy, boring place was to watch them count Antral figures aloud to a song he had translated from Desalian. He also taught her a little Desalian so she could talk with Y'dri's daughter in her tongue. Iseli, a year younger than Marise, could already speak Antral well, which doubled Marise's determination to return the favor. Gatra laughed at the girl's wills and started by teaching her name.

"Ma-ri-sey," he said, pointing to the corresponding letters in Antral, then Desalian, "means, loosely, bright against the wind."

"It sounds like a strong name," Marise said and looked back at her mother. "Would Grandmother Kebis approve of it?"

"I know she would," Susan told her.

Marise gestured an affirmative. "Then I'll learn it!"

"My honor, Lady Marise," Gatra returned with a gracious bow of his head.

Marise giggled.

It never failed to make Susan smile, seeing her little girl and a man who had come to care for her sharing such times.

She still cried herself to sleep some nights, ignored him and treated him coolly even when she approved of him. She needed the distance on occasion, when her moods grew dark or her memories and longing revisited her. She needed time to collect herself and made no compromises about it.

She allowed Gatra back when she was ready. Though the work and the routine of their days didn't bother her much, Susan knew that having a considerate lover was something she shouldn't take for granted. And though they all knew, through Yasis' astute and well-placed ear, that they would not be on Dajid forever, Susan did believe that Gatra cared enough about her to possibly be a part of her life for some time yet.

She still dismissed him utterly when he acted up, though.

She had on Tridl's ship, too, even if he had been worried for her and apologized for his rudeness with Y'dri. Still, Susan would not bend when it came to his attitude about the Desalians, who were so kind about it, so uncritical, it hurt to know them sometimes. Susan still thought about that woman in the inspection line, the one who had been sent to the mines over nine years ago. Knowing Desalians as she had come to, Susan knew the woman would not have blamed her or felt angry for her "fate." Susan felt it instead and made her apology in the only way she knew how--hoping that the woman did survive, wherever she was, hoping she somehow had found her way home.

Gatra would simply have to be a man and deal with his own contrition instead, Susan concluded. With their escape from Dajid and present course to Cezia, he would have to whether he liked it or not.

So as the Desalians in the opposite corner continued to tell stories about the little world and all its nature and joys, as the warm air rushed in from the ventilation ducts, Susan settled her shuddering, breathed through the memories that invaded her as they so often did with such small reminders.

"Just keep it together, right?" she said, without much emotion but a passing grin as she continued to stare at the hypnotic light, flickering steadily across the bay.

Kurt shrugged. "It's always worked before, hasn't it?"

"For us..." She sighed. She would never let go of some things, and other things she chose not to, she knew without complication. Those choices had been hers to make, and she made them. "I suppose we have done what we could," she said.

Kurt reached over and touched her hand, which still stroked Marise's thick curls. When her stare found his, he held it. "More than that, Susan. Now that we're free--finally--we'll be able to do even more."

Her smile was small, but it was there. "I guess you're right."

"Yet despite the unique form of the branches, it should be no surprise that they may find shape when brought together..."

Upon finally exiting the belly of Tridl's hulking ship, they only had to look at each other to know they could stay there without regret.

True to Me'ekra's promise, the silver grasses swayed easily in the warm, gentle breeze. The white sun was pure and bright, not too hot, and the air smelled so fresh and dry it almost made them cough.

"Susik, look there," Yasis said and they all turned to see the expanse of Dviglar. Susan and Kurt's jaws dropped.

A base--a *real* base--was plainly visible at the end of the landing zone. Approaching it, they saw a central building in the middle of the gorge, which connected directly to the communication arrays arranged on the surrounding ridges along with an enormous deflector dish. Upon further examination, they realized the latter provided a shield grid for Dviglar--and possibly the surrounding area, too. Around the rest of the gorge, buildings made conveniently of old hulls were burrowed in the rock faces; all were lit with activity. Into and between these structures some very swift-footed and healthy Desalians passed, along with a portion of Antral, Brijan and Koba.

On the plain beyond the rocks, an entire fleet of small ships sat in rows as far as they could see, swarmed by people and maintenance equipment.

Susan felt her entire Academy education wash back into her. Real ships. Real technology. It was like a dream...

"If only Aldrun could have seen this," she breathed.

"He would have been ecstatic," Yasis agreed.

Marise nodded too, knowing all about her father and his career as a trade ship captain, how he had planned to be a resistance fighter. But seeing the other people in the gorge, her thoughts came quickly back to the present. "Do you think there are more children to play with here?" she asked her mother.

Susan laughed. "I am certain there are," she said, teasing her girl's cheek. "They say Desalian cities are very crowded. I believe we might find a few pretty little girls in the town."

Straightening her back, Susan looked around the base again, and then at the fields, feeling her heart respond to the savannah's beauty, her skin drink the warmth and light. Turning back once more, she noticed Captain Tridl returning from the main building and gathering up Y'dri and Me'ekra and their families. Nearer by, Kurt was collecting Aldrun's crew, telling them to follow them for the time being, until they all could be housed.

In that same view, she saw Gatra, standing near but keeping a polite distance, as she had not forgiven him yet. He had nowhere else to go but with them, so she finally thought that maybe she should let him off his usual hook a little sooner. He obviously was going to need the support of friends, uncomfortable as he looked just then.

"I like it here already," she announced, for him and the others.

"Does that mean we will stay, Mother?"

"Yes, Marise," Susan said, only glancing at Gatra's reaction. "If things go well, we will find a place to live until Antral is free."

"Good," Marise smiled. "For I like it here, too. I feel sleepy, though. Like I ate too much again."

"The gravity is slightly stronger here," Susan explained. "You might have headaches, too. --I will explain that to you later." As Susan petted her nodding daughter's head, she caught Tridl's attention as he neared. "What news, Captain?"

"It is Tsi'omad, Lady Kichyrn," he informed her, brushing at his coat as he jogged up to them. "I always forget their public days here. Dalra and Miztri remain in the city, and so we will venture there now." Setting them off toward a break in the rocks, he continued, "The others of Dajid have gone ahead or now arrange to return to their homeworlds. If you would like to come as well to Azlre, I can help you arrange your settlement--and food for the child, hmm?"

Kurt came back into their circle and, grabbing Yasis' hand, set his stare on their immediate destination--a thin clay road at the base of the gorge. Nearing it, however, his stare rose as the bright white rise of Azlre appeared on the horizon, its steeples and tenements like cutwork against the deep cobalt sky. "Wow," he breathed then glanced back to Tridl. "I think we'd all love to come back to Dviglar later, though."

Tridl laughed and nodded. "I doubt they would deny any more help in the resistance. --Y'dri! Me'ekra! We go now!"

Nodding, the siblings and their families collected their bundles, hurried along and followed with their eyes hungrily roaming over the changed landscape. Even the grasses, they told the Antral crew leading them, seemed more abundant than they recalled. The world had fared well in their years away from it. As Iseli and Marise ran ahead, Y'dri's eyes turned to Susan's smile while Me'ekra told a story about yet another adventure he'd had in those fields. Nodding to herself, she leaned into her mate's arm, her own

mouth upturned with satisfaction.

After a beautiful walk, with goats--or joth, as they were called--in the path, and a good deal of friendly greetings at what Tridl pointed out as Azlre's south gate. Within the city, vendors handed small fruits to the newcomers as they passed several small gatherings and glanced at displayed wares, and they stopped for long drinks of fresh water at a busy public well. Finally, they crossed through the city and entered the main square.

Not only Dalra and Miztri resided there, they were told, but the regents of Desal, their siblings and Cezia's elders also lived in the Adavill District, which along with most of the other districts in Azlre had undergone several improvements since the war began to turn for the better. Many of the grand buildings, Tridl pointed out, had been restored and whitewashed when a new influx of citizens required the rooms within them; the amber-toned flagstone streets were re-laid in the past year and young trees and vines had been replanted. A half block off the far end of the square, the west gate had been reinforced and repainted.

"And quite good, too, as they were very much against replacing it," said the captain. "Desalians cherish their history as dearly as food!"

Just south of the road leading to that gate, the high-domed silag sat. A glorious restoration made from much toil and latent talent, it bore the finest examples of local white granite slab and patterned glasswork. It also now housed the prichava, whose dual duties in the two Cezian cities had inspired her to begin training apprentices. Much to the others' surprise, the sight and the news had stopped Gatra in his tracks.

Shrugging at their surprise, he explained, "Some matters of being even disgrace cannot erase from a Desalian." His eyes turned back to the beautiful structure. "I have never been in the presence of a consecrated silag before.

"Now you are," Tridl replied with but a glance back at the man. "Welcome to Desal."

Near the center of the busy, well-tended mall, the dais had been resealed and surrounded with climbing flowers. Nearing it, Tridl pointed farther down, towards the east end of the square. There, he told them, the city's main clinic was also somewhat in new condition. With the war, some additions to the rear ward had become necessary, and the elders had finally decided to incorporate the tenement beside it and more space behind. The original clinic remained only as a lobby, with housing above and a kitchen, bathing and lavatory space behind.

"You will learn your way around with little time," Tridl told them all, smiling widely as they passed around a few humming vendors. "But we will cross here. Someone will know where Dalra and Miztri are--and I will likely meet my contractors soon."

Yasis narrowed her eyes. "So you *were* to be paid for this," she sneered.

Tridl sighed with affect. "I was contracted five years ago, woman. Certainly, I am not a bounty hunter, else my *booty* would have been here earlier." Concertedly making his company with Me'ekra and Y'dri then, Tridl left the others to follow them.

Susan didn't mind, truly enjoying the sights of the beautiful city and feeling her hopes rise in a way she hadn't felt in a very long time. Too long, she thought, seeing both well-looking Desalians and various Irliae traders going about their business or talking on corners, like in any normal city. For a moment, she

would not have thought those peoples were waging a war for freedom nearby but for the scarcity of their surroundings.

Liking that, she rubbed Marise's hand against her hip in a small surge of excitement.

They stopped just past the dais, where Tridl hopped ahead and bowed deeply to a petite, round-eyed and brown-braided woman, whom he introduced as "Sashana'i of Cezia, Regent of Desal," and then smiled proudly to watch the humble and grateful introductions cycle through all the Desalians but Gatra.

The regent noticed his exclusion, and so once she had succeeded in pulling her fellow citizens up from the flagstones, she turned a welcoming smile to him. "And you, good man, standing by our Antral friends, may I welcome you as well as Desal?" She moved near, slowing when he pulled up his chin as a gesture to stop--a Dajidian gesture, her memories quickly told her. "You need not draw back. We all are one in life and among all." Glancing to the Antral contingent, she tried another approach. "I am Sashana'i of the Allanois."

"Gatra," he replied, "--of the Ella'omb."

To his and the others' surprise, the lady's eyes seemed to unfocus briefly then clear as she regarded him anew. "By the spirits," she whispered and reached out to take his hands then press one to her temple in a deep and grateful bow. "We have been blessed this day to have another of our cruelly forsaken returned to his people. The Ella'omb, an honorable family of artists, much known and adored among our memories."

"I did not return," he replied, not bothering to acknowledge the hard stares in the corner of his eye. "I happened by here in our liberation from Dajid."

"All the more blessing of fate, good Gatra," Sashana'i stated, "that the curse of my ancestors should haunt me. As the heir to the Allanois, I have taken their crime unto my spirit and endeavored throughout my life to absorb what I might of Desal's natural redemption--including making reparation to all of those who were criminally and cruelly scorned for their fine intent and true spirits."

Gatra blinked, taken off guard by her progressive humility and ready sincerity. She remained bowed low before him for several seconds after she finished, as well, a gesture of deep regard. Her small hands were dry and warm around his. "I... I thank you, lady."

Sashana'i bowed again to accept it and pressed his hands against her chest in a further show of gratitude. "My house is yours should you require it," she promised "my food your plate and ears for your speaking. --Ka, good man, this is truth. You may ask any upon Cezia of this and it shall be known as one knows their own spirit."

Stepping away, she again embraced Y'dri and Me'ekra and their own. "I shall take you to your parents," she told them, "before installing a house for Gatra and his own. --Ka, this shall be tended to, friends. As for you, Tridl: Shall you take yourself immediately to gloat to Be'i?"

"I must go to the clinic in any event, for..." he nodded tiredly to Yasis' stare, "Yes, yes, woman--for payment and perhaps that Bakali may have time to see to these inmates' health. The others arrived have been similarly instructed to go there."

"You shall find my siblings both, then, as their duties and Tsi'omad have retained them this sun. Their generosity would be assured when they know how you have blessed our dear friends in your duty." With a

snicker, she picked up a couple of the dirty satchels by Y'dri's feet, whipping them out of reach before the woman could protest. "We shall meet again soon, I should think. When Miztri sees what I bring her, a sedative shall be required!"

With no more delay, the regent led the family away, talking and spoiling the children with bead pins she pulled off her scarves with a free hand. Gatra had to snap back to his senses before excusing himself to take a closer look at the silag. He caught Susan's satisfied grin as she turned away.

Indeed, she would not deny for a moment that she had enjoyed the regent's graceful speech as much as Yasis and Kurt had. More, aside from the payback value, maybe it would be all right.

Gatra had, after all, thanked an Allanois.

As they continued with Tridl across the square, Susan let her eyes fall on their destination, a two-storied, whitewashed facade with several long thin windows, slate shutters and vines bearing vermilion fruits crawling up to the roof. In front sat a long entrance patio, where a typically lithe, petite lady with long, brown curls braided back in her scarves stood at her work. Her finely embroidered beige gown and thin blue leggings appeared to be good quality for a Desalian, Susan noticed with a cursory glance--though certainly, Cezians on the whole seemed all but alien to the Desalians in the camp, or even serving in Antral households. Airing out a small carpet, the woman chatted and laughed at an undulating heap of cloth. Her small feet, wrapped below the ankles for the warm, breezy day, skipped over a wayward tassel before she stepped on it then stopped in front of the heap.

"Ba'ela, abrrosk ill ye'a mech'i'irr!" she called, laughing again when a curly-headed boy climbed up from the cloth pile, growling like a dog. Crossing her arms with the carpet still in them, she leaned closer. "Ab Ba'ela ya'eshiv tola jallim."

"Nali ka!" the little boy responded, hopping out of the pile to take the cloth from the lady.

When he trundled it inside the open clinic doors, the lady turned to pick up a thick, knotted blanket. Glancing over at the approaching group, she stopped. Her hazel eyes widened as she looked again.

Her fingers released the blanket when she focused on them: Tridl, an Antral woman, a little girl--and then the other two again.

Her full, red lips fell apart.

Yet as Tridl straightened to address her, Susan and Kurt both looked elsewhere.

The corners of her mouth twisted up into a grin.

Stepping down from the patio and onto the flagstone street, she tried again: "Bendera?" He glanced up. "Nicoletti?" She jerked her eyes down from the rooftops.

They looked at each other then at the lady again, only half-realizing. Indeed, it did take that moment for them both to interpret the Desalian woman's features, her mouth, her skin, the shape of her eyes and face, the color of her hair...the remnants of what had been her brow ridges...

Before they could respond to her, the woman looked aside to the frowning trader. "Tridl!" she laughed;. "I shall have your head for not alerting me! And yet, the *remainder* of you shall always enjoy a place at my table for this."

"B-but...Be'i," he said, furrowing his brow as he gestured back across the square, "I have brought Y'dri and Me'ekra--they are being taken to Dalra and Miztri now. I knew not of..." He stared over at the Antral family and suddenly recalled the names she had called them. "*These* are the other ones?!"

Yasis scowled. "You mean to say we were also to be for your collection?"

"Not you--but *them*." Tridl shook his head in frustration. "But Be'i, why did you never specify they were Antral? I might have found them sooner!"

The clever, responding smile on the woman's face was what Kurt would have called priceless Torres--if it *was* Torres.

"Perhaps this detail slipped my memory," she replied, relishing in Tridl's consternation. Her attention returned to the newcomers, however, when she continued, "Tridl, house yourself in great comfort at Dviglar and bring what debt you gain to my name. I will have them know it lies with me, and know our debt to you will be delivered presently. These passengers will now come into my family's care."

Taking that properly as a dismissal--or, better, desirous to leave sooner rather than later--the trader bowed. "My honor, Be'i," he managed with some remaining dignity. With another bow to the others, a few parting words, he turned to head back.

"Is solid, with my eternal thanks," she called to him, barely restraining her amusement. When Tridl disappeared into the street, she took a full breath and turned her head. "Toma! Tsave y'aballosk!"

Kurt snorted. Nine years hadn't dulled his memory that much. "*Toma?*"

Her eyes lit as she moved into the sun, she closed the distance between them, hugging Bendera tightly. "Ka, my old friend," she said and looked at Nicoletti. "And you! You are just as I would have wished."

Susan coughed a laugh. She still couldn't believe what she was looking at, the scarved and scarred, marked and exceedingly happy woman. To her memory, the chief had *never* smiled like that. "Lieutenant Torres? I..." Shaking her head, she finally gave it up. "It...is good to see you."

She could not stop her snickers, even when she embraced the lady before her. "Be'i," she told her. "I am called Be'i now. And it cannot be said how good it is to have you with us--finally. Finally, you are brought to us."

Susan finally had the presence of mind to reach up and hug her former officer back, though she still hadn't caught her breath. "We thought you were killed on Uillar."

"There were many chances for that," she said, pulling back to give Susan a straight stare. For a moment, she offered a grin to the girl on Susan's hand, greeting her silently and with a touch. "We nearly did pass there a few times. Yet we were brought to Cezia after nearly a half-year, upon the scourge which collapsed the Kahseht sect, who had domain in that territory. We have resided here since our arrival, recovering, taking a home and family...rebuilding a small fleet of ships for a conflict you might have heard about."

Kurt's eyes flew open again. "You?! I should have known! Damn!" He laughed and looked at Yasis, who had keenly watched the scene from his side. "Yasis, this was my comrade in the Maquis--Lieutenant Torres."

"The engineer--your superior," Yasis smiled, finally understanding and giving the lady a nod of greeting. "You are not what Kurt has said of you, I think."

Be'i returned the gesture. "It seems, my *Antral* friends, a long meal lies before us." She almost said more, but her stare turned inward for a moment. "Mes va'a ka?"

Though she had not turned back to point him out, their eyes all turned up to who was obviously "Toma." In his long, light tunic and pajama trousers, with his indigo markings and intent expression, he took in the sight without much surprise. But a genuine grin creased his older, tanned face the moment he focused on them.

Without breaking his stare, he took the hand "Be'i" drew up for him then pulled it around the dangling ends of his headdress to kiss it.

Susan's brows drew up at that, though she couldn't be any more surprised at that point. "Paris," she said in a breath.

His lips twisted at her greeting. "You are late," he quipped. "Were you lost?" But immediately after, he opened his arms to embrace his old friends, squeezing them tightly when he got them.

She held Susan around the waist like a sister, reached over to smooth Marise's hair and pinch her pretty cheek as they continued into the clinic.

Grinning to the others, he had them follow after, guaranteeing they would have all they needed as they could procure it.

Shameless in her pride, she introduced their son.

He introduced his elder-mother with due respect and warmth, and then secured them a space for their treatment.

She collected the equipment and vials she knew they would need, turning back an amazed smile before preparing them.

They might well have been any other set of strangers in it all, which was stranger than possibly anything Susan and Kurt had known yet.

He welcomed Gatra when he arrived a few minutes later, but only shrugged at the man's frown and silence. "All one in spirit is not always so in wits," he commented. Purposefully ignoring Gatra's reaction to the insult, he turned his attentions back to Kurt and Yasis.

Kurt, unusually uncomfortable in that new place as it was without Gatra's help, gave the man a shrug. "You did say you wanted to go inside the... --What's it called? The selak?"

"A silag," Toma of Azlre clarified, not looking back. "Ka, a visit there may be helpful, I should think."

Bakali, busy with a rash she discovered on the *Antral* child after treating her gravity sickness, gave him a brief smile as her assistant's quick scan of him was handed over to her. She glanced through it and

nodded. "You are a free man, Gatra of Ella'omb, and free of apparent physical malaise," she said then continued her work.

Susan said nothing, but instead turned away to hold Marise's newly healed hand.

Gatra left without farewells, only a slight bow.

The regents entered some time later and Be'i broke away from the others' treatment to introduce her "siblings." Seeing the friends for who they were that time, Sashana'i embraced and kissed them fully, welcomed them to her home, thanked the spirits for their deliverance from Unar.

"As I have said to your friend Gatra," she said, holding both of Susan's hands in hers and looking from her to Yasis and Kurt in turns, "your needs, whatever they may be, shall be tended here--especially as you are family to our own."

"I shall find you and your crew housing by the next sun," Aratra promised. "It is difficult, particularly since the war has freed so many, yet not impossible. There is always movement amongst our guests and it is good work for us during our rest."

"House yourselves here with our blessing in the interim, good Children," Bakali assured, "and we shall take Dalra and all his own for our evening meal, as well, should it please. I should think he and Miztri would find themselves beyond such worldly matters as housekeeping this happy moon."

"Your invitation shall be brought, Nali," Sashana'i said.

"My thanks, Child. --So then, a partial harvest shall be required, Toma."

"Then it shall be brought, Nali," he returned, bowing properly to his elder. Donning a long coat, Toma took his boy's hand and started out, repeating Be'i's list of "nado'ev, chisak, mial, dir, kimne'oll, harisde...and perhaps I would send some friends to watch over our errant guest?"

The two adopted Antral noticed their former superiors' eyes meet at that question. The two smiled slightly, and then took a simultaneous breath as their stares briefly melted into each other's. Then, Be'i looked back to help her 'nali' with the remaining treatments. Toma turned again, his coat hem catching the breeze coming in the door as he left with his son's hand still in his.

Susan and Kurt looked at each other, blank-faced. They might have expected it, if they'd expected them to be alive. But in truth, it was the last thing they'd have imagined.

There was wine and good company, aromatic breads, fruit, greens and cheese, a warm fire and soft pillows all around the room; the air was filled with easy talk and longer stories in the Desalian fashion. Friends and families sat reunited and young children played games in the corner by the window, engaged even after a full quarter. It was small and humble, the flat above the clinic, no more than what the residents needed and just enough to fit that party of eighteen, and yet it was more welcome than they had enjoyed since they left Antral.

Be'i and Toma of Azlre, born at Gahahol--or that was what the regents wryly said was a "poorly kept secret in Azlre and a well-accepted chronicle elsewhere." But maybe they really did belong to their names. Still, it was difficult for their former crewmates with their memories of one forthright Maquis and one reforming rogue, both of whom they had last seen bleeding on the red dirt of Uillar, failed miserably

in their attempt to protect their people.

Without exception that evening, the bondmates had been warm and funny, comfortable with their 'family.' As they chatted before and during dinner, they spoke of their spirits genuinely. They rolled their food in their bread with two practiced fingers. They lapsed into the Desalians' untranslatable speech without thinking and apologized when they remembered.

They were thrilled and grateful to see their friends alive and truly saddened to hear of the difficulties they had faced. They spoke for some time about their own adjustments, their gradual coming together and their life afterwards--even laughing about it at times. Later, more quietly for the children's ears, they spoke on the war. It had not been on very long, but it was as violent as any war rightfully was, sometimes messy, other times a creator of great heroes, often tragic and a good cause of their present mood--hopeful but sober.

Be'i became fast friends with Yasis, who could meet her every pointed comment with one of her own, laughed often and good-naturedly. Toma fell in love with Marise and Iseli, and took to teasing them throughout their meal, to the girls' delight. When they had finished, he pulled out games for them and Ba'ela, who according to his parents was so active, he could probably be connected to the city generator to keep it running smoothly.

Despite their otherworldly feeling, still present, Susan and Kurt had honestly enjoyed Y'dri and Me'ekra's still teary, thankful parents for some time. Dalra and Miztri were surprisingly true to their children's loving descriptions and plainly dear to Toma and Be'i, too.

Upon Kurt's curiosity, they all soon after descended into laughter over Dalra's witty recollections of his frustration with the two passionate outsiders who took their food in his overhang and openly challenged his ways. They also smiled at Miztri's descriptions of their simple, dogged will to survive despite their constant injuries and illnesses. Aratra recalled as well how the two had argued like hungry gasks--and from the first sunrise, when Sashana'i had been forced to literally throw Toma out of the shack to silence them.

"I'eva tsa! No more wood on our pyre!" Toma finally laughed, hugging his lady close as she leaned back against him.

"Ka," Be'i added. "It may be believed we are not always all our charms."

They were both humble and proud, they had family in the regents and the city elders, they had fought successfully with their ship for five years, and though firm in tone at times for the war, they were so...gentle, honest, accepting...

So Desalian.

Even Kurt, usually easygoing about the unexpected, blinked every time he looked at them. Susan could only watch and try to relate their new ways with the old, try to picture them like they were while looking at them there. It always took her much longer to accustom herself to situations, she knew. She felt better to know she wasn't alone in it that time.

As the conversation shifted back to Dalra and Miztri and their re-expanded family, Bakali's invitation to train Y'dri and Gavasi and Me'ekra's expected baby, when she felt she might leave somewhat unnoticed, Susan took herself out to what Tom and B'Elanna had called another downtime project... *Toma and Be'i*, she reminded herself yet again with a smirk. But then she wondered if she could judge them for being so

different after everything she and Kurt had done in their own time in Irlae. Then again, she and Kurt at least *seemed* somewhat like they used to be.

The project turned into a pleasant little patio off the top of the staircase and above the clinic washroom, with a few simple wire shelves of herbs against the wall and a tall pot of white-bloomed vines in the far corner. The space had always been there, but needed reopening and repair. "Like most things on Cezia," Toma had told her when he pointed it out, "it all makes itself done eventually."

In any case, she needed a bit of quiet.

Standing at the balcony, Susan looked out to what she'd been told was the north side of the city. Roofs of shorter buildings that rolled down slightly with the land to the city walls stood in her foreground. Beyond that was a plain of grass, backed by a range of mountains, all lit eerily blue in the light of two moons. When the wind stilled, she was certain she heard joth balking. It reminded her of a resort she'd visited before going to the Academy. It was in the Ukraine, and she had been the youngest winner of the Drinar prize for excellence in computational theory...a million years ago.

She breathed a deep breath, felt the dryness permeate her waterlogged lungs.

"So much for not going native," came a voice that still seemed like a faraway memory, and even then, it was so oddly accented that it took Susan a moment to recognize it.

"You did it well," she finally replied, managing a small grin.

Be'i stood in the doorway a moment longer, looking at her old comrade almost as a stranger whose face she knew. It was truth--it had been nearly a decade since they had seen each other, after having known each other only a year and not closely. Her journeys with her bondmate had been so often, seeing Nicoletti and Bendera in their memories, that they had almost expected the same people to arrive on their doorstep, if they ever did.

Susik. Be'i grinned to herself at the sweet-natured nickname. In Antral, she knew, it was a particularly rare dewflower, much prized and beautiful. Whoever had nicknamed her that--and Be'i did not have to guess--certainly loved his lady.

Susan did look good for having lived in a family internment camp nearly six years. Her hair fell nicely around her shoulders, and though a bit too slim, her figure knew she had borne and nursed a child, too. Given the chance to replicate some new clothes, she had chosen a style decidedly Antral, a fitted violet longshirt and brown trousers, a colorful sash that covered her ribs and tied flat on her back and short, fitted boots. Susan's choice both complimented her and pleased Be'i in its own way. It was good to see she and Kurt both had come to embrace something in Irlae. Moreover, they had found themselves with mates, Kurt with Yasis and Susan with a good husband, regrettably passed.

She wondered how well they would continue to embrace Irlae if they knew about the time...

They would have to know soon enough.

"Am I disturbing you?" she continued in their native tongue, thinking Susan might be more comfortable with that.

"No. I just needed to get some air. It's beautiful out here."

Be'i nodded and joined her, sliding the door closed behind her. "When Toma expanded the loft for our

son, I insisted on this repair. We had always thought of utilizing this space and I long had craved a place to have some quiet. The view is good, and it remains cool most of the day. Naturally, Ba'ela likes being out here, too, when I'm here. So, I gave up on the quiet part."

Susan smiled. "He's a beautiful boy."

"Zhra'i ka. He was a...pleasant surprise."

"A surprise?"

"It's easiest to say without talking until dawn that we learned precisely when subdermal implants finally lose their effectiveness."

"They held on longer than mine," Susan said lightly.

"But your husband was Antral," Be'i returned. "Then again, I shouldn't talk, since mine is Tom Paris."

Susan laughed. "It took him a while longer, but sooner or later he would get it and to hell with the rest?"

"Even if he didn't know what *it* was," she grinned, but then she shook her head. "No, he was as surprised as I had been. We expected to require an *effort* in order to conceive, and we were glad for that, considering everything happening here. Desalian bonding effects aside, we simply didn't anticipate Ba'ela's sudden appearance. Though, we were never sorry for him. Zhra ya a'tsozh--he is our spirits' greatest blessing, as they say."

"Yes," Susan said, pleasantly surprised yet again at the other woman's invocation of the Desalian spirits. Odd as it might have been, it seemed to suit her, the way she said it...the way she looked. "I can see that, in you both and in him. Ba'ela seems like a very happy child."

"That is his father's nature--brutally optimistic, and I'm thankful for it." Seeing her smile at that, nodding with understanding, Be'i moved beside her. "And your Marise is a beautiful little girl, with much of her mother that I can see."

"She has a good deal of her father, too, though I've been the only parent she remembers."

Be'i paused respectfully, seeing the tinge that came with the statement. Susan recovered easily enough, though a lingering bittersweet remained. Be'i knew she would never understand such a pain, as she could never be a widow, but she did feel for her.

"Would you like to remain on Cezia, Susan," she asked quietly, "or do you want to return to Antral? I am curious of your plans and what I might plan for you."

She thought about that for a few seconds. "I think I would rather remain for the time. I'd like to be with Mother Kebis, have Marise grow up with her father's family. But as long as the war continues, I can't justify returning to an unsafe place."

"We'll set up a secure communication for you if you like," Be'i acknowledged, "but I can ask my assistant Latsari to send your family the news that you're safe in Azlre before we retire. She is in Dviglar now."

"Thank you." Susan's eyes roamed over the mountains once again. "Tridl said Antral is still in danger, though, being so close to Unar."

"Antral will be the next secured area," Be'i nodded. "With the laskeb's safety, it should not be too difficult to push the front back to Gozhor." She snickered. "If anything, the Antral would do it alone--and with pleasure."

Susan grinned. "I can understand that. We lived there for three years before Desal joined the resistance; it was all we talked about some days. I have to admit that I didn't expect to hear this much after being at Dajid. The Unar there didn't look very worried or anxious."

"That was Unar trying to keep face," Be'i told her, focusing on the view. "Or if they were not worried, they should have been. We strike their deployments at every turn, work to get ahead of them and push them back--and have from the start. As we speak, their supply lines in Onast are being disrupted--starting with Dajid. Toma and I should be leaving for more of that offensive in four more suns, when the Azallis is repaired."

"It almost seems like a dream," Susan whispered. "We had some news of the resistance, but only from what Yasis could sneak out of the comm system at the camp. We didn't have any idea how much had been done since we left Antral."

"I'eva tsa, we have been as persistent as fate has been generous," the other woman nodded as she pulled her evening coat more warmly around her. "They hold onto the Tyrralm fields, the surrounding territory and Desalia-Four, but the pockets are crumbling one by one. Unar will not continue much longer. They were not prepared for their slaves' revolt or our sabotage, and they never managed to recover enough to succeed in decisive battles afterwards."

"How long, do you think?"

"We try not to predict it publicly, but I would guess it should take less than a ralkle to push them back into their territory. We have recently re-drawn our plan. If their Onast forces continue to fall as predicted, then we should have them well encircled in a third of that time."

Susan turned to the serious face of her former chief. Her profile, so different for her injuries, also bore a different yet oddly similar intensity to match her tone. There, it was...quiet, assured, oddly knowing...or maybe it really had been longer than it felt all the sudden. Despite her accent, her tone was familiar in her desires at least. "Kurt and Yasis want to join the fight."

"We thought they might. Toma and I will take them on our crew, to see what they might like to do."

"I'd like to help--but remain here."

"With Marise. I understand. It's more difficult than many would realize, to leave Ba'ela, knowing we may never return."

Susan nodded slowly. "I couldn't do that. It must be difficult."

Be'i blinked at the obvious observation. "Our son needs us and we do not like leaving him. Even with twice daily communications, we think about him all of the time when we're in the field. Thankfully, he has Bala and Bakali, who love and take very good care of him. We're needed in this fight: We are the ones who taught Desal *how* to fight. People look to us as teachers and as guides, particularly for our association, being claimed Allanois. Toma and I need to do what we're doing, too. In a way, we created this war, and we intend to finish it." Be'i paused before adding, "But I think you might enjoy Dviglar. I can tell you from experience there is always much to do there."

"And the technology to do it?" Susan returned, laughing lightly when the other woman's proud little smirk appeared. *That* was definitely familiar. "You and Toma did a lot and it shows. I couldn't believe it when we saw it earlier--a real base. And that deflector--"

"Originally the Unar's, actually," said Be'i. "We stole it from what was left at Uillar."

"Nice revenge, wasn't it?" Susan commented.

"We thought it was...an appropriate balance of fate."

Susan laughed again, sighing it out to the view. It was good to feel so relaxed, and even confident about the future before them. When she last knew the woman by her, it had often been much the opposite. "I have to admit, I'm impressed. When I was told we were going to Cezia, I imagined the poor, pastoral descriptions I heard on Antral, goats and temples and hooded natives."

"Cezia is still that," Be'i admitted. "Desal is still humbled in many ways--sometimes to a fault. I won't lie about this. But it's also returned to much of its roots, with the necessity of freedom and living decently. They had accepted not having that. With any blessing, that will not happen again."

"How did you do it?" Susan asked. "Of all the people on Voyager who wouldn't have had the patience to deal with what was going on here--even I couldn't accept some of it. But Desalians...all these people, who for years ignored Antral and the others then let itself fall to the Unar..."

"Desal was not as thoughtless as you make it seem," Be'i told her. "They always felt terribly for the plights of others. At the same time, they were trapped in their own philosophies and a confused and misguided regency. When Desal was conquered, the Unar capitalized on that. The result, I think you have seen well enough. As for the fight, Sashana'i and Aratra would have eventually raised Desal, as there was not a single person here or elsewhere who didn't want peace and the natural balance in Irlae to be restored. The population was trapped in their beliefs, yet Desal has *always* cared about the plight of our neighbors--often more than themselves."

"But you said yourself that you had started the war," Susan said.

Be'i's lips turned slightly up. "Toma and I...sped it along, gave them more ideas than they initially would allow themselves. We pushed people with improvements here on Cezia, restoring some technology in repairs and upgrades to some of the city systems. Even then, it was an Unar attack and a particular response to it which strung us to the end of *our* patience and brought us to publicly ask to make a fight. That's when Sashana'i jumped in and formalized Desal's right to commit war. The day after Bala and Bakali approved, we were at Dviglar rebuilding a salvage yard."

"Well, after this much time, I guess you would..." She left the sentence open, nodding back to her previous thoughts.

"We had adopted Desal, the people and our family, and we felt some responsibility for the attack," Be'i filled in. "We taught them everything we knew on their level as much as we could, from the basics to doing battle and defending themselves, as they never had done any of that before. The mechanics of keeping a ship up was easier than teaching them how to be mercenary, to destroy life and property without provocation. We needed to bring Desal to where it could fight. And when the war ends, we will *all* have more of learning and teaching to do."

"The confiscated records," Susan nodded. "I heard of the same on Antral. Aldrun told me often how

horrifying it was to lose it all, not at first, but when they realized they could not just open a file, or look up a thing, or make a repair--or teach except by word and hand. I can only imagine how it must have been."

"It devastated all of Irlae."

"But not the Desalians as much, I heard," Susan pointed out. "They were always known for their oral records."

"Don't mistake tradition for simplicity, nor acceptance for peace," Be'i warned. "What is left when your scholars and word painters fare worse than the technology, are not stolen but exterminated? But a relative few survived to pass on their knowledge outside of Desal's homeworld. Many are still in hiding, secretly passing on the spiritual training, but nothing more than necessary, just enough that they can perform bondings, give the kraja and counsel the ill. It's helped keep Desal true to its ways, but it's not a complete education. It's not known how many true scholars exist now. There are but a scant few receiving full training even now. Unar almost destroyed all those living records."

Her correction had been quiet but firm, and Susan accepted it. "I apologize. Y'dri and Me'ekra were always friends to me and the others on Dajid, but I don't know Desal very well."

Be'i eyed her. "I can tell our good Gatra is not a well of information."

"He doesn't like to talk about it."

"Ke'atse. He didn't seem to want to be here, and he looked angry with Toma, though they had never met."

"He's nervous about being around Desalians again," Susan told her. "I don't know if I can blame him too much for being cautious, but he does grate my nerves when he takes it out on the wrong people. I'm handling that less and less well, lately."

"He must have some goodness if you've kept him as a lover."

"Off and on. As soon as he starts looking like a nice guy, he says some things..." She shook her head. "He can be so self-righteous, I wonder why I ever bothered. But he's good to Marise and me and, yes, he does have a good heart. I'd give him a chance if I were you."

"I haven't cursed him outright--yet. We'll see how things go." Be'i looked out again, leaned up on the rail. A pause passed, long enough to turn the subject back from its tangent. "Those records, all the databanks confiscated upon Unar's takeover...they're all on Desalia-Four, Susan." She nodded to the other woman's surprise. "Our agents--friends of Desalians once assigned to labor on the homeworld--found out only recently. Yet it makes sense: Only the catacombs there have the capacity to store the incredible mass of data. It's why they barricaded the homeworld so heavily, made it self-sustaining."

"That is logical." Susan watched the corner of Be'i's mouth turn slightly up--an unvoiced thought, it seemed. "Do the Antral know?"

She breathed a short laugh. "They grow aware of it, slowly but surely."

Susan didn't ask, though tempted, what the Desalians had been up to there--which was likely keeping her own adopted people at bay as best as possible. She couldn't say it was unwise. So instead, she asked, "So what happens now?"

Be'i shrugged, though her eyes brightened to relate it. "We have decided it's time to take the homeworld--at last. With this, Unar should fall with only some more effort. The tactical layout is in planning; we need a way to get beyond the detection grids and whatever power source they're using. But it will come soon."

Susan drew a deep breath. As crazy as it all had become again, to hear those words coming from her former chief's mouth did nothing but good for her. She found herself gladly trusting it. For her recent experience, she knew she *wanted* to trust it.

"Good."

An easy silence fell between them then, and the two women continued to stare out at the panorama, glowing blue in the moons' light. It was so quiet, either of them might have said they could hear the little world itself spinning. Only the occasional echo of an animal or the shifting breeze disturbed it. For them both, the silence was restful.

Be'i's eyes were not on the view by then, however, but beyond it as she pondered how she should inform them. Or perhaps it was a better topic for later, when their old comrades were rested and more acclimated to Cezia. They had all received treatments for malnutrition, injuries never properly corrected and several viruses typical of survivors of the camps. They had all bathed, dressed and made themselves neat for dinner, wine and talk.

Their excitement of being free from Dajid was sinking into reality. Their shock at seeing their former superiors so different was also dissipating.

They should naturally be fatigued and should be allowed a peaceful rest, Be'i decided. The many new things for them to do and digest would easily come after that. She and Toma had four more suns before they would need to leave.

For that matter, she could use the sleep as well.

It would be a full day at sunrise.

As he had planned with Be'i when they spooned together the late evening before, Toma took Kurt with him to the market that morning, with his son, Bala and Aratra, to show him around in grand fashion. The early day routine was one he had come to truly enjoy, and so he was curious to see how well it might fare with the man who had lived with the Antral for so many years. To his memory and Be'i's, Bendera was the sort who might take to it.

They were correct. Kurt, better rested than the day before and with that, quite curious about the place both Susan and Yasis had decided would be home for the remainder of the war, started memorizing the traditionally curvy streets and graceful white buildings. He asked so many questions, too, that Bala had to take over the answering of them. Meanwhile, Aratra and Toma waved over friends, both members of the resistance and "civilian" Azlreians, to meet him. They did so with their usual grace, gratitude and warm congratulations to Toma for finally having found his friends. Toma shrugged to Kurt. "You and Susan might have been mentioned occasionally by the fire."

Once they reached the market, the men went so far as to use Kurt as their sample taster--even down

to the last, which Bala all but snuck over from a Maha'ajan vendor. "Sirril," Toma explained, jabbing Aratra. "We blame our bonded regent for having that brought here--leaving the most of us with cravings."

"Only do not speak too freely of it to our bondmates," Bala grinned. "Or not until they are in their most pleasant moods. They are convinced we shall grow fat and unhealthy on it--and when happy, they would rather jibe us for our weakness. Yet it is, in truth, an indulgent fruit."

Kurt had to take a breath behind the bite. "Damn, that's good--best thing I tasted since I was on Risa."

"Speaking of indulgences," Toma snorted. "Who was she and was she truly as sweet?" Aratra and Bala laughed and looked curiously to the man for the answer.

Kurt's brows rose, not surprised at his old comrade, but definitely taken by the Desalians' response. But then he chuckled, too. "Faride," he said. "But it was only--"

"Not 'only' should she be considered alongside the taste and juice of sirril," Aratra smiled. "Now paint the words, friend, and we shall walk with it. --It is the way. Speak."

So Kurt told the old and embarrassing story about how he'd lusted after a pretty, blonde-haired Risan girl and was plagued at every turn in wooing her with bad timing, awkward exposures and the loss of his money to a Ferengi, finally losing his patience and accepting defeat without even having gotten to touch her. Only by accident did he get together with her on his last night there, during which he definitely made the most of their time, in the Hidran Bay by moonlight with a most interesting Betazoid wine and sweet, luscious Faride wrapped around him like a warm, wet scarf.

"And Yasis knows nothing about it," Kurt finished. His audience laughed even as they nodded their agreement. It was not a matter to discuss with an Antral wife, even if it was nearly twenty years ago.

Still chuckling over the story, one he hadn't told in ages, Kurt found himself indeed in a good mood for the company as easiness about them, even if he noted to the other man, "It's not like it was before--back home."

Toma's grin was one of agreement, though inward. "Not much is," he said, using their native language that time. He and Be'i could see the night before that some of the words were lost on him and Susan, though their translators were of Antral origin and thus very good. Be'i had also said that Susan seemed to have relaxed, hearing their birth tongue. "And I think that's a good thing most of the time."

"I guess you would think that," Kurt said then looked at Toma again, his suntanned face and the deep scar wrecking into his cheek. His expression was untroubled, his stare set on their direction as they made their way through streets he had come to know by heart. "Do you ever think about it, though?"

"Yes." Toma shrugged. "We never forgot what we came from--and we couldn't forget it. We are curious about home, but we don't miss it. Our families, of course, but not the place--and still we had to let it go either way. The Federation is so far from here, we knew despite our projects and rhetoric that we probably wouldn't see it again long before we got in that shuttle. Do you miss it?"

"Sure I do," Kurt said. "I don't have anything left back there, really, but I miss being around humans sometimes, miss the idea of *maybe* seeing Camor again. Yasis and I have talked about it." He laughed, recalling suddenly their last conversation about the wonders of the Alpha Quadrant. "She's Antral through and through, though. She says I'm better off here, where I won't get spoiled again and I know my place."

Toma grinned. "I think Be'i and I would agree with her on that in our own right."

"I do sometimes too," Kurt admitted. "There's a lot I've gotten involved with since we got here--like you did. And there's a lot that I want to be a part of, the resistance especially--like in the Maquis, but knowing something's actually happening. With so much at stake, I'm still pissed off that we were stuck away at Dajid while all of this was going on. This time, I really want to follow through, see what comes of all of it. Then there's Yasis."

Seeing a deeply felt grin find Kurt's face with that last thought, Toma nodded. "Ka, she's beautiful, smart and quick like any good Antral." Kurt's smile grew. "She has made a good home for you."

"She's the best friend I couldn't have asked for," he said thoughtfully. "On the worst days, she can make me grateful I'd gotten stuck in this place."

"I wouldn't call it a crime," Toma commented.

Thinking more on that, Kurt looked at him again. "But I'll always miss home at least a little."

Toma's eyes turned down in thought, but then came back again to see Gihetra. He gladly changed the topic to introduce his good friend and fellow captain.

Having dressed herself in her working clothes and gladly allowing Ba'ela to sleep a while longer that morning, Be'i came down from the loft to find a perturbed Yasis pacing circles in the main room. Hearing the reason for her mood--the elder, Toma and Aratra practically stealing her man away at sunrise for errands--she patted the other woman's arm understandingly.

"It is tradition for the men to take themselves for our bread and fruit," Be'i told her, and then with a grin, "--and a good one, so that we may speak freely of their particulars before their return."

Bakali shook her head, grinning. "My child, you and your brother shall never find change in some manners," she said, pouring hot water into the mugs.

Be'i continued to regard Yasis. "And how *has* my technician been utilized since his controls were rewired?" she asked, knowing precisely how Yasis would take it.

Yasis laughed. "*Your* technician?" she returned. "Looking at your own pilot's devotion, it is plain you have already honed his navigational socket--if not burnt it to coals."

"I always did enjoy the ride," Be'i grinned.

"Had you not, I would worry for you," Yasis returned then gave her a more genuine smile. "He is a fine man, for what I have met, and more than what I would have expected, for all I have heard."

Be'i turned a similarly amused yet more hinting look towards the woman. "I hope my bondmate has not suffered too much talk for all that was known of him then."

"Not too much," Yasis answered, "but for every curse there was a compliment, for him and for you, and enough to make me know you were real."

"As it should be, I would think."

"True." With that, Yasis peeked over to Bakali to see how their tea was coming along. "The smell is good," she commented.

"And it is complete," Bakali announced with smile as she lifted the tray.

Satisfied with Yasis' positive turn of mood, Be'i excused herself to check in on their other guests. Taking one of the cups Bakali had brought and promising her quick return, she took herself downstairs to the front clinic's storage room. Susan and Marise had been set to sleep there rather than the main room of the flat upstairs to afford them some privacy and relative quiet in the morning.

As expected, the lady was already awake, though not out of the bed of blankets and soft, plush pillows the elders had arranged the evening before. She instead held her sleeping child and stared out the thin window to the bright sky. Her eyes were filled with wonder, much as they had been the evening before, neither sad nor happy. Perhaps it was only relief, in a calm manner time had taught the cool facade of a girl once called Nicoletti.

It was understandable.

Be'i smiled gently and moved herself in to give Susan her tea. She said nothing, offering her greeting with her expression alone. With a quiet "Thank you," the cup was taken.

Without thinking, Be'i reached over to Susan's bag and took out her brush for her...

The room smelled of spice and tea when they took their breakfast; the sun, peeking through the shutters, had grown white and inviting. Around the freely patterned floorcloth, they ate far more quietly than they had their dinner, not necessarily groggy but simply beginning their day with a measure of peace and gentle, issue-free talk. There, it was tea and bread, fruit and cheese, an elderly couple chatting simply, a small boy nibbling eagerly and his parents watching from their places on the soft, old pillows. Their grins were reflective, either pleased with their view or with whatever they were feeling between each other.

Susan still noticed that when she looked at them, and after she told herself again not to stare, she decided they were probably both.

Marise ate just as well then happily curled up on one of those pillows by her mother, who smoothed her curls as she tasted another piece of cheese and sipped on a rather delicious floral tea. Kurt and Yasis, more awake and doubly ready, had already eaten their meal, memorized the room and by that time were only being polite in their remaining. They opened their mouths at every pause, taking a quick look at the window or the stairway door with every new noise.

Noticing this made Bala smile at first; then he laughed. "Toma, Be'i, you might wish to free these nyvalst of their bearings else they shall fly through the shutters."

"Somewhat like another set of arrivals I bear fair memory of," Bakali said warmly. "And my thanks to the spirits they have retained both their wings and their nest."

So, at their elders' suggestion, Be'i and Toma pulled themselves up and, convincing Susan to leave a more than willing Marise to stay with Ba'ela and Bala for the day, draped on their outer cloaks. Minutes later, they started out for Dviglar, greeting their friends in the square and others in the streets as they crossed the town for the south gate. They stopped again not far outside it so Sashana'i and Aratra could catch up with them.

Greeting the newcomers as friends, the regents fell in with the five, Sashana'i in particular paying special attention to Susan, who without a mate, had to walk alone. After reporting her own news of Gatra's stay at Dviglar the evening before, the regent took care to remain very near to her, keep her in idle conversation much of the way. She even made Susan laugh a few times with her descriptions of some of Dviglar's most common customers, including her own humble role in supplying them with a fair share of work.

Be'i smiled back at her. "Indeed, a fine regent, our sister," she quipped, "worth her skill in the engine room for her precision and tenacity. Take care not to let her near your hair, however. You shall be tortured with those same fine qualities."

"Yet *you* have at last taken enough instruction," Sashana'i returned.

Aratra chuckled, rubbing his bondmate's back. "Past Ba'ela's birth, our good lady at last became busy enough that Sashana'i's words could be heard."

"But only just enough," Sashana'i replied with an air of mock haughtiness. "I should still think it yet bears shortness."

To it all, Be'i shook her head at the sky.

Toma pursed his lips and whistled a few bars of a requiem.

Hearing it, Susan crooked her head and suddenly laughed. "You rogue! You *would* remember that."

"Does that bring back a memory!" Kurt chimed in, relinquishing all but Yasis' hand as she turned to talk to Sashana'i. He'd been pleasantly surprised to see how well she'd warmed to the Desalians there. When he came back with Toma and Bala that morning, he found her with the other women, all talking so easily that she barely noticed his entrance.

Indeed, they had found themselves taken aback by the difference between those like Y'dri and Me'ekra and the more progressive Desalians there. Their robes worn pale, their humility and invocations of the spirits as sincere, they yet had life and 'spirit,' as it were. They joked and had egos, they were determined and quick to think and speak and anxious to learn whatever new came their way. Kurt could easily say he enjoyed Desal far more in that state.

Entering Dviglar again and heading to the ship rows, they saw the difference all over again in the activity of those people, their vibrancy and humor, though their submissiveness held steady in at least one respect. Their welcoming the noble family when they came into the base was surprisingly formal, with low bows and very kind words. The young regents switched into their roles with a blink, accepting the adoration with grace and gentle kindness and blessing the way of all who approached them. It was quite a change from their gaiety at dinner and playfulness on the road there. Be'i and Toma, too, welcomed their fellow citizens to straighten when the attention turned their way, touching their temples in greeting.

"It's the way," Be'i explained with a shrug as she resumed her pace through the ship rows.

Thankfully, their crew showed no ceremony when they climbed up into the Azallis and welcomed their friends aboard. Leading them straight to the engine room, Be'i immediately worked her way around it, asking questions in Desalian left and right to crewmembers who seemed to know better than to not respond efficiently.

"Just in case you thought all had changed about her," Toma quipped and added, "Feel free to look around. We won't be long. We are still waiting on parts for our deflector, but we like to check in."

With that, the captain unsashed his coat and joined his bondmate in assessing the continuing repairs of the ship, his tongue returning to unintelligible Desalian.

Susan and Kurt didn't mind the chance to examine the systems in the meanwhile. Though Desalian in origin and standard language set, the equipment in that engine room was so familiar, they laughed with each discovery. Meanwhile, Yasis was entranced. She had never seen such a ship in her life and wondered if all the old ships of Desal were as grand. Hearing her husband and cousin beckon her over, she found herself in a breathless lesson of what a useful ship looked like.

The same held true for the communications center, with which the two captains were equally pleased. Busy but organized, they entered to see a hodge-podge of equipment around a well-populated double horseshoe of panels and screens. The back wall held four larger screens. On the left were three long rectangles with star charts bearing ship positions and current territory lines and data. To the right of those displays, the main viewscreen displayed the entire layout of Irlae from the vantage of what Be'i called the "ka'ekle-berr."

Whatever that meant, it was incredible.

"So that's what it looks like," Kurt breathed, moving closer to see every detail of the place he'd inhabited almost a decade, but had known only in a strictly local sense. The region was small in comparison to vast areas he had known in his life and amazingly surrounded by the same plasma field that had brought and kept them there.

Oddly, that wasn't such a bitter thing to him anymore. Even seeing it for the first time since they arrived, it was more a thing of wonder than of ill fate. He almost wished he were a scientist to see all the notated wonders on that map.

Cali, the lead controller and second in command to Dalra, welcomed them with a smile and bow, but then pulled her older friends over to gesture toward one display. "Note his direction," Cali pointed out.

Toma chuckled and opened a channel to the ship in question.

"It seems my bondmate and I must bear you thanks," he said. "Your snail slime of an agent has finally freed Dajid, to some excellent effect. Though I see you already capitalize on this."

"Toma and Be'i of Azlre!" announced the Antral captain over the scratchy comm. "So, you have emerged a while from your domestic grandeur to hear of my successes?"

Toma rolled his eyes, laughing at his friend's usual manners. "I should think, Novren, you would tell us anyway."

"The Onast Sector's liberation will continue freely in all directions outward but Unar itself. --And I chase the grey hawk as we speak," he boasted. "I have him in my sights again. He will be at this battle. Best you do not miss it. I *will* take him down."

Be'i bent closer to her friends, who stared up at the configuration display in continued awe and had started at the voice. "Think of him as Ahab," she told them. "We always have."

"We knew Novren," Kurt told her. "When we were on Antral, he came to the hall sometimes with

Aldrun. He's the one who told us about the resistance here."

"It was why we left Antral," Susan muttered.

Toma backed off from the display. "Would you like to speak with him?" he asked.

Taking a moment to decide on that, Susan moved forward to the central control panel. "Novren Pridalar," she said, easily reassuming her Antral tongue. "Do you remember me? Susik Kichyrn?"

"Susik! Susik is a lady I do remember!" Laughing loudly, Novren was plainly in good spirits. "I heard of your inspection years ago. Where have you been lounging since? I have missed your ability--and your fine features."

"We have only just arrived from Dajid," she answered, ignoring both compliments.

"Well, then, Tridl will definitely be my spitting urn for a time," he returned. "But your part of that idiocy is over for now. It would be good to have your expertise with us again, Lady Kichyrn. --And Aldrun's! Where hides he? I would not mind having--"

"Aldrun is dead," Susan told him flatly.

"Dead?! How could he die in that comfortable place?"

Susan drew a breath, cursing to herself, nodding when she felt Yasis' hand on her arm.

Kurt took over. "When we were captured," he said, "the commander who stopped us for inspection injured him fatally. He died at Dajid seven gruvnu later."

A pause sat on the comm for several seconds. "Who was this commander?"

"Commander Ogakosb," Yasis answered immediately, seeing Susan's mouth tighten. Her surviving cousin had likely tried to put that Unar out of her mind entirely, but Yasis had certainly not forgotten that name.

Again, a pause, then, "Susik Kichyrn, you need not worry about his vindication. I will take care of that. Bastard Unar. I knew Aldrun from our days in the mines as teenagers. His strength was legend there. They will pay for his death if I have to drag them bleeding over my rusty nacelles. --And you may count that as my contribution to the universal balance, my Desalian friends."

Toma licked his lips, shooting a look to Cali, nearby. He correctly guessed that she was just as glad Dalra was occupied that day with his children. "Would you keep your results discreet this time," he told the other captain, "I would have little to say against such a means of balance. Your ship's debt to us carries much importance, as does our trust and friendship."

"As *always*, Toma," Novren answered magnanimously. His brutal grin was as easy to hear as it might have been seen. "I do not forget our trade as I do not forget my own woman."

"Whoever that might be each kli'ajea," Be'i quipped as she worked on a console. As the man laughed, she turned a fond look towards the origin of his voice. "Be well in your wishes, Novren. We shall join you soon and celebrate this sun's successes then."

"I await it, good Be'i. --Susik, I hope to see you soon as well as your family."

"Until Antral is secured, I will remain with Marise here at Cezia," she told him. "Kurt and Yasis, you might see sooner."

"I would see you all well in any time."

The comm was cut, though Susan continued to stare up at the viewscreen, imagining the man she had known years ago, flying into battle with that next in what was probably a long list of vindications on his mind: Vindication for Aldrun, who had been so happy and anxious to sink his teeth into a true resistance. Certainly less bloodthirsty than Novren Pridalar, Aldrun's desires had been just as strong. Susan could easily remember the long nights she and Aldrun spent together, with her snuggled in beside him as he gestured toward the ceiling and described how it would be again on Antral when they were free someday. She remembered the morning they set off for Tralbil, how his face glowed with expectation as they walked out to the ship with Marise. She remembered sharing that happiness as if she'd been born there.

Now, Aldrun was dead--but the dream they shared was far from it. If he had, like Y'dri once said, gone to a higher place and could see it all from there, he would be proud--and vindicated even without his old friend's efforts. He would be happy.

"Remind me to thank Novren someday," she told Kurt and Yasis then turned away from the screen.

With that and Cali's promise to establish a secure communication with Antral by the next sun, their tour of Dviglar continued. Inspecting the smaller stores and repair warehouses, the observatories and maintenance centers, they came again to the center row, where they would head out again for Azlre. Though it was only just past midday, Susan was anxious to see Marise and to see about their near future on that world.

Kurt and Yasis were already sold on "doing some catching up" on the Azallis. Likewise, Susan had liked the repairs warehouse a great deal, seeing both the variety and precision of work going on there. Be'i immediately encouraged the idea, as they could always use more ashna'o there, too. They had some elders, two scholars among them, in fact, who had blessedly good technical skills--a few of the non-scholars had even been engineers before the Unar invasion. About sixteen in all had come out of hiding and to Cezia at Sashana'i's humble request.

Even so, a former Starfleet data engineer would understand far better the technology Be'i and Toma had implanted into the various fleets.

So they walked and planned, genuinely happy and still a little dreamy for even being free to make so many choices so soon after escaping internment. Things were yet again going quickly--and they did not think to waste a moment.

In the main row as well, they stopped to see Gatra, bathed and freshly clothed and looking at them with an equally pleased grin. Though relieved to see him as well as Sashana'i had reported of him, Susan still greeted him without touching.

"With whom did you stay last evening?" she asked as they started off again to the path to Azlre. "When my husband's crew returned to Azlre this morning, we learned you also were here for the night. Sashana'i told us you had as well."

Gatra politely kept the distance she tacitly proposed, glancing only once to the seemingly uninterested friends of his lady, who walked a few paces ahead. "I took refuge with Captain Tridl, as Desal's regents

did not seem to bear in all enough sway to provide decent enough housing for myself, nor any of you. So I took the opportunity to rectify that."

Kurt shrugged. "We slept at the clinic. It was no hardship. You would have enjoyed it, too, had you not gone skulking off."

"In a city like Azlre," Yasis said plainly, already tired of Gatra again despite his smile, "you cannot expect them to pull a house out of the air. For that matter, Gatra, we are not at Dajid. Can you not just be thankful and leave them be?"

"I did not need," Gatra replied. "I have already had words with the lady Sashana'i this sun. She and her bondmate will take care of matters this time, as she was charged to. --And so, you will not need to stay in a base cubicle again, Susik."

She sighed, feeling her disappointment even in his thinking of her. "Gatra, we have been treated very kindly. I honestly hoped that being here would help you act less like your worst. I do not understand why you must be so hateful to them."

His stare thinned. "I have been exactly what and who I am. Should I remain here, do you think I would get on my knees for anyone, as remains Desal's preference? It is tradition to ask of the regency--and that I have done for all of us. Whether or not they are kind, they cannot be trusted always in action, after all."

In a manner that made Susan take a step back for all her memories of the woman, Be'i of Azlre turned, stopping dead in the center of the way. A slight breeze shifted her cloak, but she did not blink. Catching the light of the late sun beneath her hood, her eyes sparked like fire as they pointed straight at the unsuspecting man.

"What have you said?" she asked slowly.

"I have only reminded our regents of that sincerity Sashana'i professed in atoning for the crimes committed against my family and others," Gatra told her. "It was they who have--"

Be'i held up her hand to anything further. Knowing Sashana'i, she likely offered the robes from her own shoulders. "You bear no right here, Gatra," she stated, "none at all to speak ill of my family and drive them to service not earned by you. I think Tridl's wine--all the four mivrrret he took of it last evening by our reports--has seeped into your better senses and *rotted* there."

The woman's insult truly surprised him. "The benefits of my homecoming are only what the regent Sashana'i gave me from her own free will and wish for--"

"Given in such kindness that you, like others of a spoiled, petty age have abused," Be'i responded, meeting his narrowing eyes with an even hotter glare. "Ka, you have learned well of *your* elders, I would think."

"And I should believe, Be'i, you have not. I would think you should bear more compassion as well, being Allanois."

"Do not dare employ such an attitude with us," she warned. "I pity the past and regret it--yet only that. *You* in this life alone are a different matter and bear rights only to your own conduct. A great price has been paid by Desal for its sins: As we have said to Unar, you shall not continue our contrition for your own ignorance of the sacrifice which Sashana'i of Cezia has already borne for her people--of her body and

her spirit. You bear *no* right to have it paid personally to *you*. No other outcast family returning to us has *dared* to take such liberties--likely for their sense is greater than their arrogance."

"Do you speak for yourself, or for the regent who has already accepted her fault?"

"My siblings are kind and shall serve you," she replied. "Yet your part of it, gye, is not accepted, for your own capitalization on their good faith--a trait of Unar I shall *not* accept."

Susan sighed, holding her hands out to them all. She truly did not want to hear the very fight she'd had with Gatra too many times, knowing its effect. At the same time, she didn't want him to disappear into Dviglar again. "This has been a pretty good day. Can we keep it like that? Right now--"

"Now must not be coddled," Toma interrupted firmly, giving his lady's fingers a squeeze to stop her own retort. Looking to Gatra, he said, "The feelings you bear, though this may not be believed, are not unfamiliar. To walk among people who should be your own while you do not feel as such indeed is uncomfortable. The pain of an outcast is most keenly understood. Admittedly, my lot was my doing--my foolishness and selfishness served.

"Yet now you must understand the responsibility one bears to let one's bitterness aside in the face of kindness, to learn from past mistakes and not repeat them. *You* have repeated the mistakes of those who cursed your family--and reinforce your exile with your greed for compensation. That, my bondmate and I shall not allow in our good conscience.

"Another matter," Toma continued, his searing stare pinned on the other man, "Should you ever threaten *my* house again with that brand of poison, you *shall* be called into a public forum by this Allanois--with or without Sashana'i and Aratra's support. Are you prepared to defend your own family of three generations ignorant of the community of Desal against the reformed Allanois, who have already welcomed you in spite of your perpetuation of the crimes they have rectified? I should hope you are, for I shall take to that council as I do every other debate of wits I have welcomed already--and won."

That time, Kurt was the one to be surprised. Beside him, Yasis held herself another step back. His head held high, his dark eyes unwavering, Toma was confronting Gatra almost like an Antral would. Even Gatra was stunned enough at the force of the man's words to shrink at it. But Toma was not done.

"It is my opinion that should you bear little preference for Desal despite the generosity of my people, then you may be returned to what soils sprung your form. Your transportation *shall* be procured before this sun is set. We are all one in this life, Gatra, yet *you* make your place in it. This is your choice: Miserable, pitiful complacency which you yourself have cursed, or to accept your welcome among a people who have healed and shall embrace you as part of Desal's spirits' blessing. Should you require a detailed instruction in the latter, I shall be happy to provide it.

"Your decision can be considered as we travel home, where you shall undergo the 'base' tradition of procuring food with Kurt and I as well. I would see you accustom yourself to the ways you seem to be all but completely ignorant of in your poorer existence."

With that, Toma turned and, taking his bondmate's arm, started them away.

The walk back was silent, though the regents' siblings seemed as casual about it as they had been that morning. He kept his hand at the small of her back most of the way, they bowed to their people as they passed through town and hugged their son at the foot of the clinic as if it were any day coming home from their work.

This, Gatra watched more carefully, feeling the painful silence from his friends as they embraced a happily tired Marise. She had spent the day with the elder Bala and therefore with many other children who took their lessons in the square. The good natured old man, fluent in Antral, had thoughtfully procured an alphabet abacus for her to play with and learn from. Naturally, Susan was thrilled and wanted to see it.

A part of him, like a boy wishing the company of his peers, wanted to hurry after them as they all started into the clinic for water and bread and preparations for dinner. Even Susan, glancing curiously his way, stepped inside with Marise, who practically dragged her. Certainly, he wanted to follow her and the child he had begun to think of like he would a daughter. He still felt unwelcome for their continued allowance of his indecision--more, a decision that was stuck in his tensed throat.

He almost had left when they were gone, turning back to the street with a sigh. A long, elderly hand upon his arm stopped him, however. Looking back, he saw the kindly face of the healer.

"I could not enjoy the opportunity to speak with you this past sun, Child," Bakali said, "and tell you of my remembrance of the Ella'omb family. They were of fine nature and spirit--and how you take after Tusella, the dear patriarch, with those eyes, like bared earth past the storms. Even your voice bears his echo."

Gatra's stare widened. "You recall them, lady?"

"Ka, I do. There in Desal, our well born community enjoyed great intimacy." The elder woman's wistful smile grew curious to regard the young man again. "Shall you not share my floorcloth this moon, and allow me to bear their memories? I would find great pleasure in telling you of my elder brother's friendship with a rather handsome young man called Refdra. My dear Bala, as well, had taken schooling with Myajri. We also would paint numerous stories of their parents, most fondly known in their creations of beauty and form, which I would pray each sun yet survives on our besieged homeworld, for their blessed memory alone."

Gatra hesitated, shaking his head. "You call them friends," he said, "yet none followed them. You allowed the Allanois to send them away from the community of Desal."

"The short reign of Troka past M'hida was an era of most terrible practice, Child," she sighed. "We in our willing ignorance had seen nothing but our free-spirited friends following their own paths, of their own choices. My easy ignorance was a great crime, my comfort in a time of suffering--and yet I would also have you know they had not once been cursed; rather our admiration for their strength and freedom remained long after them, liberties to which my nature was not open.

"Under those suns, Gatra of Ella'omb, this not seen as a parting from Desal's oneness, as *none* among us bore oneness in our indulgent wretchedness. It was seen only as a different path. Brutally, it was learned what it truly was only when all was taken from us. Among so many others, we have suffered for our sins. All my life but Bala and the bags I carried was lost. All else, my family and Bala's, most of my friends and all my instructors, my infant daughter, Mebani: All had been consigned to the spirits. We ourselves were fortunate to remain undetected as scholars, and thus we were permitted to remain among the living. One hand cannot count the number others who shared our fortune in Azlre. In truth, however, at times it was wished we rather had been freed to the ancestors, for the despair we bore. In time, I accepted our fate. Yet I accept far more willingly the blessing which brings your family among us again, good man."

She slid her hand, wrinkled and dry, down to his healthy one and brought it up to her temple. "Shall we not share their memories, Child? Shall we celebrate them, as is the way? Make content their blessed

spirits among the ancestors with all the goodness known of them and those who followed them? I humbly ask you to share our dinner, good man, should there be no other to whom you are already engaged."

Considering the raucous table he had shared the night before, the invitation easily tempted him. Still, he balked. "Your regents' siblings bear anger towards me. I should not be welcome."

"For what purpose?" Bakali asked. "You behaved with rudeness when we first met, yet that should be no cause to think they resent you. They show protectiveness toward their own, yet they are good spirited and forgiving when it is shown your intentions are good."

Gatra's mouth screwed into a sheepish grin. "More has been done by me than what you bear awareness of, good lady."

Bakali laughed lightly. "This was noticed. Be'i appeared quite satisfied when she brought herself in." She patted his face gently. "It shall heal, Child. It shall heal. You bear little knowledge of what healing has been borne on *their* parts in this city. My children could not be offended by your doings for long, were your ways to mend. Bring yourself to my floorcloth as my honored guest, Gatra. The rest shall unbind accordingly, should you merely permit it."

Gatra finally let his fingers curl slightly to touch the elder's temple, a small smile appearing on his lips. "My thanks, Bakali," he said, but then remembered another thing with a blink. "Our talk would perhaps be put aside for the meal, however, as an amend beforehand may be made. I believe it should be done to see your offer proceed with any peace. Toma has charged me into procuring food with him."

Bakali laughed. "Good child! Then it is already repaired!"

"It is?"

"What little knowledge you possess of my chosen son," she smiled. "No invitation would have been made had Toma not wished it personally. You would be ignored utterly had he truly disliked you."

Realizing the full meaning of that, Gatra had to laugh as well.

"It really was worth it," Susan said warmly as they walked away their meal in the then empty square. She bent nearer to Be'i to quietly add, "And thank you for welcoming Gatra like you did. I was angry with him, too, but I'm glad you and Toma could get over it more quickly than I have."

Be'i smiled. "Thankfully, Bakali knows how to coax a child. It was her doing. --But I am also glad he came." Peering ahead to the dark haired man, whose form and height were nearly equal to Toma's, her smile creased into her cheek. "I can tell it meant more to you than you admitted."

"I suppose it did," Susan confessed with a sigh. "But thank you, anyway."

"Gyi'ak," Be'i said quietly, her gaze dropping to the smooth, ancient stone they walked upon that night.

Hours before, as she stared in the mirror and threaded a bead chain through her long braid, she wondered how they should do it. Glancing at her bondmate in the reflection, she could see in his expression similar concern. It had not lessened since that morning, as they planned their day and

considered their options. They had agreed they should see how their friends reacted to Dviglar and their first true day of freedom before deciding how to give them the news. As the sun began to set and knowing how well the day had progressed, they now needed to decide how to bear the news to them.

"Perhaps after dinner, when Ba'ela is down for the evening," Toma said quietly, lowering himself behind his bondmate to help her with her ties. "We might take ourselves out after our meal."

She thought about it, nodded. "This might be best. We would be better heard with the sun behind them and full stomachs eased. With Sashana'i's arrangements, they could take themselves to their new home to think on it. Have their items been delivered yet?"

"Aratra said their belongings would be taken there before sunset." He pulled the ties against her slim frame, smoothed the ripples they created in the cloth with the flat of his hand. "I should think we would have heard otherwise by now were they not well settled."

Unconsciously, she pressed into his touch. "More furnishings should be procured for them, however, for the time..."

Their eyes caught again in the reflection, sharing their reluctance.

When they learned of her pregnancy, the first thought that Be'i and Toma really warmed to after getting over the shock was the idea that their child would be even more Desalian than they had become, both in body and mind. He would be borne of bonded parents and raised among their gentle, honest people, with more love, freedom, community and, with an end to the war, education than they could wish for. Having adopted Desal for themselves in a true love of that people, they naturally wished their son to have the same as they had gained there, but in that case, from the start.

Without any regret, they had given their beautiful infant boy the first marks of the kraja on the day of his birth and a purely Desalian name. By ancient tradition, it had been derived of family names, which Toma had chosen of Bala and B'Elanna both. In time, he would know of his parents' heritage, but he would have Desal as his base culture, his roots. They smiled at the idea that someday, Ba'ela would choose names of honored spirits on the day of his initiation into the novitiate, should he choose that path.

The immigrant parents had certainly chosen theirs. That other place, their birthpeople, would have them back if only they could cross that threshold again. They had known for some time that the choice would be there eventually. But they already knew that that they did not wish to return there, even when Sashana'i and Aratra had promised in their spare time to work on options for them. Gracious to their usual generosity, Be'i and Toma allowed their adopted siblings their ideas, as it would make them feel better to do something. More, it would mean more options for Bendera and Nicoletti if they ever were found and wished to return.

Suddenly, years later, their old comrades were there, relieved and free, somewhat Antral but very human, too. The sludge of Dajid had been willingly sloughed off, and though they likely would have some morose reappear for those horrible years, they would adjust to their freedom and health with relative ease.

Yet if it was not meant...

They corrected themselves as quickly as they erred, however. Susan and Kurt had the right to know. They must have the choice, just as Be'i and Toma did. Sashana'i was still moving on her project, too, and

they should be aware of that as well.

They took dinner freely, quieter than the night before but truly enjoying their elders' many stories of Gatra's free-spirited predecessors and the unfortunate result of their liberty. For Gatra's grateful hearing of that history, in addition to his change of mind towards them, Be'i and Toma finally warmed to him and began to ask of his plans and desires. Polite but uncomfortable to admit it, Gatra claimed no trade, though he did confess his lasting fascination with the natural sciences.

"I have heard that Dajid owns much geology of interest," Be'i commented.

"And I bore interest in it," Gatra said, leaning against the pillowed wall with his small cup of wine. "As a youth, before Unar expanded the internment, I found such pleasure in exploring the crystal caves at Ipinma. My father would have to bring himself after me each time I was lost in those caverns, lest I be discovered. Dajid did not require many Unar upon it, yet the Desalians were much watched there. Many were taken and sent away for service like any other, and so our parents had been most watchful. I did slip away, however, and found myself lost quite willingly within the formations' colors and cool mists."

"You sound like an adventurer," Toma smiled.

"Only a curious child," Gatra shrugged.

Toma would not let up. "How curious? --Tell, Gatra. We Cezians enjoy stories as well as any Desalians. Tell us and I shall bore us all with a one of my own in trade."

Gatra assented, and as he began, Be'i looked across to see Susan rather pleased to hear him speak of something more pleasant--pleasantly surprised, in fact. She had to admit that the change was gratifying for more than one reason. Gatra had a well-toned tongue and a thoughtful narrative. Better, within a few minutes of his story, he had them all laughing.

"I still at times wonder where my poor little headscarves landed," he said with a sheepish grin, "and still bear memory of watching them flap and float as far as my eye could see, taking themselves away as would a giant, clumsy bird." With a chuckle and another sip of wine, he proceeded with the remainder.

That finer mood lasted well after dinner, as did the stories between them as they slipped out of the living space to walk in the warm, moonlit square. The men and Yasis well ahead, greeting a few others who likewise had come out to ease their meal, Be'i and Susan trailing behind in their own conversation, they strolled a slow lap, like old friends, well met, comfortable in each other's company with but that day to support them.

But then, turning the corner past the silag, the bondmates caught each other's eyes and regretted all over again the necessary.

In that look, they also decided it was time. They could not put it off, else they might never say it.

When they finally took themselves back around towards the center, and glancing to see that no one else was near, Be'i and Toma met and joined hands to look at Gatra and Yasis first. "How much of our birth is known to them?" Be'i asked and offered a respectful nod to their newer friends. "Forgive us, Gatra and Yasis, for this knowledge is required."

Taken aback by the other woman's turn of subject and mood, Susan answered, "Gatra knows we were not born on Antral, but little past that. --I will explain later, Gatra."

Kurt furrowed his brow. "Yasis knows everything, as you know. Why?"

Toma drew his eyes down. Gesturing to a step on the side of the dais, he quietly said, "Have a seat."

Looking at each other, they did as asked.

Kurt sighed up to the stars, hazy for the asteroid fields that surrounded that tiny world.

His heart hadn't stopped hammering since he heard it first, and he could swear he might have walked a hundred circles around that city thinking about it. Be'i and Toma had eventually made up their minds about the situation and weren't troubled with their side of it. They'd already had the time to get used to idea--and to decide what they were doing about it: Nothing.

If anything could have convinced him of their conversion to Desal, it would have been that.

Kurt wondered why that surprised him. He'd seen Dviglar, all their work and dedication there, their ship, which they outwardly loved, their expertise obvious in every nook of that base, their pride in their achievements. Surely, they lived fooling anyone who would doubt their sincerity because of their being outsiders--just like he and Susan had.

But it was more than that. They had family there, made a family there.

They would do more for their friends, though. When the war ended, if he or Susan just said the word, they would build a ship that would break through the Barrier...where on the other side, not even a day had passed.

Not even a day, after everything they all had been through...

It was too much. Way too much.

Holding Yasis against his chest as they sat on the square's dais that night, not yet ready to go back to the flat Desal's regent had found for them, Kurt had to really think about it. Yasis said she would understand if he wanted to go--though she would rather he didn't. He closed his eyes against her copper hair, washed the day before with herbs he could still smell, and behind his eyes he knew how beautiful she was, how much he knew she loved him.

He knew how much he loved her, too, when she glanced up and he stared into her earthy green eyes. She knew what kind of fine ship waited on the other side, with all its comforts and his people, his noble cause still waiting far away. She knew he had wished he could see it all again. She had dreamed with him on more than several occasions how they might bring that wondrous way of life to Antral and the rest of Irliae someday.

It had been a happy dream, though unrealistic at the time...at *that* time. In the long, dark days at Dajid, they had indeed shared that desire, as his life and struggles in the faraway DMZ were nil. He never had enjoyed the idea of spending his life on a Starfleet ship, either, so it wasn't as if he pined after those days. On Voyager, one place was much like the other, just trying to stay alive and get home, if only for his friends' sakes. He had no family to return to, after all.

But there, having been at Antral and then freed from Dajid, they were definitely ready to help close that accursed domination, to begin the widespread recovery of an entire "universe" of sorts. The dream had become possible...and a good deal more possible and rewarding than anything his work in the Maquis could have promised, much as he'd believed in that cause, too.

The future of entire civilizations sat at his fingertips. The woman who shared her dreams with him was warm in his arms.

"I miss you already," she whispered, her voice assured as ever, yet etched with a sadness she rarely exhibited.

"You do not need to," he said as he embraced her again, feeling heavy inside even when he had no regrets. "Unless *you* plan to go somewhere else."

Her fingers clutched him as she finally released her breath.

She held her knees to her chest, sitting on the bay of the window in the flat Gatra had become ashamed to accept--and promptly gave away to the others. He would take the cubicle in the clinic until other arrangements could be found.

That was before the words Be'i and Toma had needed to bring to them, before they politely left their friends with it. Returning to Bala's house to collect a soundly sleeping Marise, Gatra also escorted his estranged lover to her new home, which had already been appointed as nicely as possible. Ignoring the increased guilt he felt for his methods of getting that space earlier, he set the little girl into her new pallet then took himself back to Susan Nicoletti.

Susan Nicoletti: Her birth name, her birth. Gatra somehow cared even more for her than, knowing her origins completely. Still, he knew he would lose her, knowing she could go back someday. Unless...

"Should no time pass there," he suggested, "perhaps you would be able to have both...to remain here then leave when you felt able...or when it would be best for Marise."

She remained silent for over a minute after he stopped. Her deep blue eyes, liquid and sober, turned out towards the night sky, which glittered with the refraction of what Be'i had called the Sha'ot Zi'ihar, the asteroid field in which Cezia was cradled. She drew a deep breath through her nose, blinked slowly. The rising moons were beginning to shroud the field's glow in their silvery aura.

"I am not a strong woman, Gatra," she finally said. "I have allowed myself to drift into things, stay where I felt most comfortable, until Aldrun..."

She paused a moment, and then continued, "He gave me more than I realized, even in death. He gave me everything, Gatra, even when it was against tradition. He helped me know and helped me see where I could and should control my life. With him, I did not see it because he took so much care of me. But after he died... He helped me gain what little strength I do have. He changed my life--as if nothing else here did. He helped me really know what life should be. In spite of all that..."

Susan turned her stare back to Gatra. "I know you would prefer I stay here. But honestly, the only thing that keeps me from flying at the Barrier right now and running back to Voyager as fast as I can is

Marise. Who would I be to take her away from the people she has known and belongs to just so we can stay on a ship that is always under attack? Just so I can have a sonic shower and real bed and the regulations I had always depended on to keep my own life straight? It would not be fair to her, most of all.

"But how I would love to go back...go home. Even then, unless some miracle occurs out there, I will never see my homeworld again before I am very old--if at all. We are too far to make any use of returning." Blinking away a well of tears, she shook her head at the milk-hazed view.

"Your home could be here," Gatra said meekly, inching closer when she looked at him again. "I am not a strong man, either--nothing like your Aldrun had been, and I would not attempt to mimic him for all the unnaturalness of that vanity. Moreover, for all my well-known selfishness, I might easily have been turned to dust through Prihar for my acts before this sun."

Kneeling by the bay before her, he looked up to her steady gaze. "Yet I do wish to make you feel happiness. Since I first saw you in your despair, I have wished to give what I might offer to you and to Marise. I felt belonging in this place and indeed have been thankful for your mere acceptance. It brings me balance--and I know it has been some good for you, as well. I am a man of many mistakes, of many lessons yet to be learned, and yet I have not been completely blind. More than ever now, I would make every effort to make Irliae a rightful home for you, Susik, for us all."

Her stare grew watery once more, seeing the supplication in him, the quality of which she had never seen. Not begging forgiveness that time, Gatra begged for *her*--was promising himself to her. He had never professed so much before.

"Are you asking me to remain here--with you?"

He gave her a single, sober nod. "I realize you could never love me as you do your passed husband. This is known without regret or jealousy. Yet, I would ask you consider me your partner--your lifemate, should I be so blessed with time. Our separateness shrinks my spirit--and I know well enough now through the wisdom of the Azlreian elders to not inspire your correction of me. Rather, should I be accepted, *mes va'i*, I would seek to better myself further with every breath in this body and always procure your happiness and Marise's. It is my spirit's joy, I believe, and would be my honor."

Susan had to think about that, but knew immediately, "I would not marry you, Gatra. On Aldrun's deathbed, I swore I would not have another husband. I meant that."

His eyes lowered. "This is understood. I have always accepted his rightful place by your spirit."

"And yet..." She touched his chin, not too intimately, but softly enough to bring his eyes surely to hers. "...I did promise him I would live and find contentment, and you have helped me with that a little." She paused, sighing. "We will try, Gatra. I will try. I cannot make you promises. Not until the war is over and I know what I want--what is best--for Marise and I."

He nodded again. "I would ask no more of you, Susik. Or is it Susan?"

Her lips turned slightly up, though the sadness remained. "Susik will do."

From the steps of her flat, Sashana'i watched the couples slowly draw themselves into the square. They were looking better rested by the day, were making friends and connections that they would need, making themselves more comfortable in their new flat. The lodging was one reserved for visitors. The former Brijan occupants had recently moved, finally able to return to their homeworld. Finding little else in the district that would serve the family's needs, Aratra managed to secure it before another contingent did. They were simple quarters--an open sitting and small cooking area with a few small satellite chambers--no more than the average Desalian household in Azlre. It was bright and clean, however, and enough for them at present.

Soon, there would be much more available to them all, should they decide to remain.

To Sashana'i's surprise, those comrades, Susan and Kurt, had indeed decided so. Kurt had Yasis and a fight he wished to see to its completion. His thoughts beyond that remained in Irlloe, as well. Susan had her Antral child to think about and the memory of a husband she felt responsible for vindicating.

Complications, indeed, but thankfully Sashana'i had already been preparing for them.

"And yet," Aratra had said that morning over their tea, "should it be their decision to pass among Irlloe, such a wish cannot be denied."

"What is to deny?" Sashana'i argued. "Should it be well-fated, there would be nothing for their presently located spirits to be concerned with, ka? In relation to their minds' remembrance?"

"It would yet always be known, within their truth," Aratra returned. "Their spirits cannot be blinded nor transmuted."

"Yet fate alone would grant them this understanding," Sashana'i replied, leaning forward to press her hand upon her bondmate's. "Aratra, this would allow them what we all wish--life here, balance there. What their spirits shall speak would have been despite *any* life they might have chosen. Truth *is* alterable, even while a spirit bears no change."

He had considered that closely, staring deeply into his bondmate's bright hazel eyes. They refused to waver. Of course, he knew why.

On a typically frigid night on Uillar, after an equally typical meeting with Maghet, followed by the usual retching and pain, she had reached a point where there seemed to be no hope left within her. She had felt hope before because of her predecessors' assured memories and the promise her grandfather had extracted of her. After nearly six years on Uillar, that promise had become increasingly impossible to her. Even before, in their accepted lives on Cezia, they knew what bleakness still existed, they knew what a thing Dulla had asked of her: A miracle. Deep within, Aratra cursed the man for giving Sashana'i such awareness and conscience.

Despite it all, she prayed. Lying prone on their filthy, bloodstained blankets, she prayed aloud to the ancestors to send her hope--any hope--that Desal might be saved, lest she sink into despair. In desperation, she prayed to the spirits *directly* for that miracle and swore her lifelong dedication to Desal, no matter what the cost would be for her, physical or spiritual. That next sun, as they walked in the detail lines to the refinery, they happened to look across and see two defiant forms at the examination block just outside the barricade.

Slowing to view the scene, those people and their words just before they were bloodied and struck down, Sashana'i met her bondmate's eyes and knew...then left him to slip back into the shacks, hoping she

might dig up any leftover antibiotics. There were none. After meeting the two, she decided, ready or not, that she would return to Maghet for more medicines. She knew they were the prayers she had begged. She did not know why, but her very spirit knew those outsiders were the effect of her demand upon fate to deliver.

Thankfully, Aratra felt this, too, and agreed to her silence about the Barrier, assisted her in that deception. From there, they looked after the two, gave them their family when Dalra could not, actively taught them their language and eased them into the ways of their culture as they seemed ready for it--something to accept and grow into. In time, they did accept--everything.

Ten ralkle past that fateful prayer, Sashana'i's main purpose, aside from the well-being of her people, was the repayment for the fate she had created. As Desal's hope had grown, so had her need to balance what she had demanded of her ancestors and her siblings had suffered so for in the beginning. It was not even for them that she wished it, as the two had found contentment and growth. She most truly wished to repay the spirits themselves for their gift and fate for her meddling.

With Susan and Kurt there, another layer of debt had been laid upon Sashana'i, though she knew that their very reunion with Be'i and Toma was foretelling. They were meant to return to each other, to be as one again after having their own time of self-discovery. That earned, it would continue, and in Irlae, they would gain more life still.

In the end, if her plans bore fruit, Sashana'i might still see her desire--or at least she could offer the possibility to the spirits' council.

Fate would choose as it saw fit in the end.

It was acceptable.

Rising from the cool step of their flat, the regents moved forward to greet the couples, touch the temple of the child who came with them.

"We are all to Dviglar this young sun, I see," Sashana'i said kindly and smiled at one of the couples. "Kurt, Yasis, breathe this air well now, so that it may be sought all the more dearly. The fronts grow less stringent, yet no more pleasant to leave our home for."

Susan was looking around. "Where are Toma and Be'i?" she asked.

"Likely they remain a moment longer with Ba'ela," Aratra answered. "We might give them this time to bear their farewells in peace. Shall we lead them to their ship?"

They assented, and Sashana'i allowed herself to fall behind the others, by her bondmate's side. Heading out of the square, she peered back to the little residence above the clinic. The old, silver shutters at the top eave were open.

A small smile crossed her lips as she turned forward again.

"Where lie they?" His stare narrowed on the viewport, as though picking up each of the stones in that black and grey garden, waiting for the lizard to run out from beneath one. "Where lie you today, Unar?"

Her eyes pieced apart each tick on their sensors. "I cannot see... Wait..."

"The wait cannot be long, else--"

"Toma! Bank hard aside!"

He punched the comm even as he swung the Azallis off from the line of fire that zipped from the rocks. "Novren, Medrove, Ka'icha, bring our front to advance!"

The swarm descended but a moment later, pouncing into the asteroid cluster with phaser fire and threshing out the Unar ships lying in wait. Two did not make it out into the field. The other Unar ships flew a formation around the lead cruiser and opened their weapons upon the resistance fighters. Toma yanked the Azallis up and over the sharp green haze, diving high above the offense then pulling around to allow Bolmra their response.

The torpedo struck the Unar's rear shield bubble--and immediately after, a polaric phaser beam cut through the resulting shield recalibration. Several more bursts from the Azallis' phasers followed, picking at the defense with ridiculous patience, even while swerving out of the way of another Unar's attempt to distract them. Medrove expertly paid the Unar the same service, forcing the enemy to duck away from the Azallis' target.

With a few turns and another repositioning of the Azallis, a final line of steady fire finally pelted through the Unar craft, from bridge to engines, like a steady hailstorm. Toma craned his ship away and to the next enemy ship without looking back to see if the other craft destructed. They were too busy to mind if it did or not.

"The port ship targets us!"

"I evade it!" Toma responded and tipped the Azallis through the paths of two other Unar, spiraling them past a fourth to come about with phasers first.

"Bolmra--now!"

So went another day in the field.

Following the Onast Sector's liberation was a mighty sweep through the domains the Unar had clutched, now with a loosening grip and a finer show of reckless desperation. It was a glad duty of the lesser-developed races to pull at those fingers where they could, though Desal had found itself in those maneuvers as well.

The Azallis was one of those ships on a couple occasions, providing a lead line--its very reputation, in some cases. Successfully, it drew the Unar from their hiding places: If there was a ship aside from the braggart Antral's they sought to engage and defeat, it would be the former regent's ship which had cursed them so mightily--beginning with the Rywalok, the first Unar ship to fall in the war.

Despite their attempt for revenge, however, the Azallis, as well as Novren's Grivaban, continued to disgrace their challengers.

Far past Dajid, through a less populated plain of wastrel belts and plasma strings, it was often but a matter of taking on the patrol ships, which were often poorly accompanied. Their usual protection had been reassigned to the realms closer to Unar to engage another resistance front. At first, this region had been a disadvantage to the resistance, as very little was known about it. Assistance from the recovered

scholars and the regents eased their ignorance, however, and provided them with better-detailed maps so they could push steadily through that minefield of smaller Unar regiments.

Inside the Far Barrier region, they finally began to wedge themselves in and divide the Unar patrols. There, they came upon a more grievous discovery than anything in Onast: The resistance was shocked and dismayed to have come across not one, but three pre-warp cultures that had been invaded as any of their worlds had been, mainly for the planets' resources, and abused in much the same way as others in Irliae. Painful minutes passed in silence on the Azallis when this was reported by a stunned Gihetra.

Indeed, Be'i, Toma and Kurt barely knew what to say to that at first. Of course, they knew what they should *do*, and so they advised the Tebri'all to escort Eneprae and the other Brijan leads in to take the ground.

After cleansing those pitiful planets of Unar, a Koba faction surprisingly volunteered to remain behind and assist those peoples in their recovery. Though better advanced, the Koba knew well those peoples' plights and toiled respectfully to assist them in understanding alien races, as their first experiences had certainly been horrific.

That sweep completed and a small contingent left behind to defend those sectors, the resistance moved its front back through Onast and towards the Gozhor region--only to find that yet again, the Unar had spit up yet another front to defend the line near the head of the nebula.

At the Sureshan's call, the lead ships of Desal arrived as well. By then, it was almost an afterthought to ask of their kinder neighbors--according to the Antral.

"Fire torpedoes!" Be'i ordered even as she lined up enough power for another assault.

At a nearby console, Kurt gave a nod. "Yes! They felt that." He punched in a new set of parameters on the console Be'i had refitted for him and Yasis. The results popping quickly up, he glanced back. "Do you have a dispersion array in your disruptor resequencer? I am seeing a buckle in their secondary shield grid."

Be'i grinned as she recalled the tactic. "Ka," she said and turned a nod to Plicta, who quickly realigned their disruptor output.

"It is good to see an elder 'Maquis' earn his wine," Toma commented, nodding at the results; then he spoke to the open comm: "Sollve'a, pull yourself to the head! They target your weak shield zone again!"

"*Adjusting our course!*" Sollve'a responded over the crackling comm.

"Bringing us around again," Toma continued.

"Where is Novren?!" Kurt demanded, seeing another and even more frustrating repowering in an Unar cruiser as the resistance ships regrouped and scattered again to take the others in the field. The Grivaban had dropped off the Azallis' short-range sensors, however, opening a hole in their offense line. "Bastard! --Bolmra, disrupt their sensors with a thoron burst before they track us!"

"They know that device," Toma told him. "Inject our refuse tachyons to the mix."

"Novren takes on the rear ship. --It is the grey hawk!" Had she been blessed with such spite, P'llaja'i would have cursed mightily. "Toma, the grey hawk has brought itself yet again!"

Be'i was the one who swore at that, wondering not for the first time why they had been graced with that particular Unar presence. "We bear our own matters to attend to at present. Send the warning to the others. --Toma, we best are quicker now. --Bridge to Latsari, prepare our drive for a burst run!"

"Firing a full array!" Plicta told them all and nodded sharply as it sank into the buckled shields. "Their containment is failing!"

"All ships!" Toma shouted. "The cruiser is to burst!" For his own part, he yanked the Azallis off the disintegrating bubble and made as much distance as he could at full impulse, carefully avoiding the lines of the other Unar ships they had left to face.

From a distance, it was a spectacular display, the large cruiser exploding against the fogged curtain of space as the seven remaining ships dealt out their blows.

From the bridge of the grey hawk, High Commander Gychak stared at the tableau, feeling the unconscionable defeat. As his pilot evaded more fire, he watched the shards of another cruiser too arrogant to stay away from such a fight find its grave in a million pieces.

His hand fell into his pocket, rubbed the charm as his chest constricted.

That ship had carried an entire cargo of laridium and ferranide, supplies gravely needed on his homeworld. He had thought to finally trade that charm for those supplies.

He had been to Unar twice since the fall of the Onast sector three months before. To his dismay, his people seemed much like that ill-fated ship. His village, which he had left at fifteen years and had returned to but thrice in his twenty-four years of service, looked almost as did a camp. The ornamental brackets and fine cloths had been stripped from his grandfather's table, his father, uncles and younger brother had grown thin and were dressed in clothes at least a decade old, his mother and sisters all but barricaded in their chambers, were likewise gaunt for their poor diet. It was a completely different scene than what he had left.

They had been relatively prosperous once, before their sect, the Kahseht, broke down. Lively in their semi-rebellion against the established sects, including their own, they had been quick to think and to speak. But their trades in sarinite ore had dried when the sects cleaned out their stores for the war and left them to fend for themselves. Unfortunately, Gychak's own affiliation with the Wisnnin sect--already poor--could not support them.

His entire village spoke the same, in its poverty, its silence, and the stares at him... Gychak wondered if they were staring the uniform alone, that perhaps they blamed him.

He sought out his wife and the child he had known only once, but she would take no company for her own malaise. She sent word for him to attempt another visit when it was her time for procreation--the proper time.

Frustrated, Gychak blew a breath and returned to the capital, promising to bring his village something to ease them. Despite their coolness towards him, he did feel responsible for them. As by far their highest-ranking native, he actually was.

Even so, he wondered where he would get such means. The sect system had been reduced to a mere twelve groups, several of those the scattered remains of other sects. Frouwid was dead; many of his

fellow house leaders had been killed long before. Their economy had been taken apart piece by piece--first to support the war and most recently because of the resistance's efforts to annihilate Unar's rear supply routes, Onast, Mehyru, Kimalsto and the far Barrier region. In but a quarter year, Unar's remaining territory had been seriously threatened. They had already lost a full half.

Somehow, the Unar still fought, determined not to give in. He still fought. Only minutes after learning that Frouwid was dead and all those with him seriously struggled in yet another campaign, Gychak had boarded his ship for yet another battle, though he knew that it would eventually be futile.

Unar would perish on their present course. His people would be destroyed.

To what end? the new high commander of the remaining Wisnnin house had begun to wonder. For what had his people thought to act against those others, only to have that utter humiliation not four decades after? What strength had it given them in the end? They were weaker than they had ever been and utterly despised without allies to name. What purpose was there in that fight, especially then?

None. None anymore. His ship hit the debris of a ship once belonging to that idiot Kralaod, who had sworn to burn the drasks he killed that day. As Gychak's own ship, smaller and more maneuverable, banked to avoid the pestilence of an Antral craft holding close on his tail, Gychak knew that his own prideful retribution for their initial insult and self-centered search for the voice that had haunted him had been equally in vain.

The voice had been correct all along, he knew, seeing ahead the silvery Azallis arcing gracefully around another comrade's ship in a trademark attack pattern. Over time, he had memorized each one; Tkolot's ship would soon be debris, too.

It spoke of the uselessness of clutching to hopes that did not truly exist, or make sense. It said the reasons were but excuses, that dignity was vanity, fighting loss was but self-annihilation and that it was far better to survive humbled rather than never have the opportunity to grow again. It was better to find a finer strength through submission rather than relinquish any chance to prosper in the future.

They were words he had known all his life and had recalled all too clearly during his more cynical days and long, cold nights upon...

His fingertips rubbed over the arches of the charm.

...upon Uillar. Uillar...

"Retreat from this field!" Gychak blurted, finding his feet as quickly as his instincts had put the words upon his lips. "Take us back to Gozhor!"

They did not turn quickly enough, as the Antral ship had already taken position and fired upon his ship, sending an array of sparks throughout the dark bridge.

"Full power! Now!" Gychak bellowed.

As the Azallis banked off another sparkling target to back up Aratra's offense, Be'i scowled at another reading that popped onto her monitor. "The grey hawk has left the field--and Novren has taken himself as well! Ahab!"

"He is not needed here anymore," Toma replied and pointed with his chin to the Merraj's slice of fire through the back of the last Unar ship's hull, which disabled it completely. "We may take ourselves now."

Letting out her breath with a short nod of agreement, Be'i glanced back to P'llaja'i. "Contact Dalra and inquire on any more fronts," she said.

Her command was merely a routine. Looking out to the floating graveyard of scrap, iced with energy remnants, sizzling into blackness, she knew that cruiser was the last their foes could offer for the present. The Unar regroupings were taking longer and longer of late.

It was difficult to believe, but in but six years, they were coming so near to their goal. In the beginning, she had imagined it taking far longer, with so much more loss.

Without warning, her face began to swell with gratitude. Beside her, she heard Toma whisper thanks to the spirits. She echoed it.

"The Antral ship is in close pursuit!"

So close to that haven of Gozhor, in which he and others had hidden with some success over the years... Some among his people were still ignorant enough to avoid it. "Take us into the distal claw," he said calmly, if only for his crew. "We will evade him there."

It was obeyed without question, in the Unar way.

Perhaps that was also a part of the problem, Gychak thought as he slightly felt the sharp turn his ship was making. He knew his inertial dampers were not at maximum. Thankfully, he was accustomed to that damage.

"Our shields?" he asked.

"Are at only half efficiency," said one of his younger officers. "We will have radiation sickness in Gozhor."

Gychak took a deep breath. "We have proper medication here. We will continue."

"Yes, Commander."

"The Antral ship is powering his torpedoes!"

"How far are we from the first strea--"

A direct hit to the failing shields knocked Gychak from his seat and onto the grated floor. When he hit, he felt a few distinctive pops in his torso and grunted against the pain. Sucking his breath as he pulled himself up, he tasted his blood.

"Return fire!"

"Disruptor power was struck, Commander."

"Open our remaining torpedo array and fire, then!" But as he regained his seat, and as he heard the torpedo bay plunge out their remaining weapons, he knew...

Novren Pridalar easily evaded the clumsy shots fired from the tail of the hawk like errant dung, and he shook his head with a long sigh through his nostrils. Their single power burst had taken out the Unar's primary systems. One torpedo had dismantled their disruptors. Now the hawk's torpedoes were gone.

Novren frowned then shrugged to himself. *As the Desalians would say, not every road must end where it leads.* He turned a nod to his man at tactical. "Take out their engines."

"The Antral ship targets our drive systems!" the young Unar officer announced.

"Evade their fire!" Gychak ordered. "How far are we from the stream?"

"Four minutes."

"It is not enough," the commander replied. Silent afterwards, he ordered nothing more. Another blast slowed them more and his eyes drew out over the edge of the Gozhor stream, to the stars beyond it.

It was useless. Their fight was but a request for destruction.

Yet again, a phaser blast buckled the hull and he threw up his hand to protect his eyes from the shards of fire that erupted from a nearby panel. A hard rumble started beneath his feet and he suddenly heard the shouts of his engineer. Systems were steadily failing, from their engines to their sensors. Shields were gone. Another direct shot and they would lose life support and containment.

Their attempt at dignity was nothing more than desperate arrogance.

The finger of Gozhor loomed in the screen, not nearly close enough, as were the stars draped behind it.

He stilled, even as the ship lurched, even as he heard the business over the noisy comm, the reports of deaths, the massive damage that was in fact only the result of good timing. Despite it all, in the steam and fire, Gychak stood, staring, feeling his belly swell with his injury, dizzy for the burns and letting blood. It was over.

It was now time to begin listening.

He had nothing left to tell himself.

"They have boarded!" came the shrill sound of his officer, but the commander only raised his fingers.

"I will secure our freedom, as my duty entails," he said, strained but solemn. "Obey me and do nothing to increase my payment."

With their shocked compliance, or perhaps only shock, Gychak waited, waited and watched the dots of stars twinkling through the veils of plasma. A familiar creak behind him made him take a difficult breath, close his eyes to the view. He had already prepared what he would say--and whom he would request to see. The Antral having protected and sought, it seemed, to vindicate the Azallis, it was likely that Gychak's request, even as a prisoner, might be given consideration.

To that request alone, his captor would have to listen.

When Gychak turned, his first sight was of a fair-haired Antral with a hard, narrow glare striding down

from the corridor and across the bridge. He looked insulted--and very likely he was. Gychak had not been able to fight him very well, he knew. The Antral captain would not be pleased after five years of hunting to have such an easy capture.

Listen. Patience.

As the heavy fist of the captain came at him, Gychak simply met his eyes and let it come.

It was the most difficult thing he had ever done, but he did take the punch.

It was not too great a surprise by then to see their former chief and the pilot in their formal Desalian clothes, though Susan still blinked at them. On that "winter" day in Azlre, singing along to what seemed to be an amusing song. It echoed all around the square just then, Be'i held their son at the step of the clinic as Toma wrapped one of the boy's boots. Both waved when they spotted their friends.

When his father was done, Ba'ela immediately darted from Be'i's arms to grab Marise's hand and bow to the mother. "I ask humbly, may we play now, good Susik?"

Seeing Marise bite the bottom lip of her smile with expectation, Susan had to laugh. The girl was far too accustomed to her mother's constant attention. "Have fun," she granted, and then called in afterthought, "But do not leave the square!"

"We will stay near, mother!" Marise called back in the midst of a giggle as they neared Iseli, who already stood with the children they often played with. Most of them were Desalian, but there were also a few Antral children and a couple of Brijan boys. They all greeted Marise and Ba'ela warmly, as little friends should, then scampered off to the games.

Susan sighed. "So strange to see her being normal," she said.

"Children are resilient," Kurt agreed.

"Unlike their parents sometimes."

He rolled his eyes. "Loosen up, Susan," he told her. "I don't think we've done all that badly, considering."

She shrugged, nodded. In the past few months, they had adjusted somewhat to their choices and their new and--as promised--busy routines.

While Kurt and Yasis were on the Azallis, Susan had ample time outside her work to refresh her contacts at Antral. She found Mother Kebis in her usual good health, clamoring for her to bring Marise as soon as possible. Susan promised, but insisted that subspace would have to do until she was assured of their safety. Meanwhile, Susan had also made a comfortable, stable home for Marise, keeping rooms for her family and her husband's crew, whom she hosted when they were not working at Dviglar or in the field, and she offered a pleasant return for Gatra, as well. He had made himself useful with supply procurement for the elders, at Sacezia, and then between the other Desalian colonies when one of the former trade ships needed someone good with compounds and numbers to run requests between Desal's five free planets.

Though Susan didn't quite enjoy the potential danger, skirting so close to the Unar-infested Desalian homeworld, she understood completely the necessity for those more impoverished planets. She could tell Gatra was enriched by the experience, too. Getting to know the various peoples of Desal, their extreme suffering but equal strength of spirit, had made him truly appreciate his people for the first time--or at least he seemed to through the stories he brought back from every trip.

In their returns each week or so, Susan had also grown to know Be'i and Toma again, and also the people they had adopted. Truly a family, it seemed to her--or certainly, they had depended on each other as much as a good family would. But it was more than that, Susan knew. As she had done as second daughter and bearer of the first granddaughter in the house of Kichyrn, Be'i and Toma had made use of their rank, used their natural abilities to lead, to fight, to look after others, to bargain and deal, and they trusted the respect they were given in return. Even Kurt and Yasis had returned from the front loyal to their new captains.

But they did not talk about that often. Rather, they talked about Ba'ela and each other and their family. They spoke of everyday things when they were home, business when they were at Dviglar. Anything beyond that--and she knew it was there--they shared with that uncanny awareness that Desalian bondmates had of each other.

As the days lengthened and the heat grew in that busy city, the locals had begun to talk about the new year's approach, so much so that even Susan was curious to see it--mainly for the stories and the different foods that had been promised. It was a spiritual holiday, too, so the events would naturally coincide with the topic: Desal's development through the spirits' blessings. Marise, of course, was simply anxious for something different, as if not enough already was. But the girl's enthusiasm could not be quenched, and because it was a holiday, Susan went ahead and replicated a pretty outfit for her daughter and something nice for herself. She even pinned her thick curls back with the nest clip Adrun had given her at their wedding before joining the others in the streets.

Seeing the happily festooned square, Susan felt her grin. The colorful displays, the formally and brightly dressed Desalians, standing in groups or on their way to join others, the kiosks of storytellers and games and musicians, were already getting underway at that morning hour.

"So, this is a tsaborr," Susan said, walking beside Gatra as the friends gathered around. "I had not expected this great a festival."

"For our practiced poverty, dear lady, our past ralkle offered far less," Aratra admitted, offering a bow to an elder scholar passing by. There were many guests to paint that day. Bala and Bakali's practice of begging their fellow elders to emerge from hiding had happily begun to show outside Dviglar. "Yet with our ancestors' blessings," he continued, "it has increasingly returned to its origins and found improvement in other manners, I would think."

Sashana'i winked and looked over at Be'i. "Since your arrival, I should believe," she said and instantly turned to tell Susan and the others of the first new year's feast Be'i and Toma had attended at Azlre, with Be'i almost too ill to attend but their eventual appearance--the first time they dared to wear traditional scarves and formal dress. "It brought sighs to all who saw them. --And I might yet speak on this, Be'i. They remain my words to paint."

Be'i smiled, knowing well she would never deny Sashana'i her chatter, though she would never resist her own urge to tease her. "Ka, they are--repeatedly."

"This is a way I would be lax not to follow," Sashana'i returned, flipping one of her sister's braids before

settling back into her bondmate's arms. "As for yourself, Gatra, I should believe you have not enjoyed a true play of Bihla and Sa'alli."

Gatra's brows rose. "The play of the first bonding is performed again?"

"The first *bonding*?" Kurt asked.

"Vaa, this you cannot miss," Toma assured them his incredulous friends. "It might bring you some particular satisfaction. --Bring your mate."

That Tsaborr, as all other Desalian holidays, passed between all of Azlre's citizens. There were games, which Sashana'i happily explained as they watched Be'i and Toma play their separate rounds, and plays, which on Bihla and Sa'alli's part left even Kurt a little bashful. Impressed in her own right, Yasis pulled her mate off the square for a few minutes--and without much resistance, Be'i wryly observed as she and Toma watched them disappear.

Also throughout the day were visits to the silag coupled by word paintings in every corner. To those stories, the new denizens of Azlre listened closely, being largely ignorant still of the histories they had only heard about in passing, and from the source.

First came the stories of the degradation of Desal, the wave of ignorance that had cursed their people, begged of the spirits for retribution. This came in the form of abject humility under the hand of Unar, which did all but crush their spirits and destroy the scholarship, every notion of order, education and leadership. Then came the stories of the crowding of Cezia by Unar, how they had deposited over six hundred thousand former high born citizens into two cities barely equipped to house a third of them--and then insured their remaining largely within the ancient walls until only seventeen years past. By then, the citizens were too accustomed to the close space to consider separating, despite the influenza, starvation and other pestilences they had equally been forced to accept.

Another painting told of the plague year, and following that was the coming of the bazaar, when the Desalians discovered they would have to sell themselves to labor for what they required. It was six years after the conquest, and many who were too proud starved; others were killed outright. Some took their own lives rather than face either fate. From this, Desal knew the true lesson of humility: It was more than spiritual healing through sacrifice of Desal's excesses and a deep sense of societal contrition--it was survival.

Despite all their wishes to be cleansed of their ancestors' spiritual filth, to indeed earn contrition and thus inner peace through their own poverty and sacrifice, they yet wished Desal to survive and grow again someday. In their deep affliction, only few had realized that the Unar's plan was far more reaching and might indeed have destroyed them had they continued on that extreme path of complete subjection. But again, fate thankfully intervened. It brought Desal's blood regent and her bondmate away from Uillar, as well as the people who had worked with them there, straight-backed and determined to survive. It made the Allanois strong and good--and public--once more.

Desal's goal was a somber, accepted truth, an honest and humble intention, which had been turned upside down by Desal's rightful regent placing herself into her proper position, this in tandem with the public plea of Be'i and Toma Azlreat'o after the Unar bombardment of Trisjorr--itself an enlightening story to those new witnesses.

In their time at Azlre, neither Susan or Kurt, nor Yasis or Gatra, had heard exactly how Desal had changed its entire outlook, seemingly its entire nature. The simple fact was, they hadn't had a regent in

power that they could follow, nor access to the learned. They had no guidance and needed it more than they knew. They had necessarily become numb to the tragedy around them, making them need someone to point it out to them for what it was.

As the tale was still being told, they looked over to Be'i and Toma, who stood across with the regents and their elders, soon joined by Dalra and Miztri, pleasantly chatting then laughing when Sashana'i hugged her sister and suggestively patted her flat belly. This made Be'i roll her eyes and squint at her bondmate as Miztri made her own comment. That time, the elders chuckled and looked pointedly at Dalra, who turned his eyes and palms up in an invocation to the spirits. They all laughed at that.

It was through those eight that it had begun.

"Not to mention because of Torres' big mouth," Kurt added, chuckling when Yasis reached out and pushed him.

"Toma and Be'i of Azlre!"

A wave of gasps followed the familiar Antral voice, which echoed through the square and made Susan tip her head with a frown.

"Toma and Be'i of Azlre!"

"Speaking of big mouths," she clucked. Then she noticed Be'i and Toma catching up the corners of their coats to run over past the silag and towards the west gates, their faces set with concern to hear the scene developing. Looking at her friends, Susan hurried after them to investigate the ruckus.

In the gate court, there was a buzzing from the onlookers, who all looked suddenly engaged by that next little development deciding to present itself on Tsaborr. As Susan, Kurt and the others pressed their way nearer, however, many backed away in horror as they invoked the blessed ancestors. Others more commonly known at Dviglar and thus more directly involved in the war simply made a cautious distance. Meanwhile, Be'i and Toma moved to address their caller, creating a natural sort of forum in that exit street.

The scene set, Novren Pridalar advanced again, dragging by the hair a bleeding, burnt Unar officer--a commander, they knew immediately to see his ornate insignia.

As Marise hurried to view what her mother had gone to see, Susan grabbed her close and stepped back again.

Sashana'i took one more step in, reached out to clutch Aratra's hand. They went no farther.

Her hand resting on his forearm, Be'i and Toma stepped four strides into the circle and held their ground there, staring at Novren's prey.

The Unar was injured, trembling from a loss of blood and from burns which had to be incredibly painful on his typically hard, albino skin. His black hair and long eyebrows were partially burnt short; his uniform was filthy. He had been obviously beaten as well. But most disturbing of all, the Unar did not fight the submission Novren had lowered him to.

Be'i felt her gut tighten, to her surprise pitying the man who had very likely earned the capitulation he was serving. Even so, to see an Unar like that... She was glad the officer did nothing, but she knew it was unnatural.

"Novren," she breathed, "why have you brought him *here*?"

"I told you I would bring this pest to your feet," Novren said, his chin jutted out. "But it was *he* who asked to address the captains of the illustrious Azallis. So I have brought him--the grey hawk."

"To Azlre?" Toma demanded. "With our elders and children gathered? On *Tsaborr*? Novren, grateful as we are for your duty, this might have waited until sunrise."

The Unar looked up at the sound of the voice.

Their eyes met.

One set widened to find his suspicions proven. The other set narrowed with recognition.

"You," Toma whispered, his brow growing heavy as he tried to figure out what he was seeing. The face flashed before him: Uillar...and the shack they had been assigned, the guard's face when they hit the hard, red dirt, and when he, feeling the sting of the impact through his Starfleet uniform, looked up at his captors. He had thought in that moment, in that glance, that the guard felt pity for them. Several months later, the guard had averted them from a certain disciplining, thinly veiling it as an unwillingness to take the trouble with them. Sashana'i had named it a shift in stability and they had all been too willing to believe that. Then, in the frigid moons, the same Unar would deny his compassion. But Toma knew what he had seen and what the man had done. Too busy to think too much about it at the time, Toma nevertheless never forgot it.

He recalled the look as clearly as he saw the man's face then, filled with a blank sort of wonder and equal realization.

"*You* have sought *us*?" He numbly shook his head. "Why?"

High Commander Gychak said nothing, though his lips had parted with what he saw of them. Their dress, their markings, their remaining scars. He remembered the man's, might have predicted the woman's.

She radiated Gozhor no more, yet indeed had been a part of what Hychar had predicted.

The "curse" and her mate were Desalian.

This should not have surprised him.

Novren gave him an impatient shove. "Well, *drask*, you have Toma and Be'i of Azlre in your sights now. Speak, so that I may finish my work here and return you to Antral for proper sentencing."

"No," Be'i said quietly, her arms unconsciously crossing as she considered the man kneeling on the flagstone street, onto which his blood slowly leaked. "This man's life shall be retained at Dviglar."

"This Unar?" Novren spat. "Who would seek to kill you if he had the chance? Who has hunted you for over five years? He should be given his words and put down!"

Be'i did not respond to Novren's indignation, even if she knew she had wanted an end to their constant pursuer. Seeing the officer, however, a full commander--probably for lack of any other proper successors in his sect...who knew who they were...

And yet, she continued to gaze upon the battered Unar, examining his blank stare and many badges of rank. She felt a small, sharp pain in her skull at the sight, so close to her just then...

But he was not Hychar. He was another officer, who...

Be'i drew a deep breath as her bondmate's memories filed through her own...then clarified in one distinct memory, which above all other things, she could not neglect.

"This man, Novren, was a guard at Uillar and saved my life," she finally said. "He likely meant to for his purse, and yet he acted, knowing his payment would preserve me. More, he never brought harm that I recall to the prisoners of Uillar. He merely served as a guard there. He bears not an extent of poison that others bear, even while he is among Unar."

She offered her Antral friend a kinder stare at that. "You have performed your duty and followed your cause beyond any great deed we might have asked of you. You shall always own a place in our home for your dedication, Novren; our gratitude for your valor and sacrifice shall always be remembered. Yet now this is done, you have been victorious and he has been brought to Toma and me. You have taken enough Unar in this campaign. Yet it shall not be completed with this man, my friend. Please."

Novren snarled and spun away. "Desalians."

"He saved my life," Be'i repeated, firming her tone as she raised her voice. "Novren, this cannot be ignored. By my conscience, his act must be repaid."

Turning back, Novren saw the lady's assured expression. "I will be at Dviglar this night and tomorrow," he told her, blowing his breath to restrain his temper even as he nodded back to her. "I will see you then."

"My thanks, good friend," Be'i said.

Toma barely glanced as Novren departed, but looked back and found Bakali among the onlookers. "Would we be able to treat this man's wounds?" he asked her.

Bakali turned and touched Y'dri, who stood beside her. "Would you take yourself for my satchel and a su'horra tray?"

"Ye'i vsillai lizhri," said Y'dri with a quick bow and hurried off.

"What is your calling?" Be'i asked the officer, whose bloodshot grey eyes moved back and forth from her to Toma--still piecing out the differences, she correctly guessed.

"Gychak," he croaked, holding her stare even with the glare of the sun behind her. He could maintain no more dignity before those people, and somehow he knew that it would not be seen as arrogance. Rather, they would understand his need for it.

"Bear you awareness of your sentence," Toma queried, "here upon Cezia under the Allanois script?"

"I am aware of Antral punishment, from which you have mysteriously spared me."

"Desalian punishment involves your internment until the end of the war," Toma informed him, "whereupon your sentence shall be reconsidered. No harm shall be put upon you here, by Allanois decree. As for our reasons, I should think this has been made clear by Be'i: Through your acts, intentional or selfish, her life has continued. All of Desal might thank you for that, as would I. In truth,

neither the mind nor the opportunity had been in me to do so before."

"Yet I have taken many other lives," Gychak said slowly, "throughout this war you have waged against us."

"As have we," Toma returned truthfully.

"I yet do not understand how my trade with you has spared my life--despite your Desalian...nature."

"Is your passing preferred?"

"No. But I would question you, even in my disgrace."

Be'i took another step closer to the commander, half-tempted to bend and meet his eyes completely. Her more cautious senses would not allow such proximity, however, and so she remained safely outside his reach.

"Do you despise us?" she asked quietly.

Gychak furrowed what was left of his brow at the odd question. "Would it not be plain to one like yourself?"

She did not answer his question, but instead gestured around to the nearby corner of the square, just visible through those who had gathered. "Do you see that little boy in the green coat, standing upon the yellow patio?" Be'i's mouth turned up a bit for the sight of her happy child, even though the nearness of the Unar to him did unnerve her natural instincts. But she quashed that unease for her point in asking him. "He bears none of the hatred or suffering which has been washed through us and may grow into a life enriched with peace and learning." She drew her stare back to the man. "Would you truly seek that child's nothingness for an objective which in the end matters not to your people's well-being? Would you procure my child's pain for the known Unar goal? For a military philosophy?"

Gychak looked over at the boy, who, brown-haired, with a thin, high-bridged nose and birdlike eyes beneath a well-tied headdress, had noticed the scene. At the Unar stranger's attention, the child's small mouth flickered upwards for a moment before he was gently scooted away by a lithe, dark-haired woman. Gychak turned back to the small, straight-postured lady before him.

"I would not seek to destroy him, no," he told her.

"And yet you would follow your people and do as they command," she observed.

"I have followed the tenants of the law laid out by my sect commanders and have led campaigns as the commander of my house as it was left in my hands. I have also felt a certain amount of indignation for the acts of the resistance. How could I not?"

"And yet you did--*not* agree with your leaders," Toma pointed out, "when you sent us to quarters instead of taking us for disciplining that day at Uillar."

"True, I found no use in it," Gychak admitted. "I followed my commanders in greater acts, however."

"The need to do that dissolves," Be'i told him. "This war shall turn once retaking Desalia-Four is possible, and some time after that success, there shall be peace in Irrlae. Upon this certainty, you would be returned to your weakened people and its war-torn ills--alike to the ills Desal suffered at your people's

hands, our intelligence tells us, save purpose. Shall they be taken in their need the words of your former commanders, or shall you bear your own, living words?"

Gychak shook his head. "What mean you, woman? Your resistance has captured me--and I would be dead if you did not insist on my survival."

"I wish to know whether your rather determined spirit bears worth," Be'i replied, unmoved before him. "I would suspect it does, yet I wish to be certain before any of your sort are allowed back into your fold."

"Our *sort*?"

"Prisoners of Desal," she said.

Gychak's eyes narrowed. "Do you despise *us*, Be'i of Azlre?"

"Yes," she answered. "It is not personal, as you are without question the most agreeable Unar I have met. I shall make peace someday, Gychak, yet what your people have done to Desal and tried to do to all of Irliae shall not be forgiven. I have accepted this discontent as a truth for my spirit to bear and as I would never seek to harm any innocent among your own."

"Your manner has become so Desalian," he said, somewhat amused by the irony, though unable to show it though his more obvious pain. "Or perhaps I did not know precisely what I guarded. Regardless, you cannot tell me in truth that you would not seek revenge for your injuries, as you and your companion fought your submission at Uillar with a strength we had never known."

"What use would there be in exacting revenge when simply ending the problem would accomplish all I and my people wish?"

He did not answer that.

"The end of this war is greatly desired, and this with an end as equitable as our regents have designed, as Desal and others of Irliae wish, despite our different tactics about it. Only then there would be a lasting peace. This is believed. It shall be done."

Again, it was as he had suspected, that the territories were to be put back in their proper places. "And you would trust us. I highly doubt that."

Be'i's gaze turned askance for a moment, and then found his again. "Ka, my words would be doubted for good reason," she said, more softly then. "And you would likely be correct. Yet I may grow to bear some trust, were your example to be made among more of your people."

"My example?" Gychak responded, indeed surprised. "I carried you personally to the shack you inhabited at the camp on Uillar, I took your companion's gold in trade, knowing the disgrace of his act, and I hunted your Azallis for five years for but the recognition of his voice. I killed your comrades in the name of the Unar's humiliation..." He paused, remembering just what humiliation was presently residing in his village in return. His stare drew down. "I once swore revenge and death to you all, this before my people were put into the desolation it now faces at your resistance's hands. I embody all you have fought against and now resist, and you would ask my people to follow my ways?"

"Commander Gychak," Be'i said, a smile crossing her lips as she watched shame flicker across his white face, "were your purposes entirely cruel, why would you trade enough antibiotic and regeneration cells to heal twenty people when you knew it was but for one, and when your trade was but two base chunks of

gold-plated duranium and specks of gold you might have chipped off a shield coil cap?"

Gychak blinked.

"We could not have known what guarded us, either, I should think," Be'i concluded.

Silence enveloped that corner of the square as Y'dri strode in with Bakali's satchel and a medicine tray. Lowering herself to her knees upon the flagstones, she quickly prepared the tray and inserted the medicines into the injector. The elder woman took it with thanks, dropped it into her pocket then collected her scanner and a dermal regenerator from the satchel. As she adjusted the scanner, she carefully neared, looking at Toma as she did.

Toma reached out to escort her. "You need not fear, Nali," he told her gently. "This Unar shall not harm you--this I guarantee, even should I ensure it further."

With a steady breath and a lecture within herself on the oneness of creation, the elderly woman bent slightly to assess the kneeling Unar. Touching his skin, her trembling fingers drew back briefly. She had not expected his high temperature, nor the slight surprise--and not disgust or anger--in his face at her soft contact. Sixty years ago, when last she and an Unar had such proximity, it was much the opposite, and her recovery had required over two du'ave. But indeed, it was sixty years later, and this Unar now looked at her with curiosity, even need.

This resolved her, and she offered the officer a kinder glance as she brought the instrument up to his face. "Remain still, Child," she told him quietly. "Relief should be brought quickly."

All in presence watched as the Unar's natural features were gradually returned by the grey-braided elder, from his face to his soiled arms and hands, and then his leg when she noticed another wound. She explained that he would require another procedure to fully repair his abdominal wounds, but she could assuage the pain for the time.

When she quieted again, waving the regenerator slowly over his midsection, the sound of a grass flies buzzed loudly in the nearby grove and the remaining talk in the rest of the square echoed through and around the off-street. All who watched the scene were silent, as if witnessing yet another play, a drama of meaning and lesson as they had already viewed that day.

The event's realness tripled its potency.

Once Bakali had finished what she could do, the officer was invited to stand as Dalra motioned Yorlla to join him as escort. A typical Unar, Gychak stood a full head taller than Toma. Regardless, Be'i faced him when she returned to her place beside her mate.

"You would not seek my destruction?" Gychak asked again, eyeing her solid, yet inquisitive gaze.

"I would wish your people to live well," Be'i answered, "as I would wish we all should."

Gychak considered that, considered her straightness and pride, wizened with age and maternity. Not a beautiful woman by any means in his eyes, she did make up for it in a certain wisdom and sharpness. He then looked at the man by her, the one who had ultimately driven him to the disgrace he was suffering, and now acknowledging. That man, whose haunting Gychak finally understood, stood strong and watchful in agreement with his bondmate, though he had said little throughout the episode. He had not needed to.

"I will go without resistance," he said, stepping back towards those who would take him.

"We shall need to bind your arms--painlessly," Yorlla told him.

"I accept it," Gychak muttered, willing away his smirk. The people Unar had put into far harsher chains than any other were concerned about his discomfort, when only minutes before the Antral captain would have gladly beaten him to death. "Do as you will."

"And conduct him in the way of Desal," Be'i commanded quietly. "We are all as one, as are all things. Commander Gychak deserves what respect we can afford him, particularly as he has shown capacity for the same."

Dalra bowed to her, noticeably pleased. "Yes, Be'i."

Gychak turned at Yorlla's direction, settling himself with a firm swallow and deep breath, damning the acts that had brought him to that place, while at the same time wondering...thinking there might yet be some purpose to a well-brought peace.

Oddly, it seemed all too clear to him, as it had seemed so clear on Uillar, that night.

He turned back again to find Toma of Azlre. "You will require a code of inverted algorithmic encryption sequences," he blurted, "in order to break through the sensor grid at Desalia-Four." Pausing at their reaction, he committed himself more. "The automated lunar and planetary defense systems will hunt your ships without that entry clearance. The planet itself you seek is heavily maintained, more so of late than ever. You will need to take down the main power shunt first to have success there. I will provide you with the codes and the schematics of the defenses..." He had held Toma's stare throughout his confession and drew a breath again to complete it, "...in return for one thing."

Toma had been stunned by the sudden information and did not try to hide it, though he narrowed his returned gaze for the condition Gychak had added. "This would be?"

"For what remains of Unar," Gychak said, his voice growing strong again, "end the war--and end it in the way you among Desal would see fit. I would be killed for my request should the few others of my unsteady rank learn of my betrayal. All who would do that to me, however, among countless more of my people, would be killed without it. Use what I give you and bring about the justice your kind pray for. I betray only a people I would like to find improved...and do want to see again."

The Unar request sat for a moment as the Desalian gave that some thought, and then finally bowed his head.

"You have sacrificed your pride and known way for a future," Toma observed, "just as Desal was forced to--and I had as well." He watched that register across Gychak's face then nodded. "Your trade shall be honored, Commander Gychak."

Gychak allowed his grin that time, for both his queer relief and his amusement with the man before him. "You came to me on the barricade, freezing and desperate under the late moon," he said. "For the life of your woman, you gave all that remained of your pride and identity. --And you knew this."

"It no longer mattered to me as she did," Toma told him, his mouth similarly creased despite the seriousness of the commander's observation. "Those items were but things, symbols of rank we earned though an accident."

"It was more than that to me--and more to you than you admit," Gychak said, noting the minute

response in the man's solid stare, his slightly parted mouth. "I saw your face. I saw your...spirit, as your people might say. The pieces might have been meaningless, but what brought you to sacrifice those symbols was a different matter."

First showing a gesture of requesting trust, Gychak slowly removed a golden, palm-sized object from his pocket. It was warm in his hand for the moment he held it, though it cooled upon contact with the temperate Cezian air. With a deep sigh, he held it out for Toma to take. "I have kept this charm--an ancient practice of Unar--for a day when my purse was utterly bare, when I might need to pay for my safe disposal."

Toma shook his head, even if he forced himself not to look down at it. "This is no longer mine," he stated. "It was given to you in fair trade."

"This is payment, Toma of Azlre, for my life and the lives of my remaining crew." Gychak held his hand farther out. "More, it is yours."

Finally acquiescing, Toma reached out and picked the piece from the Unar's palm. Staring down as Be'i did, he saw it indeed appeared as did a charm. The metal was smooth for wear; the Starfleet emblem casing had been attached to the provisional rank bar by the two small pips, creating an odd, off-kilter square, suitably flat for one's pocket...Gychak's pocket.

He had carried what he saw as their sacrificed identities with him all that time.

As their stares pulled up again, Gychak bowed, pausing there before moving back a single step. He considered them again, in their scarves and with their markings, their well-tended clothes, the gentle intelligence in their eyes, so true to the kind they had taken. His mouth pulled once more to the side.

"You died on Uillar," he observed.

"Yet we found rebirth," Toma replied then blinked a nod to Dalra and Yorlla. "Conduct him safely to Dviglar and see to it proper food and cleansing items are procured for him and his crew. We shall follow soon."

The Unar turned again to the west gate, an arch of stone rising high above a street that had shaded the staggering steps of Desalian refugees over seventy years before. At the stones, Yorlla activated one of the hovercrafts there then reached in to extract a set of magnetic cuffs. Gychak took them without blinking and stepped into the rear of the craft without looking back.

They left moments later. Averting his eyes to Be'i's then to the charm, Toma took a long breath as he watched her touch it, almost as if it were a precious relic. Perhaps it *was* one: a relic to a time that had been willingly forsaken, yet never forgotten.

It almost did not seem real, and yet it was, eerily so.

When she drew her fingers away, he closed his fingers around the warm metal. He would take another day to try to interpret fully the quiver that lit in his gut to feel that familiar shape, warm but not frigid, smooth but not sharp

"This should be put aside somewhere," he told Be'i, "for posterity." With her nod, the release of her arm, he moved away.

"Toma..." Be'i said.

He looked back to feel her steady gaze, her concern and expectation. "We shall wrap it carefully," he assured her. She nodded, smiling briefly. His own smile warming, he held out his hand to her. "Would you remain with me?"

"I would like that," she replied, reclaiming his hand.

Still standing aside, having not spoken, but acutely observing, Sashana'i closed her eyes as her siblings passed, feeling first, and then creasing her face, the deep smile of a blessed fate realized.

When they were gone, Sashana'i turned to look at her people, still standing as witness to the event. Some of them she had known since she was a teenager at Uillar, and others she had met later. However, she felt equal closeness to them all just then, in her exalted spirit.

They all now looked at her, seeking their regent's reaction to what had just transpired. Her smile grew to know well what she thought of it. The Desalian homeworld would be liberated, and Irlae would be at last know peace. She felt as though she might lift her arms and fly straight to the spirits themselves.

And yet, she did not speak: She could not have found proper words just then and chose not to try. She never had been a good speaker, anyway. So instead, she turned into Aratra's embrace and held him tightly, her joy giving way to tears, and then to laughter when he plucked her off her feet and lifted her high above him. He laughed, too, as she leaned down to kiss him, full of their belief, their knowledge.

Their path to victory.

"Their branches defined, they had found their places together on fate's tree--bringing in turn the new season in...in their existence. And the season comes upon us regardless when...when this is...truly meant. Growing, spreading, branching, readying for the harvest of fruit, and then...winter.

"Only at the arrival of the rain is it known...how the leaves shall fall..."

"What read you, Derra?" P'llaja'i asked as they approached the system.

"Uh..., ytave rapol and steady."

Be'i gave a nod, though she did not look behind her. "You improve at the numbers," she told him in Antral. "However, you erred by a'etak rapol, *Derra*."

Yasis scowled both at Be'i and back at P'llaja'i. "*Derra*?" She cut her eyes at her mate. "How endearing."

Kurt just rolled his eyes. "It is just a nickname. --Cali's girl gave it to me at that ceremony last week, remember?"

Yasis pressed down her smile as best as possible. Haviki had insisted her new aunts and uncles come attend her first donning of lady's scarves and witness the blessing of puberty by her mother and spirit-father. "Ah, the dark beauty Haviki," she said, turning back to her controls. "I will have to watch this Desalian temptress as she continues to grow."

Be'i laughed, somehow liking Yasis more with every cluck. "Best you accustom yourself to it now," she told Kurt. "Desal bears a lovely tradition in naming and our traditions are not relinquished lightly."

"So I gathered," he returned.

"From where, I would wonder?" commented Toma as he made a slight adjustment in their course. "All of Azlre already calls you this, you should know."

Kurt chuckled. "Damned small towns."

A grin only touched the side of the co-captain's mouth as he adjusted course again and checked his backups, hearing but not addressing the ribbing, which was a brief but welcome relief from the high nerves they were running on. The Merraj and the Korchau, the Grivaban, Medrove's Pracheto and Gihetra's Tebri'all were the sides in the arrow formation behind the Azallis, readily chosen as the lead ship for the assault.

Over fifty more ships remained hidden in the surrounding asteroid fields to provide support once the front had been opened. More waited in orbit of Ivliisa, prepared to come with what supplies and support they could give. Everyone in each group knew precisely what they were supposed to do, when and how to do it--no questions, no variation.

Even so, it was just a matter of breaking through the defenses, taking over the central control grid, getting the Unar out of there. The work *after* reclaiming Desalia would be the hard part, but it was going to happen. He truly believed that, had convinced himself that they would succeed.

Toma took a cooling breath to help clear his mind, saw in the corner of his eye Be'i raising her head to stare up at the viewscreen.

They all saw the same thing--the defensive grid, highlighted thanks to Gychak's information. It could not detect them...yet.

At last, this shall be done, he breathed to himself before remembering to blink. Then he glanced to his side. "Do your magic, Chief."

Be'i pursed her lips at the endearment and began to make the necessary calculations, turning the incoming Unar encryptions upside down as she had studied to do for two tb'rass. She had to admit it: Unar math was rather clever, even fun to compute. Susan, too, had been impressed when she helped Be'i set down some easier patterns for dispersing the code rotations.

They transmitted nicely, even with the upgrades the Unar had installed in the grid. Even so... "This shall not last long," she warned her bondmate as they watched the computer show the grid momentarily turn. "Bolmra, activate the thoron field. It shall grant us another minute."

On the side, Kurt grinned at that.

Toma did not blink to see it, but ran his thin fingers up the impulse controls, his eyes on the screen before him. "Azallis to all lead ships. We have come in. Retain our pattern as long as it is possible; you fly without our leads past our break. Do not forget we would only need to wedge through the city defenses to disable the main power--"

"*Toma ka!*" Aratra laughed. "*This has been memorized, my old friend. It shall be as it is meant--hevrra zhall. Go as the spirits bear you; fate shall serve our portion from there.*"

Toma grinned, nodding. "Ka," he said and drew a breath to stare outward again. "Hevrra zhall me'albre. Be well. All of you."

Speeding the small ship to full impulse, the pilot sailed them into the next grid as the engineer quickly typed in new decryption codes, one after the other, clearing their way towards Desalia, through the system's outer planets and in towards the final four.

Farther into the large, oblong system, there was a skirt of asteroids, where another, trickier grid took some more time--though possibly the fastest calculations Be'i had ever performed. Passing by the lockouts at one a minute each as her bondmate steadied the ship in the eddies created by the unusual gravity of the field, Be'i even began to speak the codes aloud as the crew and the other ships waited.

Breathing deeply as she saw another chain of codes pass under her fingertips, she could feel her heart thrum. She typed faster with the added respiration.

"We are through," Be'i finally said, already starting on the next sequence.

Toma nodded, almost to himself. That part went just as planned and they still had about a minute--

"*Drask ship, you have violated Desalian space and will be attacked.*"

Or perhaps they didn't.

Be'i rolled her eyes and mixed the comm signal before tapping it into the other ships again. "Novren, would it please you to destroy the grids?"

He coughed a laugh at her understatement. "*Yes, it would,*" he told her. "*Only save some hulls for me.*"

Toma stared down at the reading that followed the Unar threat. His blood rose as the screen began to scroll--then scroll more... "I would think there are many for you. Call to our reinforcements--*now*."

From the surface of Desalia and from its moons as well, an entire fleet of Unar defense crafts began to power up and rise from the surface to greet the invasion. Mostly small and rather well armed--and freshly peopled, Toma noted--they were complimented by three cruiser-sized attack ships.

Even with reinforcements, it would be nearly three to one.

Whispering a small prayer to himself, meeting his Be'i's gaze, full of the same stubborn pride and courage he had always known, always adored, Toma straightened and rose his chin to face the viewscreen. Be'i did too.

It began to fill with the familiar grey shapes that they would seek to destroy for their freedom that day. In all manner and form, what they would do there--as was what they had been doing for six years--was completely contrary to everything Desalians by nature felt was proper and spiritually good. They would take lives that day with intent to gain. The entire war, in fact, had been a necessary greed. Thus had been the need for Sashana'i to offer her spirit as the ritual sacrifice, they had known.

How easily the people responded after that was yet a show of their need of faith in their regents, true, and of their seeing sense in creating their survival--yet it also revealed their selfishness, too. Desal in general had given the impression that they could make themselves unselfish and humble and find purity through that. Yet that was just as imbalanced as the selfishness itself--and as impossible to destroy. To

do either would have been the most unnatural part of it all. Of course, Sashana'i did not seem to mind allowing her people the placebo of her sacrifice for the mean time. It was worth it.

For Desal... passed through their thoughts, and in so many voices as they glanced down to see their own front of resistance ships joining in behind them. Their own memories found all that the two former officers had endured, those shared memories of their elders, their siblings' struggles, their friends, the other stories they knew--thousands and thousand of stories--even children, all the children, who would live according to all they did that day...

That day was all their pasts--and their futures. And it was theirs alone at that moment.

"Desal alre tsa monra'esch!" Toma announced and punched the Azallis to full impulse towards the first ship he could get to, already powered up and ready for them.

"Toma, mohabrre!"

"Be'i ka!"

Irlae waited upon its breath. At Antral, laskeb, Koba--even the far reaches of the former prisoner planet Dajid and the oft overrun Gavllorst--all of Irlae watched or listened for the next news, the next developments as they transmitted through their debris-littered space and to their rustic consoles.

At Cezia and especially the rain-soaked Azlre, the elders passed through what likely was likely the case on all their allies' worlds--silence in streets lit only with prayer. Solemn, most sincere prayer was made by those of every rank, belief and origin, all one spirit in their desire to see Desalia-Four freed.

Incense poured at the silag and burned at every covered nook on every street. Permeating the watery air, it bore the strong odor of the people's devotion to the final product of their pain, their waiting, their humility, sacrifices and all that they had given up in inner peace to create the same for the future. Not a corner in the city sat untouched.

Through the fields, only the sporadic patter of the waning rain season broke the air. And before them, the sprawling base was utterly still. No ships were present at Dviglar: They all were off to the battle.

Dviglar itself was silent even in its children, who knew or at least sensed the anticipation that had overtaken the populace. Even Ba'ela did not skip away from his elder-parents' hands, but went with them into the communications center, where they pulled away their wet cloaks and met their extended family's eyes: Cali and Aprra and Haviki, Susik and Gatra and Marise, Y'dri and Colldra and Iseli, among the many others who had crowded onto the main floor to watch the unfolding drama on the viewscreen.

As Bala neared the display, Bakali looked for several moments before understanding it all. She drew a long breath to calm herself when she knew what she witnessed.

It was as if Prihar itself had been belched up from her beloved homeworld to spit fire at the brave spirit-children of Bihla and Sa'alli.

When offered a place on a bench, the elder woman sat, pulling the child onto her bony lap. Putting her arms around him, she kissed his twice-lined temple. "The spirits alone guide us now, Ba'ela. Thus let us

also pray for their blessed way."

He hugged her back, resting his head on her collar as his dark eyes gazed at the buzzing sensor map. "I do now, my spirit-mother."

"Hold on!" Kurt told Yasis when the blast met the maneuver, clutching her arm and pulling her back to the console. "Attitude stabilizers work only to a degree."

"I noticed!" Yasis gasped, grabbing the outcrop of a steaming bulkhead as she felt her stomach toss.

The Azallis pulled its spiral assault as both captains ignored its cries to stop. "Fire!" Toma yelled as he visualized all the blasts around him, disrupted by the field he had created with the spin and their shields, already failing from their battle with the last--former--ship.

Plicta fired into their target, burying a torpedo into the side of the cruiser before Toma yanked the Azallis straight and away from what he prayed would explode.

They had but four torpedoes left.

"Four Koba vessels have taken on the cruiser," Bolmra told them.

"Zha!" Toma said shortly, pulling the Azallis around to engage the two ships that had been tailing them.

Be'i's eyes flew around her readings at the whiz of phaser fire off their port. "Latsari, recharge our disruptors!"

"*It is done, Be'i.*"

"Fire upon your will, Plicta!" Be'i said immediately, glaring at her panel as another shot hit the side of their beloved ship, rattling them from the inside out and taking out what sounded like the entire coolant assembly. Shields had weakened further...

The Azallis' returning fire nailed the enemy's starboard thrusters, sending it hurtling in an inverse spin. The other Unar ship was left dormant. Sending a message for one of the smaller resistance ships to come and finish it for them, she noticed that Toma was already off for another front of crafts. Filling her lungs, a brutal little grin found her, easily preparing her for them.

"Our shields shall not face another full volley should you not be very clever," P'llaja'i warned.

"Ka," he replied, not stopping.

"*Azallis!*" It was Miztri. "*We bear the capability to maintain the system,*" she said. "*Take yourselves to the homeworld while you remain able.*"

"One more, Miztri," Toma said, his eyes nailing onto the weak side of the fourth--last--cruiser. With a little maneuvering, they could-- "This one lies in my sight."

"*Pull back, Azallis!*" said another--Novren. "*Your defenses are too weak! We have more to take the front!*"

"Only this one!"

"*Obey your elders, Child!*" Miztri commanded.

Toma suddenly snorted at her employment of manners at a time like that. But she *was* correct. They all were. He looked to his side. "Be'i?"

Be'i shot a stare, then a shrug, his way. "Our strength shall be required on the surface," she admitted tersely.

He nodded, breaking off from the cruiser as a few Antral ships joined the Tebri'all's offensive. Grudgingly, he hit the inside comm. "We take the Azallis to the surface now," he told his crew. "Arm yourselves to defend the ship while our senior teams are on mission. Engineering teams, while we are there, ready the Azallis for departure while you can in the event we would need to leave quickly. Prepare for landing."

"*Merraj to Azallis,*" Miztri said. "*The Korchau and the Rrilast shall follow your descent. Live by the spirits, my dear friends.*"

Toma instinctively touched his temple. "And you, Miztri. May we all live by them."

The last he saw of the field was the Merraj sharply turning off to engage the ship he had broken off from. Beyond, it looked like a field of fireflies, an old memory of his childhood that he remembered as pleasant, a time when he laughed often and had little care of anything but catching the little bug in his hands.

That view turned quickly to the teal and black of the moonlit Desalia-Four, into which, after Latsari somehow managed to activate their thoron field just one more time, Toma flew straight and fast. He heard somewhere a report of the hull temperature, but he continued, not caring much just then about the shudder that echoed through the ship as he quickly recalled the landing places Gychak had suggested in his information.

"Prepare three torpedoes and give manual control to me," Be'i said, forcing her calm as they tore through the hard atmosphere with half-powered shields, lining up the shot while unconsciously holding the side of her console with her free hand. As soon as she saw open air, the dark before the sunrise at Desal far below, she fired.

A trail of orange shot through the sky: They watched it plummet toward the surface, waiting...

"The auxiliary base is destroyed!" Plicta reported, his eyes on the readings and not the forward screen as Toma immediately swooped the ship around a series of ground defenses, which were but bits of glowing green on their sensor screens. Be'i fired again, striking the main line of those defenses with moderate effect. It would at least stop the surface shots for as long as it took them to repair their shields. The following ships could take care of the rest.

"Targeting the communications relay," she then said, watching her readings turn as Toma brought them in. Again, she lined up the shot. "Toma, bring us around the anterior of the installation."

He did, close enough that he could see in their lead lights a full troop of Unar running from it, like ants

out of a hill. As he sailed in on their final approach, he knew they would never run fast enough.

She knew the same, but did not hesitate to poke the panel and fire the torpedo into the access port of the Unar relay.

"Direct hit!" Kurt announced. "The main comm relay is destroyed. We are set."

"Then we shall land at East Desal now instead of later," Toma said and did just that, swooping a long arc over the massive sea and around to the south then around again to the smoking remains of the landing base they had fired upon first. At the far end of that, very close to the city gate, sat a satellite landing flat in the middle of a grassy field. He chose it without question. Adrenaline or no, he knew neither he nor Be'i needed to run any farther than necessary.

"P'llaja'i, contact the lead ships. Update them on our progress and that the ground forces can be deployed upon their landing. They shall be needed when we are discovered. Be'i and I shall take ourselves to the main generator. It lies near the gate before us. Ask Miztri and Givadra to destroy the remaining ground defenses and pull a sweep over the continent. When we have completed our mission, we shall regroup at this slate."

As soon as the Azallis touched the cement, Be'i jumped up from her seat and tied her scarves tightly around her hair. "Plicta, Kurt, Yasis--work on the security clearances here while we travel to the generator."

Kurt gave them both a long look. "Good luck, you two."

She nodded as Toma did, offered a brave smile to tell them the rest. "Should you lose our lifesigns or we do not contact you within one rachal, continue without us. --This is meant, for Desal. Ka?"

They did not wait for approvals before spiriting themselves to the exit of the bridge and to the side hatch. They did not have time to argue even if there was any dissension.

Even so, Toma took the moment while the hatch opened to draw Be'i's marked hand to his temple and lower his mouth to hers. She responded eagerly--impatiently, yet wishing to remain. Still, they parted without regret as the steps ground down to the surface, stared into each other's eyes for but one more moment.

"Let's go, Hotshot," she said, a confident little grin cropping onto her lips, which increased to see his responding smile.

With that, they holstered what weapons they had and hopped down the thick pad steps then took off in a sprint, across the pre-dawn field and into the smoke towards the east gates of Desal.

Their first act upon approaching the ancient, sacred city was murder.

Seeing the Unar guards approaching through the east gates, Be'i ducked as she raised her disruptor pistol, fired directly and quickly, killing them before they could react. What she missed, Toma found then skipped ahead and around the pillar barricade to take out the rest in a few quick, concerted shots. With their comm lines down, the Unar would need more time to catch up with them, he knew. He also knew that they *would* catch up. Waving her forward, Be'i met him.

There, they stopped.

Though they could not afford the time, they could not help but stay a few seconds and take in the utter desolation and incredible stench. In a wide beam of hard, artificial light, they stared at the dung troths within the cement, piles of debris, blackened buildings with sections crumbled away and, worse than the rest, the huddled rags covering barely breathing skeletons sitting at the gutters.

If they did glance up, their hollow eyes gazed but blankly to the relatively clean, decently dressed fighters who had just murdered the gate guards. Young and old alike sat in wait of water not yet dispensed, it seemed, their battered jugs in bony hands. The line stretched down the block, all of them, barely living at all, sitting within the trash and manure. Silent.

Be'i was suddenly quite glad Bala and Bakali could not see it. If they did as Be'i and Toma did just then, they would have cried unto their eternities for their molested memory. As it was, the two witnessing it knew they would.

An explosion in the distance broke them from their shock, and with another look to each other and a quick steeling of their stomachs, they decided to care for the present.

On second thought, however, Be'i turned back and stared at the pitiful creatures behind her. "In the names of Sashana'i and Aratra of Allanois, rightful regents of Desal," she said, trying to will both the kindness and command into her smoke-clogged throat, "take yourselves outside the gates and find water of your own will, as was the way of your ancestors. Follow them now."

Whether or not they listened, she did not stay to find out, hurrying after Toma into the next boulevard, her weapon drawn in the dark mist of pre-dawn. In a way, she didn't want to know. They would get their water, regardless...fate willing.

"Stop! Drask!" came an Unar yell, echoing through the streets and hiding his location. Be'i and Toma barreled back into their sprint, narrowly escaping a phaser shot, which cracked into a wall and reduced a section to sand.

A second shot hit the flesh of her arm, causing her to curse aloud and smack the burn with the side of her pistol.

"Be'i, ab!" Toma hissed and yanked her into an alleyway so he could get a shot at the officer, who by the echoes sounded like he was not the only one they would face if the remainder of the forces did not come soon.

Pressing herself against the wall to breathe away her pain, she glanced--and then ripped her eyes away from the death in that nook.

It was a Unar drask heap...the same sort that Hychar wished to commit her to ten years ago. That was the end that he had plotted...

Growling with fresh indignation, Be'i was the first one to leave when she heard the grunt of the officer, but grabbed Tom's hand so not to lose him with her better speed. Selfish as it was, they both knew if one of them went down, so would the other. They had to remain together.

"Toma!" she gasped as the officer popped out from the shadows. Toma fainted, but the Unar caught the edge of his robe and pulled him up to grab his neck.

With pure adrenaline and panic as his guide, Toma spun in the grip. Feeling the burn of the glove on

his skin, he jabbed his pistol into the Unar's belly and fired. As he fell, Toma turned--"Be'i--rigid!"--and fired out into the street at another Unar aiming for her.

Whipping her head around to see the Unar partially disintegrate, she took off with Toma again, faster still when they heard more Unar coming.

She forced the thoughts of Cezia into her mind as the echoes neared, as the pain spread up into her shoulder and the Unar called out their nothingness, as those same drasks dashed through the curved city streets they had memorized with their elders' assistance.

Through the mist and mantel smoke, she imagined the silver fields and the soft knolls and chasing her lover there--catching him when he stopped and caught her. As they cut a corner and found the central command in their sights, she could see Sashana'i dancing around a balking joth then skipping back to nag at her hair. She could see baby Ba'ela's stumbling steps as Toma held his hand, and he grabbed at those soft reeds thinking they would support him...

But then she stopped that daydreaming.

She would have to speak with her bondmate about that tendency he'd given her.

But then she stopped that distraction, too.

Be'i pulled the charge from her coat pocket as they hit the hard wall. It was obviously of Unar construction for its smooth, stone sterility, which made what she was doing even easier. As Toma ripped the casing off the access panel, she knew she had no remorse whatsoever in ridding Desal of Unar architecture. With two clicks set with shaking fingers, the charge was activated. Checking it once more, Be'i stuck it to the main entrance panel and tapped the timer.

It beeped and they ran away to throw themselves into another alley nook, not caring what was there that time. Once within, Toma pulled a charge of his own out and, activating that, pitched it out into the street. He threw his arm around her and covered the back of his head with his other hand as they hit the ground, gasping for breath from the dirty stone pavement and hacking what they sucked up from it.

Two seconds later, a duo of explosions rocked the foundations of the granite buildings surrounding them. The whoosh of the resulting firewalls left Unar screams in their wakes--then only the sound of landing debris and dust. Then, there was only the sound of a slight breeze and the creak of a weakened foundation.

As the soot and sand layered over them, Be'i and Toma brought their heads up, and then their bodies, both sorely. With one more cough of breath, and then taking another, they turned towards the gaping hole in the unnatural facade the Unar had put in that once beautiful city, not yet lit with the impending day. Stumbling a bit at first, they moved themselves back towards it. As they came into the street, checking for any company around them, they paused to stare at their next step.

For the second time in their lives, they would take themselves into an Unar installation searching out power nodes to disrupt and manipulate. That second time, however, they knew exactly what they would find, how to find it--and what to do with it. That time, they were ready to.

That time, they had the right to.

With a mutual nod, they started over the crumbled rock and metal and into the blackened, grated

interior. Toma activated a shoulder light and hooked it to his coat.

"Toma to Azallis. We are in."

"The mice are nesting within near walls as we speak," Kurt replied quickly, obviously busy with whatever he had gotten to. "Aratra said to say that, by the way."

Toma chuckled despite himself. "It is understood. We shall contact you again when we have finished."

"We will be waiting."

It was to all of this and more Sashana'i listened intently from the outdoor console used for landing clearances--and hastily reprogrammed by Latsari to both jam Unar ship signals and assist the resistance's. Latsari and Bolmra had taken over the latter duty while the regent was honored to monitor the ground action.

From Be'i and Toma's last report to the other ground units as they disembarked and rushed into the filth-ridden, deathly capital city of Desal, Sashana'i watched and listened to every word that came in over the comm. The resistance ground forces would take every street by foot. After the Unar's main power grid was dismantled, any remaining Unar communications, plus their sensors and defenses throughout the system, would be destroyed.

From there, it would be a strict flushing out of Unar as the Antral, Brijan and others continued to decimate the fleet above them. Miztri, Sollve'a and Gihetra at that moment were destroying what was left of the surface bases. Soon after they reported another four auxiliaries down, Novren was said to be entering the atmosphere soon to assist in the ground offense. The fight above was going well.

It was meant, her spirit fluttered and sang. All the voices within her would at last come to peace to know of it. Their anguish and assertions would diminish...

"Desalia shall soon be freed of Unar presently," one of the city invader's comms crackled in a conversation with a bewildered denizen. "Yet I would beg you and all your own to seek shelter, good lady. We should not lose any others this sun."

"The blessing of the spirits," the woman rasped, "only in tale had we known of our own to bear the strength of me'idvei. It was not known as truth."

"It is truth, good lady. The spirits of our finest ancestors have blessed us all in our sacrifice--as have the Allanois in their reformation."

"My... My most humble prayers--for them and for you..." Her voice began to quiver with relief and release. "...My humblest gratitude, good man. My humblest..."

Hearing the resistance fighter ease the crying lady to a building afterward made tears crop within Sashana'i's eyes despite her vindicated smile. Then more than ever, she knew that even without Be'i and Toma, she would have brought that day to reality, someday, somehow, despite the hopelessness and frustration she had suffered at Uillar. It was her given destiny, all that her life's worth, and thus she would have fought a lifetime to make what she and others bore witness to that morning. But she was that much more thankful that she had been able to bear her siblings and make Desal's fate blossom with greater speed and effect, more thankful and proud than she might have described in any words or manners.

The reports of the people alone had pained her nerves, even while it made her wish desperately that she could be among them, fighting Unar by their sides. As regents, however, she and Aratra had been requested by all involved--Dalra and Lledri with particular anxiety--to remain away from the greater danger within the walls until the city was secured. Taking part in the initial attack had been more than enough risk. Humbly yet hesitantly, they had agreed, but on the condition they had a hand on all the ground movements the moment they arrived.

They could not be completely inactive on that momentous day, after all.

Meanwhile Unar were falling within the city, pushed back and down by two lines of Brijan and Antral and another full ship of Desalians. Incoming reports noted deaths on both sides, and yet they all were steadily making their way through, street by death-littered street.

The sky behind them finally began to redden with the dawn.

"Damn straight!" Kurt's voice echoed over the signal and a moment later, he was running down the Azallis' steps to the panel where Sashana'i was working, Yasis right behind. Snatching the little regent into his strong arms, he spun her around in a full circle, hugging her.

"The main power generator is down!" he announced, loud enough for everyone to hear as he set Sashana'i back down. "Be'i and Toma are heading back! The Unar are out of here!"

Sashana'i laughed aloud and hugged Kurt back, releasing him only to find herself in her bondmate's arms. Aratra held her firmly there, shaking with his joy.

"Ka, it was meant, my spirit," he rasped, half laughing, half overcome. "The spirits have blessed our fate, after all."

Sashana'i couldn't help it: She cried.

Her station already re-manned, she allowed the relief of the past five generations to flood her. From her great-great grandmother Da'ili's inefficacy and sorrow and her bondmate M'hida's horror of realization as he followed her in their passing, her great grandmother Yusi's final prayer and Troka's honorless execution, to her grandfather's plea upon his and her grandmother's passings--even her own parents' proud dreams and also her own... All the longing, determination and desire that had been given to her--the fervent, tormented Allanois voice that had haunted her since her inheritance of their legacies, twelve generations in all--washed through her core anew and now lit her smile.

Her work was only beginning, she knew. Yet now, with her truly blessed siblings, the products of her prayers and subjects within all her plans...It was all possible.

Everything was possible.

She looked out from the landing area to the landscape, wiped away, beaten and neglected with seventy-two revolutions of poisoned occupation. The sun was just beginning to rise over the far horizon, its light glowing crimson, and then gold and streaks of white upon the smoke-painted sky...

The re-dawning of her people.

It would make a fine story someday.

She smiled, blinking away the water as her bondmate took her around the waist to watch with her.

With the light came the breeze, which dried the remaining perspiration in their looser garments, setting their scarves free in the acrid air--air that someday would be clean again, blowing over fields of crop and feeding animals and repaired waterways to nearby villages...

All possible. All of a near future.

In the full light of that warm morning, Aratra turned at a sound to see what they had been waiting for. He called out to them, "Toma! Be'i!"

Sashana'i whirled around and laughed. She could see their smiles all the way from there, their tired waves as they approached, supporting each other, filthy with soot, but determined to cross and rejoin their own.

"We have won this sun, my beloved siblings!" Sashana'i cried out joyfully.

"Ka, we have, Sashana'i!" Be'i called back. "It is a sun for us all to be blessed by!"

Kissing his bondmate once more, Aratra hopped off the platform to greet them both. Sashana'i followed, wrapping the drift of her robe over an arm as she descended the steps. She saw Be'i share a comment with Toma, who chuckled good naturedly, settling their hurrying but steady pace into a slow, sure stride through the weedy turf.

Behind her siblings and to the side, Sashana'i blinked at a glint off the city gates and almost held up her hand up to shield the reflection from the sun.

The gates had been hewed of rough stone, not polished marble, she suddenly recalled. She looked--

"Toma! Be'i!" she screamed.

They turned and saw the Unar whip up his pistol--

"No!"

"No!" Anai gasped, suddenly weeping, shaking her head as she broke away from her narrative.

Tears fell onto her lap when her head dropped; her shoulders trembled. Within her, she screamed at herself almost as violently as she had screamed that day, in terror at her own realization....

She could not do it. She could not do it to them. Not like that.

"I cannot... I cannot...continue." Choking, she clutched her bondmate's hand. "Forgive me. No more of that sun can be recalled. We are to bless the passed, yet I could not that sun. It was too...too..."

She drew her tear-fogged eyes out to her stunned audience, to young Harry Kim, so troubled; Chakotay, solemn but surprised; Kathryn, as ever so controlled, though the tears, glimmering in the low torchlight, sat in the wells of her eyes. They all grew worse to realize the word painting was indeed stopping at that. Anai dragged a shaking breath.

It would have to. She simply could not subject them to the remainder of that day.

"They passed..." she whispered, "...it was... My beloved siblings were lost beneath that dawning sun, and then we had to continue, to vindicate their sacrifice and fulfill their dreams, the children, Desal's future, all our years. Yet my life, even as regent in this prosperity all Desal created from the dung of Unar...it was never complete, knowing they... They had sacrificed all in the finest sense of honor, and...I and Ara...gave ourselves to their memories, for having promised them...to live on and to paint those words to you.... I cannot. Ara, please, my Ara..."

"It is understood, my spirit," he whispered, caressing her hand with his thumb. He looked up. "Babaki, take us."

"Forgive me," Anai said again, glancing to Kes. "This ends this night. It has ended. I have done as was wished upon the origin of my wait. I must...rest."

"You shall, my dear nali," Babaki whispered as she collected her mother, who grasped at her arm. Her own cheeks were wet for the sudden stop, her mother's collapse from the painting. To her memory and no matter what the story, that had never happened. Of course, her mother had never painted *that* story. Even knowing all her life only of the event in itself, merely the plain facts of all the things her mother had detailed those past nights, Babaki easily knew why that part gave her mother difficulty.

Anai looked at her spirit-daughter, who had also come up to the dais. "Havetsi, tell them of Susik and Derra, of their continuance. It shall be wished. It is time now that rest is allowed Ara and me."

"Nali ka," Havetsi said, touching her elder's trembling arm as their gazes locked. The younger woman offered a small but understanding smile. "Had any among us earned their respite, it would be you and Tola. I shall take your place, as is the way."

"It is borne well by you and Cera," Anai managed, sure in her words as she gazed at the young woman. "It was meant... All of it was meant. Your place in it, too, my blessed kini'isi."

They were taken away by Babaki and Osna, slowly as Anai continued to cry, unable in her shame to meet the eyes of any of those good people who had come to hear her words, ultimately left incomplete--as so much else had been, to her life's sorrow.

It seemed that that too was intended. Not all matters of the living world were to be completed or balanced, else the desire for balance in itself would not be heard of. Not all matters required closure for release of attachment.

In a way, she was glad her telling ended as it did. She did not wish them to leave with empty hands and pained spirits. She had done as much as she had promised--she had told the story and given the bio-regeneration technology to someone who could do something with it. She owed and wished nothing more.

Or did she?

Despite her doubts, she passed them, allowing her tears, finally permitting her frail body to all but crumble in her youngest daughter's arms, still feeling Ara's hand in hers, squeezing supportively, knowingly, lovingly.

The remainder is for fate to balance, now, she told herself, feeling a sudden relief in her tiredness, willfully ignoring her indecision. It is no longer for us to hold.

She no longer had to be strong, and Ara no longer had to clutch at life for their purpose. Their work was done. They were free of their duty. Finally.

It should have felt better than it did. It should have felt completed. But despite her guilt, pain and that final memory still reverberating through her being, there was at least relief that it was done. She would take it. They both would.

Having stood from her pillow, a natural response to the elders' rising from the dais, Kathryn watched them. She felt the water in her eyes but fought it, seeing Anai's bony face contort as she approached. She was shuddering with little sobs too long held within her--the sort of crying that could last for days, by the way the elderly lady's body heaved and yet held back as if by instinct. A full century of wait, finally at an end, all they withheld and wished for...

By the spirits, how could I do this to them? Anai thought in another sweep of regret as she neared a familiar form in the path, feeling the captain's eyes boring into her.

Kathryn swallowed hard to see her like that, the strong, noble woman defeated in her own purposes, unable to close that last door on her past. Beside her, Ara stared at the ground, his mouth closed, his head bent. But he could see as his bondmate did--knew as she did and felt what she felt. His hand caressed hers, pressed against his waist sash. She stilled briefly then squeezed his fingers. They knew.

Anai looked briefly up to the captain, her swollen eyes still sparking with the memory, the pain, all the unwillingness, the release--and the knowing. An eternity of knowing...

"Forgive me," she breathed, that time for Kathryn alone; then she continued away, her eyes turning down to the same spot Ara's had found.

Kathryn's heart dropped in her chest.

Her breath released and remained without replenishment for several seconds. *Why?* she wondered dumbly as her piqued instincts continued to unsteady her.

Her stare followed the elders, shuffling away in their children's arms, until they were all the way into the house. Seeing their robed forms turn and disappear... Somehow in that moment, as she stared at the empty door, Kathryn's mind cleared, the distraction of those forms gone, the painting itself coloring behind her eyes, filling the spaces left open by its teller, and those last words....

Finally, Kathryn saw. Clearly.

"Oh my god," she breathed.

"Derra remained upon Cezia past the Unar War," Havetsi explained when Chakotay asked, taking a seat with Cera on the stone the elders had occupied a few minutes before, "which ended near to eight du'ave past the liberation of this world."

Her voice seemed another universe away to Kathryn just then.

"With Yasis, he became a leader in the central restoration project and assisted the rebuilding of many capitals across Irlae. Making his own trade with the assistance of records recovered at Desalia, he directed his engineering skills towards architecture. His work at this time was committed without cost, from his desire to do all he might for the people he had adopted. With his generous nature, he became friend to all he knew and a respected voice for the unspoken.

"Yasis stood by him until his passing, as his wife by Antral ceremony soon past the Worlds Council's formation. It was with that and numerous reformation projects she affiliated herself, assisting the restoration of Irrlae and the continued development of Dviglar. She and Derra, as well, adopted three young Antral children, who had been born during the war upon Cezia yet were orphaned in the final battles. In Derra's house in Azlre's north Adavill district, they lived in great prosperity and contentment. Yasis, though quite elderly for an Antral, remains there, as do eighteen members of their family.

"Susik, for her love of her Aldrun's family and great desire to maintain Marise's place among her father's people, took herself with Marise and Gatra to the house of Kichyrn. There, they remained exclusively for over eighteen ralkle, until the girl had grown into a stately and most respectable lady of Antral. Upon her graduation from the first university re-erected at Onistra, Marise married a regal young man called Tohler. Seven fine children were borne of their union, and for over fifty ralkle, she has led the Kichyrn house with all the propriety and strength of the Antral matriarchy. She too remains among the living.

"Susik continued with Gatra during and past those suns, heavily involving herself in Irrlae's data and technology recovery, and restoring as well the databanks stolen and stored within Desal's catacombs. She became the primary assistant to Novren Pridalar, and was one among the team who created the safer storages we all in Irrlae presently employ. In this time, Gatra took himself to the scholarship, claiming geology as his trade and excelling in reforming Irrlae's mineral resources, which had been exceedingly drained during the occupation. Ten ralkle past the war's end, while still upon Antral, Susik bore Gatra a son, Mi'eka.

"Past Marise's marriage and firstborn child, Susik brought herself and Mi'eka to Desal, where Gatra's occupation and her position in the Antral embassy and data catacombs were located. She and Gatra enjoyed great prominence in Desalian and Antral society until his passing nearly fifty ralkle past that time. Susik retired to Antral soon after this and passed here at Desal twelve ralkle later. Through Mi'eka's five children, the Ella'omb house has been restored; it thrives beneath our present sun."

Havetsi smiled sheepishly to them upon her completion. "You shall forgive my simple prose, I would hope. This recollection has not been prepared. I might merely ease your curiosity with what facts I bear within me. Please, I may be assisted with questions."

Harry, still swallowing away his thick throat, cleared it to address the lady before them. "What happened to Ba'ela, Tom and B'Elanna's son?"

Having expected that question, Havetsi took Cera's hand in hers, her grin pulling to the side as she cast a glance at Captain Janeway, who continued to look after the elders.

"Ba'ela, Be'otala in scholarship," she said, "came to his maturity within this city, took a bondmate called Tejani and made their union fruitful--as did Mi'eka of Ella'omb some years past that with Sareli two streets west, as I have mentioned. Mi'eka's eldest granddaughter Esidri bore three fine children, one of them a son. Be'otala's second son, Tramasa, bonded to Ke'iji, a sister of his cousin's bondmate, who as an orphan had been adopted to the Allanois house. Therefore, our beloved tola Tramasa was brought to the family house of his father's youth. Their first daughter is Beshelli, my nali. Quite simply, you are looking at what became of both Be'otala and Mi'eka's bloodlines."

Still standing away from the others, Kathryn laughed humorlessly. "That doesn't surprise me."

She had said it quietly, but Havetsi heard it. When Kathryn turned and met her gaze, they understood each other. The older woman did not smile, though it did look as though Kathryn had finally found the meaning in the words their elder had conveyed to them. She had seen the lessons of Anai for what they

truly were and now had only to employ them, as had always been the way.

Perhaps it would be well after all, the next Allanois regent thought. While the painting remained incomplete, it was reasonable to believe another stroke or two might finish it. It was now a possible thing.

As her nali liked to say, what is truly meant could not be known until the moment itself arrived.

That moment had not arrived...yet.

9. The Ingress

"One in life...that which surrounds us, that which precedes us...and which shall be..."

To see another rain season, to see the triblas bloom again, share a meal at the table or in the streets or only visit with friends...to meet their newest great-great-great grandchild, to watch all the others grow but another year, another month, another day...

Their spirits would see it, she knew, and they had so many memories of all those things already, she wondered why she yet imagined the future.

There was so much within her already, memories of centuries past, which had been thrust upon her when she was completely unprepared for such a burden. It had changed her; it had changed her bondmate. It had made them so much more than what they were that for a time they did not know who they were--or were supposed to be.

In time, they recovered, enamored themselves to one particular goal, something to focus on, from which to derive their very beings. Through that purpose, they came to know their spirits again and grew able to continue and thrive. And so, they had, gladly, gratefully. They had loved life, had grasped every thread of it dearly and lived it fully.

Perhaps this is what Bihla and Sa'alli felt, she mused, leaning on her arm on the bay of the open windows, staring out at the softly rustling trees, listening to the kyeps' song within the lush leaves. It would rain soon, but they would not see it. Ara was half asleep before her, his bare head pressed against her breast, breathing tiny breaths. His thin fingers twitched against her palm, trying to caress. Anai knew it was a caress.

And who would we be to follow them now, even as continuance tempts us? It is for the balance of nature and the peace of two spirits, now, that we no longer need to live...here.

Most among the living were rightfully greedy for their race, Anai knew well. By nature, the living clutched at survival, at memory and growth, procreation and other experience that would fill their spirits while still among the living. Even with the promise of completion among the spirits, bodily life was so

much prized that those like herself and her bondmate would indeed tempt the very teeth of Prihar, call fate on its challenge, to maintain it. They often had.

"All in the living," she whispered, caressing Ara's soft head, "are what we are, equal and undying...bound in time, for only time.... We are brought from the spirits, and are completed in eternity, one among all...having tasted the soil and water."

Her eyes closed slowly upon the view, feeling the cool breeze, scented with daknal sva, blend with the warm sun, then opened again to feel his breath catch, his fingers tighten. He trembled to inhale, gasped it out in a soft puff. His lips moved, but he could not speak. He did not need to. She already knew.

She felt the mist in her eyes as she lifted her bondmate's chin enough that she could meet his stare. It was apologetic. How amusing, she thought, that he would be that way, even while he did not surprise her. To answer him, she leaned down and kissed him softly. His lips could barely move against hers, but they did attempt it.

"Ka, my spirit," she breathed upon his mouth, "it is time to see what awaits us."

She felt him relax against her, back into her embrace. Thankful.

The trees stirred again, and a pair of spotted squirrels was chasing each other through the heavy limbs, squeaking with animal laughter. Outside, the sounds of the children, returning from their lessons, echoed upwards. They called their hellos to the elders, knowing they were likely up there. Anai smiled, but said nothing. Ara gurgled a slight laugh. He always did so love to pet on the babies, had spoiled them so.

An hour later, Havetsi's youthful form appeared before them, bringing their afternoon dvilas tea, some soft bread, conserve and an update on the visitors' ship. She had, as always, also picked some vines and flowers from the garden to scent the tray, folded the napkins prettily, as Anai had taught her when she was a small girl. But as she set it down, her usual smile stilled to catch her elder's eyes, gazing surely to her, unblinking, telling her.

Havetsi put the tray aside to have another, better look at the two who rested against the bay of the window, if only to be certain. But in only that look, her tola's stillness...

"It is time, Havetsi," Anai whispered.

Hearing the words, a slip in the fragrant air, the younger woman nodded slowly, collecting her breath, summoning her strength. She even tried a smile for them, well aware that their passing was not premature, that the spirits would be good to them and fate would bear them well. Anai believed her sentiment, and yet she knew more of it.

So, wordlessly, she opened her hand to the girl, who leaned into her lap and embraced her elder-mother around the waist, and then more tightly as she exhaled a silent cry.

Acceptance of passing or not, it was yet for the living to miss the body, the elder knew.

It was only natural.

"Captain, I think I have a solution to the problem," she'd said, full of fire and life, her entire being

emanating from the spark in her dark eyes.

Walking into engineering, Janeway's mouth turned up only slightly to think how little the bright yet troubled young engineer had known of what was in store for her.

B'Elanna had made her choices. Tom had too. They had let down their defenses only to have an entirely new existence open up to them. And in but ten years, the two had managed to gain what their previous lives could not have provided: A dedicated family, a beautiful child, spiritual awareness and peace of mind and heart. They had taken on possibly the greatest challenges of their lives--socially and emotionally, psychologically and physically--and followed them all through.

They had truly succeeded, just as Chakotay had told her their first night on Desalia.

Or perhaps it was just time for them to succeed. Though, Kathryn knew that they may well have never had such a chance on Voyager to do so much with themselves. As for what they did for all the others in their lives, they had given literally everything of themselves to their people--to a region, really--and helped to save them, while also saving themselves.

They hadn't stopped there.

She should have expected that.

Carey looked up from the warp diagnostic panel to give his captain his full attention, opened his mouth to greet her, but Janeway waved it away and continued her slow pace through the engine room. She was only there for a visit, had only needed to walk. It was a long way out of her way, but something had compelled her to call for the deck when she entered the turbolift, stroll around the warp core before committing to her duty.

She wished she could only keep walking for the day she knew she had ahead of her and some choices of her own to make.

She still had no idea what to do.

A month after the paintings had concluded, the ship was in pristine condition, actually in better shape than it had been when they left on her maiden voyage. They'd gone ahead and taken Voyager to Ivlisa for drydock repair, and in addition to fixing everything that was broken, they were given a great deal of ethically approved technology to install or at least play with. Their cargo bay was full with as many supplies as they could fit into it, their shields were upgraded beyond what Starfleet could have envisioned, and their transporters were going to be an interesting study in capabilities for some time. Their warp manifold had been given enough tuning to shame even the most self-assured engineer.

Once the Institute scholars had gotten a look at Voyager, they had certainly done some excellent analysis then put Carey and his staff to a bit of school while they were there. Even Janeway had been surprised at how much the Desalians could interpret and suggest just by looking at the ship's schematics when their own systems were configured quite differently. They had even studied and proposed several excellent solutions for Voyager's little quirks--a term they were much amused by.

"K-wirk?" Nralldali, a young novitiate from the Ki'ial had tried to pronounce the odd word and giggled as she realigned a gelpack input balance. "K'wirk is a sour root used for dyes."

"About the same thing," Harry had grinned back at her with a shrug.

The captain couldn't help but smile at that. It was good to see Kim start to look like he was feeling better. Day by day, and though it was clear he still missed them, he seemed to be stronger, as did many on the crew once the stories had concluded.

She left the new upgrades in his hands until Carey came on duty, since he seemed to be interested in it and anxious for the work.

Then again, if Starfleet technology was that simple to them, Janeway probably didn't want to know so much, though she could understand why it would be. The Desalians had been in possession of it for over a century, after all, and their warp configuration had been at least technologically equal to Voyager's before the Unar overthrew them. They just didn't *need* the warp capabilities that Voyager did, considering the size of Irliae. They rather concentrated on making their journeys through their rocky, nebulous space shorter and safer. Even so, their engineering and spatial theories were excellent, their technology enviable, and their offer was too generous to pass up.

So, they had docked Voyager at Ivlisa and Janeway encouraged everyone to take some shore leave in their off-duty time, travel, meet some of the peoples they had heard about--the more subtle message being to come to terms with their losses in what ways they needed to.

After helping Janeway settle at the drydock and arranging the crew rotations for their stay, Chakotay had gone to the rainforest cities of Maha'aje. While there, one of Ara and Anai's great-great nephews took him through what Chakotay called "an extraordinary display of artifacts and history--this aside from the rest of the planet." Janeway took his word for it, having made herself busy with another Allanois relative in the various nebulae while procuring supplies--an incredible journey. The data she collected there would keep her scientific curiosity occupied for some time to come.

She had also gone with Havetsi and Cera to the new exhibits at the Regents' Museum, easily losing herself there the entire day. True to Anai's words, Desalian art was rather realistic throughout time, with stylistic differences between individual artists rather than periods making the works unique. When Cera pointed out what to look for, though, and offered a beginner's lesson in the subtleties of Desalian art history, Janeway found herself appreciating the works far more than she'd expected.

"Kra'alba?" She asked while looking at a portrait of onlookers, painted long after the war but depicting the night of Be'i and Toma's plea to the masses of Azlre. In fact, many pieces detailed things Be'i and Toma did. It was interesting for her to note, however, that there were no portraits of them hanging in the open exhibits. Though she wanted to know why, she chose not to ask Cera. "I remember him from the word painting."

"Born in the internment," Cera acknowledged, also staring up to the heavy lines and shading Kra'alba was known for, "yet finding freedom at Azlre, his work with but claystone and brrint pigment until past the Unar War had been his standard. His subjects are of change, forward movement, light and shadow among one. --He had been an outward supporter of the resistance from the night of the call to the masses; it became his great inspiration. Note his botanical hues and thumbstrokes."

Janeway bent closer to the painting. "He did this with his *fingers*?" She would not have thought it, with the detail and emotion...the hope pressed into their heavy eyes and sunken faces, a fair-haired child holding his mother and peering towards the firelight where the plea was being made.

Cera smiled. "He bore no other tools with which to train, and so his habit was retained throughout his life."

She nodded. "Aratra had said that you have to teach a Desalian once the right way."

"Ka," Cera said, "and this way was correct for Kra'alba, as it was utilized so well."

"Agreed," Kathryn smiled. She moved with him to the next display, where Havetsi and a few of her cousins and friends already waited.

She gladly returned the next day to better study the more recent periods, though she realized by then that she was trying to distract herself from the hole Anai had dug for them but left unfilled. The story was somewhat complete. Everyone on board understood it was painful for the elderly lady and politely didn't broach the topic. Havetsi had answered their remaining questions in the end, which was enough, they thought. They could get past their crewmates' very meaningful lives, two of which had ended too soon, yet as nobly as anyone might have imagined of them.

Kathryn knew otherwise. Worse, she knew she knew otherwise. The more time passed, the more she could not force herself to let it go, to leave them in peace. But Anai had been so upset that last night, Kathryn couldn't bring herself to ask all the obvious questions. The look the elder gave her when she was leaving had torn into her, made her see, made her know the truth--whether or not she meant to. Anai had gazed into her very soul, her eyes filled with tears, so regretful, so determined and at the same time vulnerable.

She had asked her forgiveness.

For what? Janeway asked herself yet again. For not completing it? For not telling them in the first place? For running away at the end from what she obviously had intended when she began? What had changed her mind in only a few days?

In the garden, when they first spoke intimately, Anai had been warm and clever, decided in her duty. Only two nights later, she simply could not finish, could not bring herself to give them what she had promised Janeway she would.

Maybe because she saw it had no purpose?

Janeway was angry--or would have remained furious for the deception, realizing it as she had, in that flash, in that look, in those sorrowful words.

Fine, she'd thought, stiff-jawed as she walked back through the city with the others after the last story, silent beside the commander, let them die the way they want. They've lived long enough, and it'll have made no difference to us in the end. The crew already knows Tom and B'Elanna are dead. They took so much trouble to make us believe it, they should die as they please.

But striding into her quarters that night, shaking her head, telling herself aloud it couldn't be right, all she could see was Anai's sadness, her genuine, humble need for forgiveness for the very deception she was both upholding and trying to explain in her duty. Then Kathryn became annoyed that she couldn't stay angry with that poor old woman, who had obviously tried to spare them.

Anai had been helping them mourn, and helping the crew let their friends go. She must have discovered that the best way to go about that was to not tell them everything. Even so...

How can't they know? Janeway asked herself as she paced through the engine room and overheard the crew's chatter. Having realized the truth, she wondered how in the world she hadn't seen it from the

start. Certainly, Ara and Anai were both very old: Their bodies were shrunken, their voices creaked in trilled dialects; for both color and reflection of self, their eyes were simply unrecognizable. The customary scarves and braids covered a good deal of Anai's brow, or what was left of it, and Ara's scarves covered half of his head. From their markings to their mannerisms and everything in between, they were without exception Desalian.

But now, knowing the truth, Janeway could see through those elders so clearly, she couldn't believe she hadn't figured it out upon first glance.

From day one, she'd had a feeling that Anai was more than she claimed, had a gut feeling about the regent's simply tossing out information and letting the pieces fall where they would, in admittedly Allanois style. Janeway knew from the start that there was more to it than the stories, a hidden purpose, a poorly kept secret among the family.

If anything, she could blame herself for not chasing her instincts, but instead, relaxing around the ancient woman who had befriended her. Indeed, the lady had become her friend and Kathryn truly believed that part of it was genuine. Maybe Anai needed to have that closeness to paradoxically burn her bridges. Maybe she and Ara had really wanted to see them again. It seemed so.

A month later, it was time to say goodbye to them both.

Standing in engineering in her dress uniform, she was guiltily relieved to soon part with that beautiful, peaceful, welcoming people, that intriguing "pin dot" in space. Knowing what she did, she wondered whether she should be either--guilty or relieved. Had she and the crew no home to go to in her own lifetime, she would remain at Irlae without hesitation despite it all--and even as it was, thought had tempted her. But though so little time passed outside the region, she would age without reprieve--and already she felt like she'd put on a few years.

She would miss them all dearly.

During the time that Voyager had been at Ivlisa, Havetsi had taken a leave from her duties and seen to all their "procurements." Gentle, watchful, but busy and cheerful as ever, she put herself at their disposal--insisted she take responsibility for their honored guests and friends. Not surprising, really, her care of them, though Janeway could tell her presence was as purposeful as Anai's entire telling had been.

"She shall be named for Nali," she'd proudly said as she rested against one of the panels those few weeks ago, placing her long, thin fingers upon her flat belly. "And her eyes shall be brown, as mine once had been, and her long hair shall stubbornly be braided each sunrise--merely to tickle Tola's blessed spirit. How I would wish Nali and Tola would remain enough suns but to touch her.... Yet they have, in their spirits. It pleases."

"How are they?" Janeway asked. Since the last evening of the painting, she hadn't seen them, couldn't even bring herself to ask to see them.

Havetsi seemed to understand. "They prepare for the spirits with contentment despite their concern and little pain, Kathri. They wish you would attend their passing ceremony, should you be present when this sun arrives."

Despite her mood of late, Kathryn would have been the last to ignore that particular honor. "You can tell them I'll be there, even if I have to be the one who waits this time."

Havetsi's smile flicked up in acknowledgment, but little more as her fingers lightly stroked her uniform coat, deep blue with black embroidery at the hems. She seemed to know where each stitch was, the way she touched them. "Kathri..." she whispered then looked at her, "...you would bear awareness, ka?"

"I think Anai made it pretty plain, don't you think? She did everything but tell us--tell me."

"Ka, there was more purpose with you than Nali's painting her promised words. Yet it surprises me that you do not ask of it now."

"I got the impression that whatever it was," she said, another half-truth, "I'd be told if I needed to be--that it wasn't my business to ask."

Havetsi turned her glance at that, gave her a look Janeway immediately recognized. So much Havetsi seemed like B'Elanna, in small ways, here and there. Her hair, while quite long and stretched with length, was a rich, dark brown and braided just so. Though taller, more angular in her features and generally far more cheerful, she reflected a similar intensity when she had something on her mind. Her gaze, though bright hazel, was very like, . Three generations worth of diluted DNA could not remove that particular presence.

Anai had been so amused to compare them, Kathryn recalled with an irksome flash.

In her own memory, she had seen that expression recently, when a young lieutenant had to make a rather difficult choice. B'Elanna had been forced by her strong conscience to destroy a life she created. Janeway could hear the engineer's voice all over again, quietly insisting that it had been necessary, despite her own mixed feelings. She had tried to make it sound simple, even to herself, sipping at her coffee, staring at nothing only moments after she had been filled with the passion of her doings.

Yet, she had known--realized--what was the right thing to do. Janeway believed she did not regret it.

Looking at the chief's descendent, it seemed so obvious it was embarrassing.

"It is not for my elder-parents now to choose," the young woman told her. "The stars pass them without their reaching--and nor should this be required of them. They have worked too diligently for this privilege." Havetsi reclaimed Janeway's stare at that. "More, fate's blessings cannot be charged by them. They have lived to make possibilities, not certainties, as do we all."

If her last night's sleep had given her enough time to settle her unanswered questions into their little mysteries, Havetsi's words and stare brought them all to the forefront again.

"Then what do *you* suggest?"

"Your own fate," the woman replied. "It is but for you to reach to, Kathri. Your choice can make a fate possible. The results of this shall be accepted by us unequivocally . This may well be known of Desal and the Allanois. It remains truth."

"What choice do I have, Havetsi?" Kathryn asked. "I don't recall being given a choice in any of this."

"It is not to be given," she answered, "but procured. Kathri, it is but for you to derive the lesson of Nali's words--all her words, her life and Tola's. Or I would hope when you are touched by fate, your instinct shall be your guide. While Nali and Tola are worn of their life's journey, it should be known that their promises were not always a burden..." She stopped, smiling gently at Janeway. "You shall understand this another sun. Only hear me now, my friend."

She heard.

By the time she and some others decided to visit Cezia, Janeway didn't know exactly how she should be reacting anymore. Like a dumb fact, it burrowed in her mind, festering yet useless to anything she might otherwise make of it. So, she decided to simply try to start putting it behind her. Clearly, Anai and Ara had intended that they all did and Havetsi suggested that she should for the present.

She knew better than to think she could do that.

When they stepped off the transport at Dviglar, she found herself immediately transported back into Anai's painting, complete with busy citizens and Irlae traders. The base alone was remarkable, especially as Janeway recalled it had been little more than an Unar junkyard during most of the occupation. One hundred and ten years after Tom Paris and B'Elanna Torres came to Cezia, however, Dviglar seemed to deserve its continued regard, from its vine-decorated research facilities and trading circles to engineering and science buildings. The wide avenue through the flat of the gorge that hosted it led to the drydock repair fields and ship museum.

There, they were directed toward the famed Azallis, which was preserved at one end of the landing facility. The sight stopped them all. Smoothly angled from bridge to stern, short and broad winged, the small white ship was obviously designed to move in and out of atmospheres, maneuver through the rocky, nebulous space, not meant for long periods of space travel. Most remarkably, the Azallis was a monument both to the war that freed its people and to the gentle time that bore it. Seeing it there, grounded but noble, simple but packed with history, it inspired a respectful silence in them all as they finally moved on.

Even so, Janeway couldn't help her inward grin as they crossed back through the bustling station. It was little wonder Tom and B'Elanna refused to take it apart. Their adopted people could not have understood that part of their natures...at the time.

The path to the city was equally fascinating, though in a completely different manner. There, it was noisy with nature, the balking joth, the long blowing grasses, the smell of rich earth and the hums of insects deep in the thrush beneath the warm, white sun. The others who came appeared as entranced with it all. Harry, Kes and Neelix ran a steady replay of details they knew from the paintings, relating the reality introduced through another's eyes. Looking over, she saw on Chakotay's face a similar smile, one of wonder and memories finding a home.

If the fields were interesting, the city proper cemented their attention. A "rural city of both steady warmth and reserved rain," as described by the family on the homeworld, the Azlrelians' dress and scarving was notably different to that of Desal's capital: more often tied than buttoned, lightweight and subtly embroidered muslin in shades of white, cream and pastels. The jewel tones and tailored silks of a capital city denizen would stand out clearly among that colony's day clothes. The Azlrelians' movements were somewhat freer, as well, their lilting noises not so much a steady buzz as a flock on a swift breeze. That too took their proper place among Anai's stories as they wandered the streets once frequented by Be'i and Toma, Sashana'i and Aratra, Miztri and Dalra, and their elders, all those good people who had loved that city, their chosen home, so much.

Like ordinary tourists, casually dressed and without immediate direction, they stared around at all the corners, the white sandstone buildings and ivy-trimmed streets. Even Janeway felt herself detach from her concerns as she pointed out the places they'd heard about. They took water at the public well, smelled the incense lit upon corners in respect of the ancestors, heard the strolling vendors singing their trades, untranslatable usually, but melodic in a minor key, echoing through the neatly curved streets.

Some of their customers gamely sang along while collecting their trade from their woven fur purses, which hung on their waists along with their other ornaments. Children danced along to the lilting beat as they passed, giggling at some of the lines.

A vendor at a nido'ev stand told them the "milk of Sa'alli" was yet to come that year to bless the fertile land.

In their first planned diversion there, they came upon the district of Trisjorr, most of which had remained a sprawling park with memorials, statue scenes of the war and plaques around the remaining rubble. Most notable was the memorial of the first meeting of the Irl'lae resistance. Janeway leaned back on the short stone wall beside where the elders, prichava, assistants and young regents had been recreated. Some other statues around the area finished the circle of citizens looking at another group of cast statues, namely Novren Pridalar, Medrove of Suresha, Eneprae of Brija, Acilg of Iaskeb, Vabrimir of Koba and Be'i and Toma of Azlre. For lack of pictorial evidence at the time, none of the figures could have been precisely detailed, though Janeway chuckled softly to herself when Harry moved close to see if he might recognize something.

Still, she could picture it, and she found upon steadier examination that the portrayals were closer than she thought at first. Beyond the heavy cloak draped over the female's head, the artist had gotten the woman's pride and will across in her solid gaze, her full mouth, slightly parted, her posture and the way her hand floated a bit forward, palm up--an unconscious gesture of B'Elanna's for certain. The man's sidelong squint below his headdress was perfect, as was his little grin. He seemed poised to say something smart to Novren Pridalar. Tom's slightly off-kilter stance was unmistakable. His hand seemed to fit on the curve of his lady's back.

It was eerie, Kathryn realized, to think they were right there. *Her* crewpeople, almost a hundred and ten years ago, had made the deals to start a war that would free an entire region. Much longer than Voyager or even the Maquis, Azlre had been their home by that time, and now, in that present, on Cezia as well as throughout Irl'lae, they were remembered as heroes.

Moving along in their unofficial tour, she could see them everywhere, almost expected to see them coming around a corner, bowing briefly with a touch to their temples. She could also see them continue on their way, disappearing into the crowds like any strangers on the street...

After a trip through the north section of the city, where the commune gardens filled the entire row inside the gates and the tenements rose plainly from their gracefully stenciled bases, the small group continued westward. With some better directions from a lady kneeling to work in her doorstep garden, they turned into the streets again towards the historic Adavill district. Thirty minutes later, as homes grew shorter and wider, and gardens grew more lush, they came to a well-preserved circle of relatively small estates with a flowering tree decorating the center. At the north side of the cul-de-sac sat the Onistra house.

Though still quite tall and not as wasted, Yasis was as elderly as Ara and Anai and unashamedly thrilled to finally meet Kurt's birthpeople. It was at her request, in fact, that they'd made the point to visit together. She greeted them personally at the entrance only moments after they pulled the bell, begging them in and calling to her granddaughters for refreshments. Upon her decided invitation, they shared a lovely lunch on a tree-shaded, second-floor terrace, with bread and fruit, tea, warm joth milk and memories.

"Kurt..." The Antral woman smiled, then she coughed as her great-great granddaughter Esherri, a slender, red-haired lady fashioned and marked in the Desalian way, placed a cup of steaming joth milk in

her trembling hands. Yasis offered her a grin of thanks then continued, "My fine husband. I could not give him a child but our three I found orphaned when we returned to Azlre after Desal's liberation. But we loved them as though I had nursed them myself, and he renovated this house for us with his bare hands after Anai and Ara left for Desalia."

Janeway glanced back into the long gallery, lit with the noontime sun. The open beams and interconnected rooms were evidence of Federation-like design, not to mention what little she had learned about Antral housing. The eclectic but comfortable furnishings were telling, too. "It's obvious he loved it," she said.

"He did," Yasis whispered. "As do I."

"I can see why all of you loved Cezia, too, even Tom and B'Elanna," Janeway said, soft against the rustling breeze around them. "Azlre is a remarkable city."

Yasis turned her gaze, which had greyed with age but shone brown-green in the light. "Be'i and Toma?" she asked, a small smile pulling at her thin, crinkled lips. "Yes, they once said they had found their true spirits here. More than once, they did. More than once..."

Janeway did not mistake the lady's allusion.

Yasis sipped her milk carefully, closing her eyes momentarily. When they opened again, they were pointed toward the floor for several seconds before finding her guests again. "Have you seen the old clinic?" she asked. "It is here, in Adavill, preserved for history as are most the residences in the square."

"Mar'lli is going to take us there later," Chakotay told her.

"Ah, Mar'lli. A just prichava, and an superior player of ba'akull. I would not recommend you challenge her. My grandson, Tive'a, is continually humiliated."

He laughed. "I'll try to avoid it."

Yasis paused to consider the man anew. "Mar'lli is not present yet," she said. "Tell me of my husband, what you remember. Kurt told me so many stories of his birth. I always wished I could hear them from another's lips. --Not that I think my husband exaggerated," she added, earning another chuckle. "Indulge me, please."

Leaning back into her chair, she smiled upon each anecdote Chakotay managed to recall, even when he apologized for not being much of a storyteller. But Yasis was indeed interested to hear the old stories from another man's view. Even as he spoke, however, the old woman seemed as curious in examining her guests, shameless in her microscopic stare. Whatever she deduced, however, Yasis shrugged away, likely already resolved to her own part in the silence.

Janeway understood, remembering when Anai, on the day Voyager arrived at Desal, admitted that Kurt's wife still held in her heart what only Ara and Anai's memoirs would reveal at that point. She did just that, seeming to be pleased with that honor and obviously not about to break it for any sentimentality they might have inspired. For her own reasons, Janeway didn't bring it up, either--not there. Somehow, at that point, if they didn't want to say it, she didn't want to hear about it.

She did enjoy hearing the stories, however, and the tea. Had she been able to push the rest aside, it would have been a very pleasant visit.

Later, as promised, Mar'lli came for them. A sprightly one hundred and one year-old with a soft, high-pitched voice, ornamented scarves and all the goodness of one of her kind, came in with Esherri and showered her respect and love on Yasis as would a child on any elder. After a long round of goodbyes and thanks, she then took the honored guests for a tour through the square and to the clinic. Though returning greetings and bows throughout their walk, her pace was almost as brisk as Havetsi's as she explained how her people had preserved many of the living spaces in the square after the war; then she described the conditions of the time.

"Of course, this is known to you," Mar'lli smiled. "Yet it is always another matter to see its truth."

Janeway didn't say a word. Instead, she studied Mar'lli all over again, as she had the rest of Ara and Anai's children. It was hard to tell, the captain noted. The woman, fair-skinned and wrinkled with her long, busy life and copious amounts of reading and writing, probably looked only vaguely as she had in her youth. Her eyes were like Ara's--dark bluish hazel, not any exact color. She was bonded, like her siblings, and therefore her eyes had changed from what they had been in her youth. Her long, neatly draped scarves and braids, like all other Desalian women's, covered a good part of her forehead; under them was a thick mane of flaxen white hair. Janeway guessed it had once been blonde.

She wondered what Mar'lli's birth name was.

Even then, Kathryn said nothing, but continued with the tour. She had wanted to see the old clinic since Anai had first spoken of it.

Explaining as she led them, the prichava of Azlre took them into the surprisingly plain clinic foyer, a long, brightly lit galley with old but clean tables and glass-doored storage hutches, two battered surgical beds and a tiny, portable replicator in the far corner. On the back wall of that room, a tall, quarter-circle staircase led up to an arch, where Mar'lli led them into and through Bala and Bakali's well-worn residence. Its array was equally sparse, boasting only gently tended sideboards on a sandstone floor, yellowed plaster walls and an array of mended pillows around a colorful floorcloth below the shuttered windows. Farther in sat a large stone fireplace with low-set stone plates for cooking and an urn of tools to the side. A couple of thick metal pans and a soup pot were set on the grate; a kettle hung inside, where the fire would have crackled and glowed.

Just behind the mantel and up a row of handmade steps was the three-by-three meter attic that had been Tom and B'Elanna's residence. The even smaller space that belonged to their son was on the other side of the floor flap, partitioned by only a drape that hung on a high hook in the plaster. They all barely fit in the open space there, and Harry noted with some astonishment that it was amazing they didn't kill each other in such close quarters. Mar'lli smiled and told them their bed was both comfortable and diverting. For that matter, much of their lives were spent outside of that space when not in that bed. They did not require so much space to sleep and dress.

When the others returned to the ground floor, Kathryn remained, turning a circle before she numbly sat on the before-mentioned bunk, which took up a third of the room, nestled into the alcove behind the chimney stones. Looking over, she noticed the solar-generated glowglobe hanging on the short bedpost, a glassy sphere about the size of a grapefruit with small geometric shapes cut into the shell. The bed itself was soft--maybe a bit too much so. The knotted scrap blanket on it was not very ugly and would have been colorful had it not been so faded.

They had *lived* there.

The Desalians had kept it so preserved, it was almost as though Be'i and Toma had left to go for a walk,

or off to Dviglar, or might even have been downstairs, rolling their bread around a piece of goat cheese with their son and their elders...

Drawing a deep breath, she let her eyes fall across to the small, scratched oval mirror sitting above a well-worn floor pillow, the piles of paper and equipment on the top shelf. One of Be'i of Azlre's gowns--the beige one with blue vines embroidered on the skirt and sleeves, her favorite--hung on stiff, braided reeds at the end; Toma's worn brown wrap shoes sat unceremoniously next to a trunk below it.

She touched the blanket and tried to remain composed as she felt, so deeply, the presence of those two. Somehow, they were still there, almost a ghostly presence. She could even hear their voices...

So much had happened there, so many choices, so much discussion and development and realization, all in that tiny space and beyond...

Collecting herself, Janeway stood and shook her head. But then a moment later, she found herself kneeling on the bench below the window to peek outside. There wasn't much to see from there, just a sliver of the square blocked by another building. In the beginning, B'Elanna had shielded her eyes from it--or rather the light. Later, she would sit on the bench to brush her hair while Tom, leaning up in the bed against the dull white plaster wall, worked and read aloud. When she was done, she would crawl onto the bunk to join her mate...

Janeway exhaled, her eyes closed. She could see it, B'Elanna's little grin as she tucked herself into Tom's arm, see him kiss her head, share the datapad he was working on, or perhaps put it aside...

She left the room, trying hard to avoid looking at anything again. There were too many memories there that weren't even hers, too much to come to terms with, too few answers, too much she wanted to ask and say--even order and command--but simply couldn't.

Maybe it wasn't for her to know and she should just leave it be.

Three weeks later, Kathryn stared at the glowing blue core and sighed heavily.

Poor Anai had tried so hard to save their feelings.

Why? crossed her mind yet again, and she stifled her tears, shook her head of it, turned away from that calming aura that she'd felt some strange need to see before returning to the bridge. A need to pay her respects, maybe.

Still trying to come to terms, she believed more.

Nothing seemed real now as she moved into the turbolift and called for deck one. The soft greys blended together in the sleek, sure lines of Starfleet design, and the lights that passed noted the destination as steadily upwards. Everything seemed so far away, the clothes on her body, her voice when she had spoken, the soft "whirr" of the lift.

She could not believe she was doing what she was. Her denial was almost as strong as it had been when she first heard Anai tell them that their crewpeople had died. At the same time...

Janeway walked onto the bridge without disruption, pausing a moment as she stared down at the presently unmanned conn.

Tom Paris. She could see his face so clearly, the way it looked the first time she'd addressed him, the

wonder and caution she thought she saw in that first glance. He'd been so young, for all his pretenses of worldly wisdom. He'd been a boy looking for a future, looking to redeem the hell that he had made of his life, to be accepted and loved and to believe in that utterly. He did just that and so much more--more being matters he likely had never planned and wouldn't have believed possible for himself, even things he would never have sought.

And yet, once achieved, it had suited him, Kathryn thought. His father would be proud to see so much had come of his son. It would give the admiral some comfort--or at least she hoped it would, when someday she would have to face the man... If they got home, she would have to tell the admiral.

My God, where would I start? she suddenly asked herself, but breathed against that. Definitely, it was a thing to consider some other time.

Moving to the main of the bridge, she met her commander's eyes. Chakotay's gaze was gentle, understanding, equally involved--equally pained.

A couple of weeks ago, they had met while walking to the personnel transport that would take them through the length of Desalian space to Antral territory. There, they would spend a few days in the capital city with Marise Kichyryn, who like Yasis had gotten word of the crew's presence the day they had arrived, but had patiently waited for Anai's duties to be completed before inviting them to meet her.

Though he seemed to be anxious to see Nicoletti's elderly daughter, Chakotay was visibly tired, or at least tense. Having fallen back into her poor sleeping habit, she had to ask after him.

"I usually don't go into details about my vision quests," he explained then noted her polite nod. Considering it a moment, he shrugged. "But we've talked about this. I'd said that maybe it was time to stop trying to find them, but now... It's time to let them go, Captain. The story is over, and Tom and B'Elanna died doing exactly what they wanted--they died happy. Kurt and Sue had full lives here, families, careers..." He sighed, full of the resolution he was still trying to accept. "They met me in my quest this last time to say goodbye."

Janeway nodded slowly. "I suppose it is time to."

"They said we couldn't turn things back to the way they were," Chakotay continued, his stare on the path before them, too, "and so there's no use in creating empty hope. Sashana'i had tried, but what she wanted couldn't be done. The stories were painted to return them to us as best they could, to balance fate in the only way left to. So, you can only let go, take their lessons with you and move on."

She knew at least one of those lessons.

But she couldn't do it. She couldn't keep it inside as Anai had, so patiently, all that time. Telling him could have defeated Anai and Ara's purpose, it seemed to her by then. Still, Chakotay eventually would have to know. He deserved the truth, would want it.

Of course, she'd wanted truth, too. *And look what that got me*, she thought, but decided on her instinct, anyway.

"When we return from Antral," she said quietly, "meet me in my ready room. I'd like to talk about this, privately."

He furrowed his brow. "Something wrong, Captain?"

A week after she brushed aside the query, Chakotay looked as pale as he had when they came through the Barrier--and as much at a loss for words. For some time, he didn't say anything, but leaned up in his seat as if to stand. Then he rethought the move and simply stilled, let out his breath slowly.

"This is going to take time," he admitted. He stared at his hands as they flexed and straightened then fell to rest on his knees. "They won't see anybody?"

"They're preparing for their deaths," Janeway choked, her face tight as she related it, and then falling as she realized what she was saying to him. "I'm sorry."

He paused, considering some unknown point across the room. Silently resolving to deal with it--there was little other choice but to, as the elders probably knew well beforehand--he looked up at her and finally said, "It's going to be hard to keep this between us."

"Consider it their dying wish," she told him. "Angry as I am with them for deceiving us, I'm not about to overturn all their efforts, Chakotay. I hate what they did, but I know they didn't do it to hurt us."

"They were looking out for us, protecting us...maybe even protecting themselves, too." He had spoken from his sunken heart, still reeling with the realization. It all--all he had seen in his vision quests--suddenly made sense. To his shame, he didn't see it sooner. The captain seemed to share that sentiment, seemed to have already been where he was--if she wasn't there still. "It's probably been hard on them, seeing us."

"Or maybe there really is nothing left of Tom and B'Elanna but the memories," she said emptily.

Chakotay did not reply.

Standing on the bridge eight days later, looking towards the viewscreen, she believed it more. They had indeed let go and moved on when they needed to decide on their future--and Kathryn knew she would, too.

She didn't have a choice. She didn't want to accept it--couldn't accept it. *How many times have I had to do this?* she scolded herself. *As an officer alone, I've had to go against what I wanted almost on a daily basis, lost young officers before, made tough choices. This should be like any other command decision.*

That wasn't a "command decision" and she knew it. There was nothing to decide and no way to change what had been done.

She had no choice but to simply make Ara and Anai's long-standing purpose worth their trouble by thanking them for all they had done. Though Anai never finished her painting and avoided company after that last night, she had done what she could to help Voyager, the crew and had done exactly what she and Ara had promised. They had shared the stories of Be'i and Toma and Kathryn could at least acknowledge that the elder had given them more than any record could, brought that history alive for them. Anai had also given her friendship, which though short, would never be forgotten.

Kathryn felt almost as though she was losing her own family. In a way, she was--and not just for losing her lieutenants.

But if she had it to do all over again...

"Captain," said Kim quietly, "Captain Havetsi has contacted us from the east gate. She's ready to transport."

Janeway glanced back, blinked a nod.

As she had when Voyager arrived at Desalia-Four, Havetsi would be the escort, though that time, only Kathryn had been invited to the family ceremony. Havetsi was quick to say that it was not an insult. The family passing ceremony, like kraja ceremonies, was an intimate event: It was rare to populate them excessively. Only during Unar occupation had it been a communal practice; there were usually many corpses to tend to and because it was a method of sharing and teaching the tradition. After the war, the tradition swung easily back to the older and more private way.

For that matter, the public honors had already been celebrated a week before, in Desal and throughout Irliae. Dignitaries and other leaders, even a few old friends--very old friends--had come to grace their last public appearance, wrought with all the pleasant formality and gentle dignity that the Desalians were known for, making a celebration out of a sad event.

Aside from that gathering, the elders had kept themselves in solitude. Ara's meagre strength was fading quickly, the family said. Having ceased supporting him, Anai had finally allowed his illness to claim her, too.

"In other cases," Beshelli explained gently as they walked through the various gatherings in the Institute mall, "the bondmate would permit the illness immediately. When my nali-Tejani, my grandmother, was first afflicted with her illness twelve years past, Be'otala allowed it within him, too. They passed together, in peace and without suffering, to our blessed ancestors two du'ave after. For their duty, Nali has persisted with Tola for ten ralkle, using her remaining strength to maintain them among the living. To resist passing at such an age is rather unusual among us."

"They remained alive for us," Kathryn nodded.

"There remained a promise to serve, were it possible to fulfill it," Beshelli confirmed. "It was not known when you would arrive."

Kathryn's jaw tensed as she exhaled. Much as she understood, she didn't like it. "Beshelli, just tell me this: Why did Anai, Babaki, Havetsi--all of you--say that Be'i and Toma were dead?"

"Dead bears no meaning among us, good lady. I would think the word you seek is 'passed.'" Patiently, Beshelli met the lady's eyes again to try to explain it. "Kathri, the life of a scholar is utterly separate from that of a child. When one becomes a novitiate and chooses their name of being, they relinquish their youth utterly. We may recall that earlier time and continue to take lessons from it, yet we are equally divorced of it. It is another life, which is sacrificed for the assent into the novitiate and, afterwards, a life of learning and teaching.

"All Desal accepts this as truth, and thus what you see as a lie is to us a simple omission of origin, one which is entirely customary to all but parents and siblings. Thus, you cannot rebuke us too harshly. Nali and Tola's sacrifice was far more necessary and complete, for the trauma they suffered in bringing themselves to that place in life was severe. More than any other scholar at present, Anai and Ara of Cezia are parted absolutely from their childhood beings. In a manner, that Be'i and Toma passed on the field at Desal is truth.

"There *has* been deception and secrecy--this is a truth--yet it must be known that Nali gave herself to you truly, without pretense. The lady you have seen and spoken with is the same we have loved through our lives. Nali's asking us not to recall their origins to you was a crime of duty to what she and Tola felt was best, which we trust explicitly."

Beshelli kept the captain's stare solidly in hers. "This sun, had I not earlier, I see they showed wisdom in their decision. You already bear the pain of your most natural weakness--the power you lack in this matter. Nali and Tola wished only to shield you from this while bearing the fruit of their promise and deciding what is meant of their passing. --This was the whole of it, Kathri. No more. Had they cared any less, remembered you any less dearly, such pains to protect you in this matter would not have been taken. Nali would have borne little trouble in completing the painting as planned, would they have remained among the living so many ralkle at all."

When Beshelli excused herself and returned to her family, Kathryn turned and stared at the procession she had come to see. The elders, supported by their eldest daughters, made their way through the paths cleared for them to the prepared seating area. Once they had arrived and settled there, the memorials began.

What had Sashana'i and Aratra been planning? Janeway wondered as Mar'lli began to speak of her parents, of their strong yet gentle hearts, their dedication, their mass and variety of teaching.

The near desperate need for redemption of her "criminal acts" had produced a plan once Sashana'i began to use B'Elanna and Tom's natural gifts for Desal's gain. What balance did Sashana'i want to attain by trying to return the four to their birthpeople? A balance of fate... It was more like arranging for Tom and B'Elanna, Susan and Kurt to live out their "originally intended" lives, a life in process before Sashana'i had interfered and begged fate for the diversion that indeed had helped rescue Irlae from its doom.

But how? Anai had never confessed it completely, had only mentioned the transporter technology that Novren had been instructed to dig up from the floating scrap yards.

Did they discover it to be unsuccessful? Did Ara and Anai incur difficulty or some untoward effects in the plasma field and so gave it up? Be'i and Toma both were noted as not wanting to return to their previous lives. As the years passed, it would only be logical that those feelings would grow stronger. The two known as Susik and Derra had already found their ends after good lives they seemed to have chosen freely.

They *had*, however, mentioned wanting to meet their former crewmates again. Why the elders allowed themselves to remain unrecognized was still somewhat troublesome for Kathryn to ponder. Then again, the elders certainly had gained enough years to have plenty of time to think about it, to reconsider the options. Maybe they decided that it was better for the crew to remember people they knew at least a little, rather than two aged, alien regents.

Janeway could see them thinking something like that up, though the reasoning still didn't seem quite right. Of course, *nothing* did just then.

Ara and Anai looked so frail, so tired, she noticed, much paler and slower to move. Each time one or the other held out a hand, it shook; their eyes wandered, their heads bowed easily. And yet, dressed in all their regents' finery and ornaments, essentially attending their own wake for their people's comfort, they still were cheerful, laughing easily and remembering often, humbly accepting the thanks of their people when they gave it. The stories of their work in Desalia-Four alone lasted well into the evening for there being so much to tell of their century.

Janeway could barely watch it, torn between joining them and wanting to return to her nice, safe ship, crystal clean and almost complete--just about ready to go. The cool streams of stars as they traveled at warp nine, pointed at sector zero-zero-one, were suddenly so inviting to her...

What in the hell happened that day that it would bring them, a century later, to this? she finally wondered. *A beautiful, full life, society, family, but consumed with that one lingering desire...*

Before they moved into a more private "celebration," Ara and Anai publicly thanked all who had come--and all of Desal and Irlae for their goodness and peace.

"No greater contentment could have been achieved," Ara said, his voice but a sliver, but warm with genuine regard, "than with the peace and prosperity which speaks of Irlae now. Once a dream, long prayed among our spirits, it became truth, our lives' work, and our family's single desire. Yet it is for you this truth exists, and through you and our openness to all our ancestors' blessings, teachings and sacrifices, this shall continue. We bear faith in this, good friends, family, and Irlae. The spirits guide us all, as always...until the stars reunite us among the ancestors."

She could have cried right there for that--almost did. She wanted to call them out, demand her answers all over again. She wanted to know more than she had in the beginning and just couldn't understand...

She turned and walked away.

It wasn't the time or the place. Maybe it never was. Maybe it truly was futile to even consider wanting more.

They did deserve peace. They'd more than earned it.

Kathryn grit her teeth all the way back to her ship, and then to her quarters, where she might have paced a hole in a lesser floor. There was something else going on and the elders were being stubbornly silent--again. More, she didn't want to let go of them now that she knew who they were. She hated them for making her accept it, nearly fooling her into thinking Tom and B'Elanna had died and for making her like them so much. She hated herself for letting it happen in the first place...even if she wouldn't have changed Desalian history if she could.

They certainly wouldn't have, either.

The stories were done. Now they could die.

She couldn't accept that. She finally decided that she couldn't accept it. Not again.

She would have to live with that, though. As much as she wanted a choice in the matter, she would have to be like any good Desalian--or like the steel hearted captain she could be--and let them go, put the ship into warp and move on. They got on with their own lives. She would too.

That was a week ago. A few days after the ceremony, Ara had begun his final descent as he and Anai took their afternoon nap in their chamber, reclined against the pillows. The family had been preparing for their passing since.

Their great-great granddaughter's eyes were still tired, slightly swollen, when she contacted Voyager.

Later, in her ready room, Kathryn found herself staring at a point on her desk, unable to think at all, or cry, or spite it, or even force the issue. There was no issue to force anymore.

Beshelli was right. It hurt like hell, and she was back to step one.

Her people were dying all over again. She wished she'd never figured it out.

She wished she'd listened to Tuvok in the first place and not taken the risk of coming into the plasma field, of ever knowing the Desalians.

But obviously, it was fated to happen. She cursed that, too, wondered how the Desalians could live simply accepting fate as they did, how Tom and B'Elanna had ever, despite their circumstances, learned to be at peace with it.

Despite her responsibility as the blood heiress of Allanois, Havetsi had requested the duty of bringing the captain. Kathryn suspected that had she any of Tom or B'Elanna in her at all, she would also want to get away from the formalities for a while, even in those last hours and minutes before taking on the lifetimes of generations. Then again, Ara and Anai would understand that, as well. They probably encouraged her to come when the idea struck her.

The transporter shimmer was a silent one. Typically Desalian, it bothered nothing and was as aesthetically pleasing as it was an example of their stable, assured technology. In the wash of blue, Havetsi's form appeared in the center of the bridge, her fair hands held before her. But though everyone there had seen her every day for the past six weeks, the bridge crew paused appropriately when the soon-to-be regent of Desal appeared.

Though not lavish by any means, she looked the role in her formal, well-fitted coat of embroidered blue silk, open around the collar and shoulders. The slits up the sides parted to reveal an amber undergown and dark leggings, and her white robe hung upon her arms. Hung around her waist and pinned into her thick brown braid tiers were simple orange beads on thin chains. A full complement of white scarves, woven into her braids and around her head, completed her ornate headdress and drifted nearly to the floor behind her.

Aside from a touch of balm on her lips and cheeks, she wore no cosmetics, and her posture seemed at home in that array. Her gaze was content, aware; her smile was bittersweet--accepting but hopeful.

Simply, the regent Yusi would have approved.

"Zha llast nya'o," Havetsi said, touching the indigo on her temple with her left hand and bowing, her gown and robe pooling onto the floor as she did. A full moment later, she drew herself upwards, circling her temple then offering her fingers to those watching her. Then, she offered her hand to the captain.

Kathryn took another breath, stepped forward. "Thank you for coming, Havetsi."

"My honor to bring you to my nali and tola now, Kathri," she said, drawing from her robe a long, embroidered sash. "Yet not as an outsider. You are a sister among us and shall always be remembered as such."

She moved forward and reached around Kathryn's torso to tie the sash at her waist. "I shall not bind you tightly, good kini'isi," she said lightly, and then smiled to hear the captain's small laugh. "Ka, Kathri--this is a time to celebrate memory and life, to bear joy and learning in our recollections."

As Havetsi's stare met hers again, Kathryn sighed through the same smile. "I haven't been doing this as long as you have," she said, trying. "You'll have to forgive me if I'm not as accepting."

"This is understood," Havetsi replied softly. Turning to her right, she opened her arms and moved to

embrace Chakotay. Her smile grew to feel his strong, warm arms return the gesture. "We shall meet again," she said, a traditional Desalian farewell, "when the blessed spirits call us as one."

"It's been an honor, Havetsi," he said, managing a grin for the woman...B'Elanna and Tom's descendent.

The deer, darting in the path of his vision... It seemed too plain to him then, especially in her expression, so direct yet with a touch of mirth, that little curl on her full, red mouth. If he hadn't given his word to the captain--and for that matter, were there time--he would rather have taken Havetsi aside just he used to do with B'Elanna and get the answers that he and Janeway both wanted. On the other hand, he suspected that was why Janeway was going to the surface, why the elders had asked her to come.

A part of him wished he'd been invited as well, though. He wanted to meet them again, knowing who they were. But he could see why they would only want the captain there. It'd been difficult enough for them just to tell the stories. So, he just took a breath, held his small smile and said, "Coming to know all of you has been very important to us. Thank you...for everything." He did mean that.

Havetsi understood. "It was my honor to share, dear friend." She reached again into a fold in her robe and extracted a slender bound file from a hidden pocket. "To aid your memory," Havetsi told him, placing the file in his hand. "Yet only when I am left just now, look. We would wish no thanks for it, only acceptance."

"What is it?"

"Patience, Chakotay," she smiled, reaching up to touch his marked forehead. "As I have at times managed such an art, it would be certain you might bear similar potential."

His responsive laugh, short but real, was pleasing enough a goodbye for her.

Without further ceremony, she touched her comm pin and looked around to all the faces she had come to know over their time there. "With peace and as one, all my friends, take yourselves. You shall be remembered well and dearly."

With that, she took Kathryn's hand and touched her pin again. A moment later, they dematerialized, as silently as Havetsi had come.

Chakotay waited for the beam to disperse completely before turning his eyes down to the file. When she handed it to him, he had hoped it might be what he wanted. But they had been told that there were no images from the occupation in the open archives...

*In the *archives,** he thought again and felt his lips twist upwards.

Turning up the catch and opening the cover, he first found a few replica pages of etchings--schematics with half Federation standard and half Desalian characters and notes on the edges, all drawn out by hand in dark red ink. Tom and B'Elanna's plans--one replicator, one ship's systems, another thing that looked like a power node. They had both written on them, front and back, a little sloppily, certainly not thinking that it would be an artifact someday.

When he flipped the last page, he had to squint at what he suddenly saw...

It was there again, that eerie feeling of presence that had never left him since they arrived in that region, when he listened to the stories, when he took his vision quests and came away empty handed.

Then, when Captain Janeway had asked him to her ready room to tell him about Ara and Anai. Or at the elders' wake, when he numbly watched from his comfortable distance, knowing he would not disturb those near-strangers' happy community as much as he'd wished he could. He hadn't sorted it all out--as much as he knew Janeway hadn't, either. But that time...

"You might want to see this, Harry," Chakotay said, unable to draw his eyes away from the images, and even less able to collect the choke of breath caught in his lungs.

Below at the gates of East Desal, Janeway turned a look at the younger captain. "You gave it to him, didn't you?"

"A copy of it," Havetsi grinned as she bowed to the greeting of another there. "I thought he might appreciate it." She took the lady's hand again. "Ab, Kathri. Nali and Tola await us."

With that, they began, their pace respectfully moderate. That particular street was not busy, but people still cleared the way for the women, knowing what they walked to. Though offering a small smile, the various denizens did not disturb their motion but with a breathed prayer for the easy passing of their beloved regents, and then respectful quietude.

Havetsi held her head pleasantly proud for the tradition and their sentiments. Indeed, the street became quiet enough that the rustle of her heavy garments echoed against the whitewash structures around them. Her left hand remained at rest on her upper abdomen, her eyes thoughtfully pointed towards the flagstone pavement, all as was proper in her place.

Kathryn still did not know what to say. What was there to say but "thank you" and "I'll miss you" and other empty sentiments, which really wasn't what she wanted? Rather, she wanted to cry, to debate it, to find options and methods--*order* them to... To do what?

Almost a week ago, the day after the memorial, the Ki'ial came with yet another batch of deuterium and various other supplies. While her co-captain Dejourra assisted Tuvok with the inventory and the crews unloaded the canisters and crates, Havetsi took Janeway aside for a cup of tracha.

"You have not viewed a portrait of Nali and Tola in their youth," she said quietly, setting aside the lists they had completed. "Nor has Desal but those who happened by the study and spied this. It was retained as well by Nali and Tola, with their memoirs."

Havetsi meant it as a kindness, she believed, but Kathryn felt her heart lurch to see how very much they had changed, how much they seemed to belong there...and not on Voyager.

Holding their brown-haired and properly fashioned son on the steps of the dais in Azlre's square, Be'i and Toma of Azlre were certainly older than the officers they had been. As tan as he had grown, she had remained fair for her many years in the shade of her cloak hood. Their broken bones had healed but their facades were changed; their temple markings were crinkled with their grins. Their day clothes were native Cezian from their cloth wrap shoes to their lightweight, fitted coats and casual muslin scarves. Beside them and a step above, two similarly attired Desalians sat in a partial embrace, likewise cheerful for the portrait. The woman's intricate brown braids and scarves and the man's red-blond spikes poking out of his headdress told her it was Sashana'i and Aratra. Kurt was sitting on the other side with Yasis on his lap; both were attempting to stop snickering for at least a moment. Susan, long haired, wearing a thick wrap dress and straight boots and kneeling by a girl--Marise--at the bottom, was pointing to the imager. She was smiling, but her eyes were far older. Placid and well postured in their airy clothing and handsomely tied white scarves, an elderly couple, Bakali and Bala, sat on the flagstone street beside

them. A grey-haired man and a strawberry-haired lady, likely Dalra and Miztri, stood at the corner of the steps, patiently allowing the image to be captured.

The four there she recognized--barely, at that--were not the people she knew. It'd been too much time, too much life on their own in the alien cultures they'd adopted, too many struggles and acceptances that molded them into what that portrait boasted.

The people Kathryn knew were gone. They no longer existed. The Unar had cut them off them ages ago and Irllae had taken the wilted branches and set them into their waters. There, they formed roots and flourished. The original plant was dead--and necessarily.

There was nothing she could do--no hope to be had.

She wanted that hope, though, at least some way to try, to try to find a way...to do the impossible: To turn it all back again, erase the past. But she'd known that she wouldn't do that, either. It *had* been worth all the sacrifices, every one of them. Anai and Ara both knew that, knew that continuing and upholding what they'd helped to do was more important than anything.

The trees and thick coral daknas, the typically white houses and corner glowglobes all passed slowly, blurring in her peripheral vision. She had become used to that walk and those buildings, the breezes and scents, and even the people on that street. The style of the city was much like Azlre, except that most of the Cezian city's structures were a combination of flats interconnected in three and four story buildings. More stately and carefully planned, housing in Desal usually meant three-story mansions with ample gardens stretching back from the street, suitable for a few generations of extended family. The rains, more common, allowed more lush flora and trees.

Ara and Anai had watched the Voyager crew carefully, made their decision not to reveal themselves. Taking example of their own honored spirits, they gauged their guests' responses then chose to give them a better chance to let go.

Unwillingly, Kathryn also made her choice, just as they turned at the fork in the street to another, where on the next corner sat the sprawling Allanois residence. It was tall and typically whitewashed, with arched, flower-draped windows. A short set of half-circle steps lead up to its large, windowed doors, and to the side and behind sat its exquisite garden. In all, the Allanois house was another example of everything they had worked for: A well-kept home on a stable homeworld, a happy, relatively carefree but upright, educated family, a place for friends, community and love--and secrets kept for what they felt was the better good.

As they approached the steps, Cera appeared at the entrance, dressed, like his bondmate, in his bonding day's clothes: red and umber silks and a robe of white that trailed slightly behind him as he came down the stairs to take his lady's hand and bow deeply to Kathryn. Havetsi in turn touched the captain's arm, asking once more with her eyes.

Taking a deep breath, straightening the sides of her uniform, Kathryn knew the one thing she wanted to say.

The house was decorated and filled with family, all in formal attire. Somewhere in another room, a soft song was playing and the essence of some rich spice was heavy in the air. Babaki came forward first to embrace and kiss her, and then Mar'lli and her twin sister Kyori, then Kolana and Petalla--Ara and Anai's five surviving children. The younger family members also greeted her, all in peace and gentle thanks for her presence, in friendship and love.

"We have visited them," Babaki told her as she helped Kathryn through the front hall, "and received their blessings. You and their heirs are all who remain in their wishes." The woman, glancing back to Osna for a moment, touched Janeway's temple softly. "I promise, good lady, at the start I was ignorant of you and yet willingly remained silent upon realization. I hope someday we may be forgiven...our own wishes."

Kathryn shook her head. "No, Babaki," she said quietly, "I think I understand why."

The older woman smiled. "Perhaps." Touching her again, she bowed her head respectfully. "Take yourself with peace, Kathri. We shall meet again."

Kathryn had to clear her throat for the lump forming there as she stepped onto the stone staircase, following Havetsi and Cera slowly upward, around the natural turn in the steps and up to the second level. At the end of a wide hall there sat two doors, draped with embroidered cloth and trimmed with flowers. On the floor in the corner, a bowl steamed with essence.

Her breath caught, but she forced herself to relax, to straighten, pull up her head and put on a face that would be more proper for saying good-bye, for wishing them well.

Havetsi and Cera stopped before the door to kneel, their heads bowed, wafting a stream of the essence to their faces.

"Tsa alji'irra mo'enad alv," they said in unison, "ke'em ra'is zhatsoll abil."

Janeway felt her entire body numb to view the scene, so beautiful with all the lush fabrics and gentle motions. It almost didn't seem real.

But then they found their silk-wrapped feet and, looking back, Havetsi offered Kathryn a smile--a pure, sweet smile beneath her clear gaze. Gesturing with a turn of her hand, she helped Kathryn forward to the threshold, where she led her to kneel, helped her bathe her face in the cooling, fragrant steam. Kathryn closed her eyes to feel it penetrate her, the scent and the moisture.

"Within this chamber, I find spirits on the edge of eternity," Havetsi whispered for her, "thus the stars shall bless our way here."

With Cera's polite assistance, Kathryn stood again as Havetsi pressed upon the doors. They eased open without noise, revealing the bright, airy room within.

She swallowed against her tears, even if they came anyway, to see the tableau.

Upon a bed of knotted blankets and several soft, embroidered pillows, at the far corner of the room, next to one of the wide-open windows, lay the bondmates, utterly still.

Kathryn stepped nearer, her eyes roaming up the white robe and maroon coat draped over the side of the bed and pooling on the floor. Beneath it, covering a tiny body and accented by ornaments, was a sap green gown etched with same-colored embroidery. Its length did not completely cover her dark wrap shoes. Braided into and around a crown of deep silver braids and long, jeweled hair was a sheer blanket of scarves. Beside, under a voluminous white robe, was a noble, dark green coat with blue embroidery, tied at the waist with an equally ornate sash. The long, blue tunic beneath was laced to the collar with colorful braided rope. The boots below the dark umber trousers were wrapped to the knees and tied with thin chain. The white headdress above it all was slightly crooked.

The two within it all looked at peace; their eyes were closed, their mouths pleasantly turned in their rest. Anai lay on her back with Ara spooned on his side beside her, as if they slept. So ancient. So kind. Almost gone.

Kathryn breathed a heavily controlled sob away, forcing herself to remember the Desalians' way. It was for them--not herself--she was there.

She had to let them go. She owed them that much.

She didn't want to; she had to ask, wanted another day, another month.

Kathryn sat, hardly moving the soft mattress as her weight depressed its side. She blinked a set of tears, staring at those ancient faces, loving them somehow, too, even if she could honestly say she barely knew them, despite everything she had been told. Those gentle, beautiful elderly people had remained alive for her and her crew, had wanted so much to give them all they had, while also protecting them. How she wanted to know them more, know them again...

Reaching out to touch Anai's cheek, Kathryn cupped her chin tenderly, seeing all over again the difference, feeling it through the cool, sallow skin. The lady breathed a little more at the contact. Kathryn's lips turned up slightly to see it.

Anai of Cezia's bright hazel eyes pulled open, her drooping lids like weights upon the motion. But it was not enough to prevent her from taking in the sight of the pretty captain, sitting there in her neat dress uniform with her hair pinned just so. Put together so properly and there to say goodbye, yet full with tears for a loss she completely understood that time. Knowing, but not accepting, the elder could tell. The child could not go that far. Anai had not expected her to. Indeed, she remembered her former captain all too well.

Anai pulled her hand up to the younger lady's fingers, paused, and then patted it. The tenderness of the act nearly erased the remainder of Kathryn's self-control.

"Oh Anai," she choked, shaking her head as she stroked the woman's cheek, "why didn't you tell us?"

Anai sighed through the tiny smile she managed. "I could not...make you hope," she whispered, "for a thing impossible. We could not...disappoint you...in such a way."

Kathryn breathed a short laugh for that, having her suspicions again confirmed. "I'd have had a little something rather than nothing," she told her. "You should have remembered that much about me."

Her smile turned a bit aside. "Ka, Child...this is truth. And yet, we have pained you exceedingly." Her stare grew wiser still as Kathryn shook her head again. "Gye, we have.... Forgive us. We wished only...to see whether it was meant."

"If what was meant, Anai?"

"Beneath this sun, Kathri, your forgiveness for the pain we have brought...and shall bring. I lie here with my bondmate yet wondering whether it should be meant. Even at present, you ponder possibility yet again. This has not been a simple matter for us."

The captain shook her head. "I still don't know what you're getting at," she said. "Why can't you just tell me?"

"Sashana'i wished we return to our birthpeople," she said, her thin voice but a rough rake in the air, "our bodies and minds restored to how you knew us. She labored and planned diligently for our sakes, and upon her and Aratra's passings, the remainder of the research was left to us. It shall not succeed as planned, however. It was attempted, in her honor, and perhaps...perhaps for our own curiosity as well. We did see the sense in it...a good thing, a completion. Yet this was not to be. Ara and I both now regret this. Your forgiveness, Kathri..."

Kathryn swallowed, seeing the apology in the lady's eyes. It was so clear just then, the captain could remember precisely the last time she had seen the expression. Blinking her tears away, she stroked the old woman's wrinkled cheek again. "B'Elanna..."

"Gye, Captain." Anai's thin fingers closed over those young, warm ones, softly though her gaze had grown solid. "She no longer exists, and she could not be resurrected, nor could Tom. Thus, the deception continued. We wished...wished that you recall your friends as strong and noble and as they were when they truly were themselves. I did not wish to tell you they still lived in our bodies, deep within us...yet were not our selves, not our truth. That which makes us Ara and Anai shall never be erased or buried. We would have given ourselves back to you had it not been for this. Forgive us, Captain, as our insecurity in this matter...has given you such pain. It was not intended."

"There was nothing to forgive... Well," Kathryn paused to reconsider that, and also how honest she wanted to be just then, "maybe I was angry for a while, but--"

"You bore awareness," Anai whispered, watching the lady's expression betray her again, "yet you have not asked. Havetsi has told me you struggle...with your own acceptance."

Kathryn's eyes turned down as she nodded. "I wanted to hear it--your explanation, like you promised me. But I couldn't ask it of you."

"Ka, I did promise you...so much promised...so much in my life." Anai's head turned up as her gaze drifted. "How much...happiness, anxiousness, we bore when...first we saw you." She blinked slowly, controlling her own emotion well for all her practice. "So strange, to see you again, like another's dream, and yet, ka, it belonged to us. Ara and I had wished, but to bear knowledge of you all...but once more.... For our histories to be heard by our family--both our families--promised more importance to us...than even you might suspect. It was our closure."

She almost didn't say it, but Anai stroked her thumb again, turned her head into her hand, staring up at her with a regard that she couldn't interpret. "Anai, to be honest," she said thickly, "you were right: I don't think that's going to be enough for me. We'll have lost you all over again--and frankly I didn't handle the first time well."

"Kathri, those youths *cannot* return. We attempted to make the balance our siblings had desired. It simply was not meant to be."

Kathryn started to hear her repeat it, to realize that the two *had* tried whatever they'd planned, tried to make it work--and not so unwillingly as she might have thought. She leaned closer. "Then we can try again, find another way. With all our people working on it, maybe we can go about it differently, maybe--"

"My people shall not recall such unnaturalness in Ara and me," Anai stated. "This sun's outcome shall be made by your place in fate. No more shall be done by us."

"What fate, Anai," Kathryn asked her, "when you won't even let us help you?"

"*Help us?*" Anai laughed, barely for her state, though her eyes shone with it. "Our memories of you bear more clarity than I once believed. It was Sashana'i who begged us...bade we swear upon her passing moments to continue...with you. For the sin of it alone, it would not have been considered had it not been for that plea. And yet...her desire was pressed upon us; its purpose through her eyes could be seen when her memories settled within us. For that reason, we wished to see whether her desires were meant, were possible.

"Yet the outcome offered far less importance to us as it did her. Her desire, inescapable within us, drove us. She truly believed...that it was meant, the balance of fate, as did Aratra. It tempts us even now, as...as I still hear her pleas.... It has never left us, Kathri. We promised, upon her and Aratra's passings. And we accepted it."

"But you couldn't commit to it, because...?"

"For it would not succeed as planned. It was impossible...for Ara and me. It was kept from you to prevent your attempting an impossible thing--for you would attempt it. This much of your nature is indeed well remembered. Yet you would only find disappointment in our denying your efforts. We would not have that...when you have felt the losses of your own enough, as you yet admit now."

Janeway sighed heavily with the truth of her statement and the understanding of her position. "Yes. But I would have at least liked to have had the chance to try."

Anai exhaled; it was as much a sigh as much as a realization of exactly what she had put upon the lady before her. It was not as much a hope lost as a hope disallowed. "My apology...sincerely, Captain. Again, it must be said, we never wished to bring you pain."

Kathryn nodded, squeezing Anai's fingers before wiping hastily at her eyes. "I know."

With a soft stroke, Anai's fingers softly fell away from Kathryn's while her other hand tugged on Ara's fingers. She nuzzled her head against his neck, closed her eyes to rouse him. With a tiny, clicking inhale, he proved himself alive. She pressed her fingers in his palm.

Kathri has brought herself, my spirit. Have you heard?

I have listened...

With a greater effort than Anai's, Ara's eyes opened, first upon nothing, and then upon the captain. He too felt that teary stare. She knew exactly what she was looking at: Corpses, really, of two youths she had taken under her wing, hiring one from a prison, giving the benefit of the doubt to the second. It had not been very long ago in that captain's mind, only a year ago.

Ara understood in but that glance what Anai had sensed just then: The woman's silent lament, far more acute than before, overwhelming desire knowing its own futility. This time, Janeway knew precisely what had been lost.

Kathryn had to swallow again to see the old man, Ara, his little smile unchanged as his eyes flickered over her, examining her briefly then finding her gaze: So familiar, even then, and yet totally foreign in both hue and presence. There was no trace of youth, uncertainty, or ignorance in him, without a doubt. But the former pilot's peculiar intentness had not waned in the bargain, not with age, nor on his

deathbed. For the familiarity of his perusal, she half-expected him to grin and formulate something wry to break the gloom.

The other half of her expectation held more truth, however. He did not speak. Instead, his fingers tightened upon his lady's palm as he watched Janeway try to keep herself together, try to smile back in a way he might recognize. But she did not need to display such airs. He recalled her well enough, and he had indeed been observant of her during the crew's visits, this aside from his bondmate's memories, which he shared in full.

We did suspect she would know our truth, he sadly knew, and regret her desires.

She aches anew, Anai agreed, yet more than the first time. Our wisdom this past du've considered our difficulties, not this reality.

This us agreed. And yet, it is done. It is what shall be next which matters now.

Anai blinked as she felt Ara's finger tremble in her palm, pulled another hard breath to catch Kathryn's attention again. "On the bureau, child," she rasped softly, "there is a box...and within, the same gift I and Ara have bestowed upon our family."

Breaking her stare at Ara, Kathryn looked. With another glance at Anai, who nodded, she rose to move across to find a hand-carved box about forty centimeters square and twenty high. Peeking inside, she saw a neat storage of data chips and a viewing device.

Their memoirs...all their stories, she understood. The answers she sought, had wanted at first to demand from the old woman, had been annoyed not to get.

Suddenly, that wasn't important anymore. Not there, not with what was happening just then. Two of her people, good people, well liked and talented, were dead. Another two, young, troubled bridge officers whom she had taken a personal interest in, now only just discovered, were dying twice over.

She had come into the Barrier seeking those people, but she had missed their entire lives. They had watched her, told her...

Anai watched the lady's shoulders sag, tremble slightly, and she clutched her own small breath to see tears drop again from Kathryn's cheeks onto her pretty uniform. Havetsi stood aside with Cera, politely silent. The children's spirits were troubled at the sight as well, longing, hoping, knowing what could have been...yet would not be, because of their elders' rightful hold upon that fate.

They care but for to hold onto what they know, should they be able, Ara's thoughts drifted within her. She cannot accept. She shall move forward, yet memory of us shall always bring her pain. A commander's conscience...one sort known well here.

We shall continue here in blood and spirit, Anai acknowledged, yet the others shall continue depleted. We may have released them, yet they have been given no choice in the same. For her and Kes the manner of it has been far more tragic. We are needed, and yet we withhold. The child wishes chance so.

Kathryn turned, the box in her pale hands, thanking her with a small smile, still longing in her misted eyes.

Perhaps we have acted wrongly for good reasons, as it is said. Thus...?

You cannot tell me you bear no mind about this, Ara.

You know well how much I do. Is this what you imagine to be meant, for all our consideration of the subject? For all our stubbornness and silence?

It is for her alone now, I would think. She continued to regard the captain. Her hands clenched the box as she swallowed again. Or should it be that we toss one more element into the breeze for the chance of rain? The fate we gamble remains ours this moment.

One tightly held according to our desires.

Far be it from us to be selfish.

Had he the strength by then, he would have grinned at her point. He could almost see her little smirk. It shall not be an addition of pain, I would suppose, for her to bear at least the attempt, as she has said.

Giving them all our truth was what we originally feared, however, she reminded him.

That singular hesitance has not been relinquished, as well.

And yet, it could be said little may be lost. We have ended here. All that was needed of us here is completed...

And to pass with debt is what was least wished by us. Yet our deep wishes remain. Which shall be?

The captain took a step back towards them, Havetsi and Cera's attention had returned to them as well.

Fate must choose, ka, as there shall not be contentment in us to leave knowing we have bequeathed her such conscience. To offer her the remainder would pay our debt.... Yet I so desire our passing. This is truly felt, Ara. I bear such tiredness, and so much has been done by us; we have worked so relentlessly these many years. What purpose would be possible?

I too would wish we would find our passing presently. We shall rest, Anai...and in other manners, we never shall. Our spirits shall remain unchanged regardless. What their fate would make of us is the question.

Turning her gaze, Anai found Ara's eyes.

Not that our choices have ever been directly procured. This is a risk for us to choose.

Again--truth. Yet we make of fate's response all we can, I should believe.

As it has always been. Only what is meant...

Shall be.

Her eyes closed.

"There is another," Anai said and swallowed at the finality of their decision. "The way must be cleansed, as a way yet exists." Feeling the pains increase in her chest, she decided to carry it through. "Upon the first shelf," she whispered, "the small carved box. Bring it."

Havetsi and Cera both released their breath.

Kathryn turned, confused by Anai's quick words and the two behind her, but soon found another, smaller case, about fifteen centimeters square. Anai gave her a single nod. Moving back to the bedside, the captain sat again. Her swollen stare asked the question.

"The first box," Anai answered softly, feeling a tremble begin in her and Ara's soothing thoughts follow it, "contains all our histories...our memoirs, all the answers you seek and far more: In the front...coordinates and a program lie...which Kes and the Doctor have been endeavoring with--"

"Kes?" Kathryn looked at them, shaken from her tears with that little surprise. "What--"

"Hear me, Child," Anai cut in, painfully dragging her air. Ara was trying, but his body possessed no strength; she had little left to hold him. Nor did she attempt to, despite the ache. "The first program is for...Susik and Derra. The second case...open it."

Kathryn placed the second box on her lap and pulled open the top--then stopped.

"Beneath the charm, Kathri," Anai instructed in a halting whisper. She did not have time to allow Kathryn a full perusal of the commbadge Gychak had carried, interesting as it might have been to the lady. "Place the charm aside...for my children; look...to the rear of the box. Behind the data chips, lies the other program Sashana'i...would have you possess, and what...we now give."

Looking--glancing to the elders who watched her, glassy-eyed--Janeway found a small PADD tucked in behind the rest and extracted it. With Anai's blink, she activated it. In but a paragraph, she found her eyes widening at the summary explanation.

In that second, recognizing what the technical information was saying, she felt her tears stopping, her heart beating faster. She turned a stunned stare back to Anai.

Feeling her bondmate's cheek twitch, Anai decided one more time, resolved with what she knew would likely happen should she say it...

"Use your best judgment, Child," she breathed, her smile faded, her eyes blankly set into Janeway's. "What is meant to be, shall be done." Her small hand turned with a shudder to take Ara's fully into hers. "This is...no longer our fate...to grasp. You have been...given the remainder, all which we initially were asked to give...even hope."

Kathryn looked at Havetsi. Her eyes had misted above her smile. Cera, too, smiled and embraced his wife from behind.

"Take yourself," Anai breathed, regaining the woman's attention, "quickly, Kathri. Or know...the spirits shall greet...ones who welcome them. Know this most: We regret nothing...have completed *all* that has been wished. We have lived fully, most happily and are...at peace, now."

Kathryn took up the PADD and the first box, clutching them against herself as she looked at the elders once more. Their faces were indeed peaceful, and they no longer looked at her. Ara's hand twitched in Anai's, his eyes fluttered as he tried for another breath. Anai, breathing just before him, seemed to be keeping them alive at that point.

"Thank you," was all Janeway could say before standing. She would have touched them, embraced them, but there was no longer time, she realized, and her hands were full...in more ways than one. The

elders had just put their bodies and spirits in her hands--an undeniable act of trust, she understood completely.

What in the world do I do with it now? flew into her mind...

But then she saw the small, secret smile Anai gave to her spirit-children, still standing by. Kathryn turned to see Havetsi indeed filled with relief and pride; in Cera, there was satisfaction.

"Havetsi, Cera..."

She shook her head and stepped forward to kiss her farewell. "Obey our elders, good sister," she said, smiling. "See after them with love, as we all of Desal would have it. And remember us always, as we shall you."

Kathryn looked again to Anai and Ara. The former blinked a tiny nod of approval; her bondmate's lips twitched slightly. "I promise," she said.

With an embrace from Cera, an affectionate touch to her temple as well, Kathryn started out, taking one last look back to the unmoving bed, where the heirs already had arrived to receive the Allanois legacy.

For all the time that had passed since she came to Desalia, there was so little left.

"Zha hevrra," Kathryn told them. Then she turned to leave, hurrying through the doors and to the stairway, already mentally plotting how long it would take her to get back to the gates, back up to Voyager, to the transporter controls, calling Kes and the Doctor...and she would definitely be having a talk with Tuvok for keeping that from her, too, promise or no.

But first was activating the program and setting in the three separate coordinates...

A little surprised but rather pleased when they saw all she carried, the family let her go without disturbing her path.

As she skipped out of the house and down the front stairs, pulling out the PADD again to read en route, Babaki and Osna found their way into the open door. Smiling after the captain as she quickly disappeared in the street, they turned back to their brothers and sisters, who stole their last glance at the departing lady through the front windows.

"Perhaps it is meant after all," Babaki said, leaning into Osna's arm.

"Yet to what effect?" Osna mused. "It would be interesting to know what shall come of it."

"We shall see, among our ancestors," Mar'lli grinned back, turning her gaze up towards a point beyond them all. "Yet, in all, it is done, and their spirits finally have acquired peace; their conscience is at rest, regardless of how their desires are tended."

"Yes, my sister," Babaki agreed. "There would be acceptance, were there nothing more."

As a soft breeze tickled the chimes outside the window and rustling leaves teased dots of sunlight into the chamber, Cera carefully maneuvered himself to sit comfortably beside Ara. Havetsi had already taken Kathryn's place on the other side of the elders, embracing Anai's left hand in both of hers.

"You are beloved by us," Anai whispered, simple in her farewell. "We shall await...our meeting again with pride and...contentment, in all of you. Live in peace, with humility...yet strength...and with love...as always, Children."

"We shall carry the line wisely, as you would have seen fit, Nali," Havetsi answered, "and shall leave it to the same."

"Our child and all children present and following shall know and honor you both as we do," Cera added.

Anai was pleased enough with that; she twitched her fingers. Havetsi and Cera both got the message. Respectively, they placed their hands atop their elders', running their center finger down the correct line of nerve, blinked slowly. In return, both elders did the same, far more practiced in the art.

"Zha hevrra," Ara breathed, the last of his strength saved for those final moments. "This...sun...all...we bear...we give you..."

"In the name," Anai finished, "...of Allanois."

The first thing Cera and Havetsi felt, however, was their love.

Kathryn nearly tripped in her pace, but continued on, reading as she walked just under a run down the stone streets of Desal.

Nicoletti and Bendera, upon their deaths, had been placed in stasis by their families, knowing precisely what could come of it. The bodies had been stored at a small medical facility just outside Desal. The directions were relatively straightforward; the procedure was difficult but possible--with the proper modifications made to Voyager's transporter systems, as it were.

Little wonder Havetsi was so concerned about our transporters, she thought, glancing up to see the gates looming at the end of the avenue.

Nicoletti and Bendera did not become Desalian, Janeway suddenly realized as she scrolled down. For Paris and Torres, the kraja, their bonding, their meditation practices, scholarship and the resulting physiological reconfigurations from it all had made their neurological framework impossible to revert without significant risk to them--made tampering with the memories they possessed an unmanageable hypothesis at best and an even more complicated procedure if attempted.

Anai and Ara gave her the plan anyway. Out of pity? Out of a sudden change of heart? Out of their unending habit of tossing fate to the wind? --Most likely the first. Anai did not seem anxious to tell her about the second box, but had rather needed to decide on it...to commit completely.

Now it was in their former captain's hands to follow her heart, too, to actively hope their promise was meant.

She had little trouble with that. She'd be damned if it was an impossible hope--a sentiment they had predicted. *Good thing they still know me.*

"Janeway to Bridge, prepare one for transport. Send Kes to transporter room one and alert the Doctor

to expect patients from the surface. --He'll know what to do. And instruct engineering to bring the upgraded transporter systems online."

"*Captain?*" It was Chakotay, predictably taken off guard.

"I'll explain later," she returned, skipping up to a jog as she neared the gates. "Just do it."

A rain of consciousness, as like their bonding, or like the first memories they collected as scholars, but it was a rain that seemed unending, gently filling every crevice of the paths within them, pooling in corners, sinking into the rolling land...

Havetsi collapsed into Anai's robes shortly after Cera had drooped onto the pillow beside Ara. But the elders were not completed. Far more careful in their transferal than their own inheritance had been, they opened each pathway using every proof of their training and century of experience, eased in the memory of one, paused to assess its stability then proceeded to the next.

It progressed steadily, however. Barely ten minutes into the procedure, they were nearing completion. Naturally, the children were exhausted, overburdened, deluged with knowledge and details no training could have perfectly prepared them for. Twenty-nine Allanois, plus several more collected along the way, the oldest ones slightly dimmed with time, the most recent quite vivid, the elders knew all too well how much it was to give--and receive.

However, the children had borne their preparation well and did not resist, even by instinct. Their bodies were limp, but their minds and spirits were open. They drifted in and out of each moment, willfully not catching onto anything of interest--which was much, both in pain and pleasure, male and female, child and elder; one incomplete, all others ending at the point just before the passing, the histories poured in. Indeed, the youths welcomed them all, felt them fill them seemingly to the edge of capacity until, finally, the lengthy bath of memories belonging to the elders was completed.

Then, as suddenly as the wash of knowledge began, it stopped, and both pairs were left staring into each other's eyes on the plain of their consciousness and on that bed, knowing one another in every moment. The elders held nothing but adoration in their regard; the new regents struggled to pull their heads upright, but did not force their responding smiles.

You are the future...and we are of Desal's past. You are the Allanois Regents, Desal's center among all and teachers of all that has been. Be wise and kind in humility and giving, always, our blessed children.

Upon all you have given, all yet to be gained in our futures, we promise you we shall.

Until we meet again among the ancestors, Havetsi and Cera, be at peace, as we, Anai and Ara, now are.

With that, Cera and Havetsi gently disengaged their contact, placed their elders' hands within each other's then positioned them again in the traditional manner for bondmates, curled into each other. Before she stood away, Havetsi kissed them both tenderly in farewell.

"Zhra'i ka, Nali, Tola...Anai, Ara Ceziati'o," she whispered and almost fell when she got to her feet. With Cera's help, they managed themselves over to the pillows, where they gladly kneeled to pray for the

spirits of their elders, and for their own in their new duty.

Ara exhaled deeply, taking in his lady's scent, the perfume of her hair--just a tiny breath before his lungs allowed it to escape.

Anai's eyes drifted over briefly to the children, who prayed silently, and then to the mural of Mecrisop, looming past.

They both saw it, the place where they knew...finally knew what their being would be, nearly a moon after the trauma of their creation....

"Toma! Be'i!"

Sashana'i turned right after Aratra had, laughing aloud and waving roundly to the figures moving across the field, outside the gates of Desal. "We have succeeded, my beloved siblings!"

"Ka, we have, Sashana'i!" Be'i called back, snuggling herself into Toma's arm as they trudged steadily forward. "It is a sun for us all to be blessed by!"

With another kiss, Aratra started towards them; Sashana'i skipped along after, practically glowing under Desalia's sun, finally risen.

"One might think they had recently won a war, or the like," Toma quipped, earning Be'i's sidelong grin as he picked up their pace. They were both exhausted; his side was killing him and she couldn't wait to close her eyes a while once her nerves settled. That would have to wait, however. Just then, they were more anxious to share that amazing victory with their siblings and friends.

But then, Sashana'i stopped, squinting at something behind them. She almost blocked it with a hand, but then she jerked her stare back to them. "Toma! Be'i!" she screamed.

They turned and saw the Unar re-aim his pistol, instantly blinding them with the glare from the rising sun. Toma swiftly swung Be'i around and down to the dirt, only looking up to see Aratra running for Sashana'i.

"No!" Be'i yelled, scrambling towards Aratra even as she heard the disruptor activate.

At the same time, Toma whipped his hand down for his pistol--aimed...

Aratra dove, but the disruptor beam struck him cleanly between the shoulder blades. With a cry, he fell, the shot spreading across his back, through his bones...

...and fired--then again.

Sashana'i gasped aloud and collapsed in mid-stride, just as the Unar officer fell under Toma's fire.

Be'i froze. "No," she breathed, staring, knowing... "No, no, no, no... No! Sashana'i!"

Crawling desperately over the rough grass to her sister's side, she looked down at Sashana'i, who lay in

a state of shock--and not for Aratra's injury, but more that it had actually happened. Be'i looked her over, watched her tawny skin quickly pale, her bright eyes dart around to Aratra, only a meter away. Toma was already trying to assess him, but she knew...

"Aratra and I are for the spirits now," Sashana'i muttered, unwilling to admit it--or wishing it was not the truth. But it was. She, blood regent of Desal, was passed with her bondmate...*On this sun of Desal's liberation, beneath the dawn sun of Desal...*

She had no choice but acceptance. As the shock died away and her body began to weaken, she realized the one thing she could not demand of the spirits.

But Desal and its fate instantly made her reconsider that finality. Her eyes turned to Be'i and focused.

Without requiring a moment to think on it, she knew her siblings could bear properly...were they to accept it. They would. They would take it, as they had taken the rest.

"Not yet," Be'i told her, cupping Sashana'i's face in her hands. "Not yet. There is too much need of you and Aratra. Desal needs you yet--Toma and I need you. You and Aratra may *not* leave us! Please make yourself remain--you must attempt to remain and hold him!"

"I would wish this," Sashana'i whispered, "yet sadly even you may not sustain us, my sister. You bear not the way...yet."

Others off the landing pad jumped and ran towards the gates to re-secure the area. Some ran back to the ship for medical equipment.

But Sashana'i knew better of it. Even as Toma tried to assess Aratra's injury...

"It is not meant," Sashana'i whispered, feeling her throat thicken and her lips begin to tremble with tears and pain. Even then, looking up to her sister, over to her brother... *The passing shall find Aratra with speed. Yet they...they are unharmed...and Allanois would enjoy them in all propriety....* As much as she did not wish to submit them to what she had undergone years before, she knew they were strong, able and rightful--and she knew her ultimate priorities, too...

"It is not meant...for Aratra and I," she resolved. Before Be'i could ask her, Sashana'i reached up and grabbed her hand. "Please, Be'i, Toma, do not see us pass unclaimed! Do not allow the legacy to pass with us!"

"What I might do," Be'i told her, "shall be done, Sashana'i. This should never be doubted. Toma?"

He blinked a nod of agreement. "Tell us what is required."

Sashana'i jerked her chin towards her bondmate. "Take Aratra's hand."

Toma scowled at first, but seeing where Sashana'i's fingers were clutching, he turned back to Aratra, letting out a calming breath even as he committed to what he suspected was about to happen. He took the limp hand beside him and slid his palm over his brother's fingertips. Aratra's arm and face twitched, then his thumb curled slightly over one of Toma's fingers. "Ti'al madvilas navna'a ya'a," Toma breathed then drew another breath. "I'eva tsa..."

Having glanced at Toma, hearing his words, Sashana'i rotated her fingers into Be'i's palm. "My body is but that..." she whispered, trembling for the lancing sensation spreading in her torso, and then

continued, "...and shall pass back to the earth. Allanois must survive in your living spirit." She slid her center finger down the nerve in the base of her sister's hand, remembering precisely where it was. "Forgive me, my siblings, that this must be. It must be meant."

"Sa--"

Be'i's words cut off when Sashana'i's other hand came up and grasped her sister's head, her thumb pressing to her temple.

*It must be meant. It *shall* be meant!*

A voiceless scream racked Be'i's entire core as she threw her head back, her eyes bolting wide at the force of contact. She did not even notice Toma collapse behind her, struggling for his own breath as soon as Aratra's hand reflexively gripped his own. Suddenly, without warning or prelude, not the gentle initiation of her elders or Toma's thoughtful touches, the memories began to rush into her.

Where her bonding had been a steady trickle of consciousness, Sashana'i's delivery of her family's memories was a like a violent storm, crashing into her mind moment by moment, forced within her too quickly...too quickly...

Birth, running, pain, intimacy...

Be'i began to cry...

....rain, threat, trades, illness...

On her elbows and knees before, her shoulders buckled and gave in....

....splendor, food, strolls, desire...

Her head fell onto Sashana'i's breast; she dragged every breath, unable to resist the flood...

....parents, bondmates, bondings, friends,

The others cascaded in... So many others...only two that she recognized...

....faces, meals, escapes, tortures...

Too quickly...

One after the other, they ripped into her mind, filing into the crevices of her being without plan or pattern. They flashed before her, all their memories, all their learning, all their thoughts and feelings...

Within herself, she heard Toma cry out somewhere near yet far away, felt his shock couple with her own. But Sashana'i only clutched Be'i's temple more tightly when resistance was sensed, her hand nearly breaking hers, desperate to get it all across...

It slowed, pressing in the remaining images of centuries ago...

It stopped upon the last, the most distant birth, from which that particular line had begun.

It was done...all of it.

Be'i stilled, then...

Swear it to me! Promise upon my passing! You must--there shall be no equity in my spirit. Please, Be'i, Toma! Swear to me you shall!

Sashana'i was suddenly within her conscious mind again, pleading with all that was left of her slowing heart, pouring her last moments into her only desire aside Desal.

Be'i shook her head. She didn't know, couldn't understand...

Carry on Desal, Sashana'i wept within her. I shall despise myself unto eternity for having given this to you, as you shall never know peace with it. By the ancestors, I do not wish this, though Allanois must survive to guide and continue to restore our people...

To this request, she sensed acceptance push through Be'i's shock and confusion. She had not expected otherwise. She knew her siblings were as dedicated as she and Aratra to Desal's reclamation.

You shall guide them well. In this, I bear much faith. Yet there is more...

When Sashana'i's hand fell away from her temple, Be'i pulled her swaying head to stare into her sibling's wide-open eyes. With the remainder of her energy, Sashana'i held their consciousness there, away from the pasts, swirling beyond like a tempest held by a sheer net. Sashana'i kept them all back, to tell her...finally tell her...

It was my doing, Be'i. You both were called forth to this wretched place by my prayers. You were retained by my selfish needs, and now I have paid the price for my sin...my greed and despair. Yet not all of Desal must suffer for me--it is cleansed through my passing. I take my sin to Prihar...

You are not taken to Prihar! Be'i finally asserted. *It was meant that Toma and I were brought to this place.*

Peace shall be found only in balance, Sashana'i returned. I deceived you. I never told you of the Barrier, though I knew of it. I kept you here, allowed you Desal in your spirits, for I knew. I wished so that you and Toma would help me bring Desal from its state. Ka, I did this, Be'i! I sinned against you both, whom Aratra and I did love.

Be'i first stilled at the confession, but then dismissed it. *Toma and I chose this place--it was meant that we be here. We would not have left you--could not have. Our fate was set here by our circumstance. I believe this, Sashana'i.*

*Yet it might not have been without my interference! --Allow me my guilt, Be'i. I deceived you as easily as I loved you.... You *should* feel anger at me. I deserve far worse, your life spent in despise of me, for all I have done to you--even this sun. I have given you all the unrest that had driven me unto my crimes as regent. It all is yours now.*

Be'i's head dropped slightly, the trembling beginning again. Even Sashana'i in health might not have held back the torrent of history at the dam of her forward mind, threatening to consume her...

After what my life proved of me, how could I feel hatred for you? You did lie. This is seen, Sashana'i. You gave all you could for Desal, yet your use of Toma and me was secondary--and not against our will, only in our ignorance.... Please take yourself with peace...

There is but one way about that--another selfishness of mine.

Tell me.... Please do not take yourself in guilt. Not after Toma and I have lived so long with freedom from our own regrets, we would never wish it of another. It shall haunt us--and you--and this we do not wish.

Promise me you shall balance fate's gift. My passing wish, Be'i: Promise me you shall continue your life with your birthpeople.

Be'i immediately retreated. It is not wished to return. This is our true home; we do not belong there--

Sashana'i held on. There is a way to return you the way you were when you first arrived at Irliae, while you may live here as long as it pleases...

Within herself, Be'i suddenly saw the plan--to reintegrate their DNA from Voyager's databanks using their transporters. At any age or at the point of their passings... It was insane. It couldn't happen. --No, it could. There was precedent in Desalian medicine--and in Starfleet, according to one of Toma's memories, an interesting note from the Federation database he had read after a transporter malfunction on Voyager.... The reintegration could be done with a modification of...

Toma's memories! Where... And mine! Be'i's eyes shot open to find Sashana'i's filling with water...

I have said you should despise me. I stole from you your beings, against every notion of propriety, for I needed you, your strength and wits.

Then Be'i saw the field at Uillar, stepping over Hychar's corpse to nearly fall upon their lifeless bodies. In her despair, she connected her consciousness to theirs, sustaining them, crying to the spirits once again for a favorable fate, stretching out her energy to keep theirs from fading away...

You held us among the living even then, Be'i realized, her stare easing to know what Sashana'i had done. All that she had done, which had been demanded both by her desires and by the dreams of those memories she held...so many memories. You maintained us among the living against Hychar, you stood for our protection, sacrificed yourself for our sake... Sashana'i, your doings might have been sins in your eyes, and ka, there was selfishness in your reasons, yet you acted for love and preservation, as well. It is an untoward balance, yet you and Aratra are not criminal.

Sashana'i blinked, ignoring the absolution. Promise me, Be'i. --With Susik and Derra, promise me you shall develop this way, return to your birthpeople when your life among Desal is to cease, to your crew and someday your families--families who need you, whose destinies are not completed, whose threads in life shall be incomplete without you...

Be'i could not promise that, not without... Toma...please... She felt him listening, though overcome, unable to touch her...

...Your forward mind would not recall this life, thus it shall not be any encumbrance for you to simply extend your body's experience. Your spirits, meanwhile, shall always be your own and shall always know their truth, which is Desal--all you have been blessed with and all you treasure this sun. You may pass to the spirits later than what is natural, yet you shall pass someday and be among the spirits as you desire. Be'i, there shall be no peace for us otherwise--nor any true balance in you, as you must face your fate among those of your birth...

Be'i saw their faces when Sashana'i recalled them for her: A captain's struggles far from home, her gift of trust to two who did not deserve it; a solid friend, who stood beside her; a young man who turned his back on reputation and gave his friendship in spite of it all. Farther, and there was a father, looking plainly...a mother stubbornly insisting, another mother sadly resigned, another father longed for but never looked for...all forsaken for strife and painful youth, and others gone from them yet never reclaimed, others left in wait, a people left behind for fear, immaturity and opposition.... So many open doors willingly left behind.

Indeed, they had barely looked at that past but in bland memory, had gladly moved away from it and took on their present life, first for the impossibility of returning and then for conscious choice.

They all must be faced again someday, Be'i, else you shall never find completion. These people are a part of the destiny from which I took you and now must keep you from yet longer.

Be'i shook her head. *Toma and I would yet have remained.*

This is known--and you shall remain. Yet you must not find your passing unclaimed by your birth. --I must know you have promised to carry Desal.... Please! I wish not to pass, yet you shall carry on for me--you and Toma shall take Allanois as your own and return--

We are not the blood regents! Be'i insisted. We may only hold this place for another.

*No other exists. You are my and Aratra's siblings, publicly declared and accepted throughout Desal and Irliae. The others who know you shall support you and my passing wish. --You are Desalian, Be'i. Whatever Human and Klingon gave you life, and whatever responsibility you yet bear to those beginnings, you bear the kraja and its changes to your physiology, and you are accepted by the spirits in your bonding. This is what being Desalian is. You bear the Allanois legacy now as well, which also can never be removed; it lies eternally within your spirit. *This* is far stronger than blood. --You must!*

Toma! She felt him reaching for her. She needed his touch, too--reached blindly out with the hand Sashana'i wasn't holding.

...And when fate has finished with you here, you shall give this legacy unto another of your choosing...and you shall be given back to the people of your birth--and they to you. This shall balance what I have disrupted...

Finally, Be'i felt Toma's hand, grabbing hers so hard her knuckles cracked. She whipped her head up to see his ghostly expression, his shuddering and shock...equal to hers. He jerked his hand up to her temple, apologizing already for what he bore within him, too. *Aratra...among so many...so much...*

Please! Sashana'i begged. Below, on the ground, her body had begun to shudder. Her skin was white with death; her grip was loosening. Her eyes, her trembling lips--her entire face radiated her need. She was passing without that one completion.

Promise me, Be'i, Toma! Promise me you shall continue for us--and for your birthpeople...

Be'i recaptured Toma's glazed stare.

Sashana'i became shrill within them, crying out, *I beg you! Fate must be allowed its natural course among your birth, what my selfishness has estranged. I beg you both! --Oh, my ancestors, why is this brought to me, for all I have sacrificed and desired in your name?! This is not wished! I and Aratra*

wished to continue, dreamed so fervently! --Please promise me! Be'i, Toma! I implore you! There is nothing more but this!

Be'i began to tremble. Toma couldn't breathe.

The flood was nearing in them, willing over in their minds. All the voices, threatening to smother, calling to them behind Sashana'i's pealing cries, Aratra's last thoughts before Toma pulled himself away...echoing through them, smashing into their defenses, bending the dam to the point of breakage as Sashana'i weakened further...

I shall never rest in you without your promise--your acceptance of the fate you shall know is truth.

Their gazes sank into each other's, lost there...yet knowing their duty.

They once told each other they would sacrifice themselves for Desal.

They would all live in guilt if they denied their siblings that only means of correcting what Sashana'i so truly felt was her greatest sin, which Aratra had supported and assisted. Even without that threat, they did not wish their siblings to pass in agony.

The rest was already done. The legacy could not be reversed. It pressed forward upon their minds, which they knew would not survive the breaking of that wall. And yet, more than any of it, they knew their adopted brother and sister were to leave the living, would be no longer among them and asked only to go with peace...

We promise.

They looked down to her again. She had stilled at their oath.

We promise, you Sashana'i, we shall do as you wish...

Be'i pulled her sister's hand to her heart. The limb was cold.

Despite any of what Sashana'i and Aratra might have done to secure Desal--they certainly could have done so much more with less heavy conscience about it--their siblings had been beloved by them. That love was entirely mutual, Be'i silently pressed.

They would miss them for all their lives, until the spirits would reunite them. They would fulfill all the dreams they shared, bring truth to their promises, regardless of their own hesitations. They would make it possible, all that they could.

They promised.

Sashana'i's hand fell away from her sister's as a tiny smile flickered upon her lips--a continued apology in her gratitude. Be'i leaned down, kissed her then embraced her tightly. Sashana'i pressed her cheek to Be'i's soft curls and glanced up to Toma's straining face.

"It...pleases," she breathed, her throat closing even as she managed the sound. Then her head rolled the other way. "Ar...a-tra..."

His own experience flashing before all the others, moving forward, crawling up upon his mind, Toma knew. As Be'i instantly turned out of the way, he crawled back to Aratra, grabbed his arm to drag him

closer--to his bondmate's side, as was the tradition. The body did not respond, even when Toma rolled it onto its side. Touching his brother's head gently in goodbye, he put Aratra's hand on Sashana'i's.

They watched as Sashana'i dipped her finger into Aratra's palm. With one last look at Desalia's morning-lit sky, a twitch of a grin, she turned her gaze.

Her eyes closed; Aratra drew a puff of breath, and then released it as she did her last. Their eyes opened upon each other's.

Then, they stilled.

People were running all around them, crafts buzzed in the air, disruptor pistols fired somewhere in the distance, calls of people back and forth rang out, and the breeze stirred as a thin cloud blocked the sun, cooled the air; the short, weedy grass rustled. All of it tunneled into what only was before them...and then into what was within them.

Sashana'i and Aratra did not move again.

Gaping at the tomb on the open grass, Be'i choked a tearless sob. Gone...

Then, suddenly, she couldn't cry and her head began to twinge, swollen behind her eyes. The voices, Sashana'i and Aratra's included, began to rise within her mind...splashing over the dam...

Her instincts told her first, *They are not mine, this does not belong to me--reject it, do not...*

Yet she knew it did belong to her. All of it had been given to them both--as had the whole of Desal. All of it...

Just another moment...please just another moment, not yet, not yet...

She looked at Toma. He was terribly still, moving only to meet her stare.

Dread. Desire. Longing. Knowledge. Sadness. Wisdom. Love. Hope...

Their expressions were identical.

Shock. Fear. Fatality.

"Be'i," he choked.

"I am here, Toma," she managed, raising her hands to him.

As Toma's arms enclosed around her, she felt the wall crack. With their sister and brother gone, they could not hold it themselves. They were not trained, nor were they born to it. In their last lucid thoughts, they knew with complete certainty it would bury them.

Their bodies pressing together, their shuddering became simultaneous. They blinked, trying to see what was physically there, not the memories flashing in their minds.

But only seconds later it all burst forth: Wave after wave, lifetimes upon lifetimes, all rushed upon their beings. Clutching each other, they succumbed as though they had not fought at all.

When they collapsed, Be'i's mind reverberated with her scream, echoed only by Toma's...

Both voices died in the chaos.

Punching the grid beneath his blackened fingers, Kurt struggled to patch through the interference and get Miztri down there. He sure as hell didn't know what to do, having watched Sashana'i, just fallen, grab Be'i's hand as Toma did the same with Aratra. Before he knew it, Toma pulled Aratra over then embraced Be'i. They fell onto the grass together a moment later.

It had happened so quickly that Kurt hadn't even opened a comm line before they collapsed. In the distance, the resistance had quickly taken down the Unar officers who had slipped around the outside perimeter. But there, the regents looked like they were dead, and Be'i and Toma...

"Hell with this!" Kurt snapped and rushed down into the field where the bodies lay. With only a look at Aratra and Sashana'i, he knew better than to try. So he knelt by Be'i and Toma, who seemed locked in their position, clutching each other's clothing, trembling and stiff. Moving Be'i's hair and scarves away from her face, he could see both their eyes were wide open and unfocused, severely dilated; they were breathing in tiny, halting gasps and their skin was ashen. He did not dare try to move them for the looks--frozen terror--on their faces.

At least they were alive, Kurt figured and whipped around to see Latsari arriving from her station.

Stopping on first sight of them all, Latsari's eyes briefly widened to examine the scene. The positions and expressions filed through her mental library of histories told by the elders and word painters. Everything she saw on the field matched those memories. "I would believe our blessed Sashana'i and Aratra have passed their memories," she informed Bendera then nodded to herself. "Ka, my friend, it is likely they have given unto Be'i and Toma the Allanois legacy, an ancient practice among educated families."

Kurt didn't bother pretending to know what she was talking about. "Get them to the Azallis' dining room where we can keep them for now," he ordered. "But we need to get them back to Cezia."

Touching her temple in respect for the passed, later to be mourned, Latsari nodded and hurried back to the Azallis, commanding the crew there to prepare a space and onlookers for her beloved friends and captains, now the new regents of Desal.

"You're dismissed," Janeway told the ensign on duty as soon as she had materialized completely. Then she moved into the young man's place. "Janeway to engineering, activate the upgraded transporter systems."

"*What? --I mean, yes Captain,*" Carey answered, surprised. "*But those systems haven't been tested yet--*"

"That's an order, Lieutenant--Janeway out," she said briskly and began tapping in commands, glancing back and forth from the PADD she still held. "Janeway to Kes, I need you--"

"I'm here, Captain," Kes said as she came through the doors the ensign had just exited. Joining Janeway at the console, she handed her the data chip she and the Doctor had been working on. "I'm

sorry, Captain, but Anai--"

"I've been brought up to date," Janeway cut in, inserting the PADD's data chip into the main uplink manifold. "We'll discuss it later. Right now, I need your help."

Flipping open the first box she'd been given, she hunted out the easier half of the plan and started uploading the parameters...

"Dos e'ibri mas'tsa micha'u, komis tirra al, ye'i tira'al, norr e'ik ye'i so'al dos..."

She sat huddled in the corner, her knees to her chest, holding tightly, rocking back and forth as she muttered on and on, seemingly without end. Her bondmate had finally worn down out of the same.

"Ni'alla ye'i, dos e'ibri masillotsa, cha morla, ye'i tira'al..."

"How long will this continue?" Susik asked, staring at what had become of her friend. One of the strongest women she had had the pleasure of knowing had been reduced in minutes to a babbling invalid with no improvement over the week since their return to Cezia. "Is there not any kind of psychological help your scholars know of?"

Bakali sighed, watching her adopted child, who stared at nothing but everything, her voice rising slightly at times when she held herself closer, tucked her head into her knees, weeping as she plead for mercy--or at least quickness--and that her spirit be unharmed.

"It shall persist as long as it is required to, Child," she said while waving away her assistants, naturally but futilely wishing to help. "It is the way."

Susik stared at her. "How can you say that? Look at what has been *done* to them."

"I see my children well," Bakali replied sadly. "Sashana'i and Aratra acted as they thought proper; Be'i and Toma accepted this. They have said so in a lucid moment, thus it must be accepted by us as well, Susik. There is no possible reversal of the legacy given to them, nor any assistance to be given at this time."

She had been summoned from the celebration of Desalia-Four's liberation by the message by Derra. Anxious and tired, haggard and saddened, as Plecta and Bolmra drove the Azallis full speed back to Cezia, the adopted Antral failed at any gentleness when he informed her of the burdens they carried, both in the dining hall and in the morgue. Not an hour later, the elderly healer hurried through the small ship to find Be'i and Toma unconscious in each other's arms. Latsari reported they had finally claimed sleep halfway through their return. She and Derra confirmed that Sashana'i and Aratra had both held their siblings' hands before passing.

Bakali realized immediately what had happened to Be'i and Toma--and more completely than the others did. Requesting they be transported with her to the clinic, she immediately sedated them and called for herbs to be procured from her newly liberated homeworld.

Three suns past their arrival, in an enormous ceremony under a misty sun, she and Bala blessed the passings of Sashana'i and Aratra of Cezia, Regents of Desal. Sympathetic to their neighbors' tears, they lit

the pyre and sang the songs to those blessed spirits, who had given so much joy and love to all they knew, so much balance to their people, who might have been annihilated without their dedication and sacrifice. Their spirits could not have found a more noble welcome to the blessed ancestors.

So Bakali and Bala moved around the fire, their feet heavy in the rain-softened earth, turning in the ritual prayer, leading their people and thanking the spirits for Sashana'i and Aratra's short but important lives among them, and knowing what was left behind: The adopted siblings of the passed, the new Desalian regents, who had surely descended into internal chaos.

True to their prediction, Be'i awoke hours after the ceremony screaming in pain that was not hers, and then Toma, cursing violently at the mantel stones. She started laughing then ran into a corner, terrified. He threw over a table then cuddled into a blanket. Then they traded the behavior--or personalities, or ages, genders, events. Occasionally, they would regain enough sense to desperately wonder what was happening to them. They descended into the confusion of the memories very soon after.

Bakali finally decided to reserve a small corner ward of the clinic for them, where she could contain them. They certainly were not safe in the upper floors.

A week later, as she watched her spirit child rock on the floor and chant the ancient prayer in Yusi's inflection, Bakali brought her wrinkled fingers up to her indigo markings, touched her temple and mouthed a prayer of her own for the minds of her children. "No more can be done by me."

"You cannot help them?" Susik asked. "Can anyone?"

"They are their only saviors at present, to my sorrow. As their minds find healing from this trauma, more can be done for them." Her stare grew heavy upon the lady in the corner, who clutched at her ribs and rocked more quickly as the memory progressed. "Yet I may tell you, Susik, they have been changed by this. In time, they shall regain a central being, yet they shall never again be what they had been. Be'i and Toma are now, as it is said, one amongst many, and those native beings now are small amidst their newly gained lifetimes. This is also the way, in their present disorder."

Both the elders, among others they consulted, knew the pathology: Transferral psychosis.

It was curable, with time and training. Such traumas had happened often in the generation after the initial occupation, when the scholarship was largely buried and families in the practice of bequeathing their memories tried to continue the tradition without proper training. It had been another way of Desalian culture Unar almost destroyed, mainly for the simple fear of insanity among those inexperienced would-be heirs.

In Be'i and Toma, they were seeing it again, they knew, one of the few vestiges of that tradition, once again done poorly and received with even less order and no preparation but their own bonding experience to guide them. More, Bala, Bakali and the other close friends to Be'i and Toma knew that though they were Desalian at present, they did not bear those abilities as a latent skill encouraged from birth, but one which their adult physiologies had acquired and adapted to. Relatively, it was very new. They may as well have been six years old.

Lledri, upon first sight of the heirs of Desal's regency, insisted she be the one to sponsor their proper training--as she had tried unsuccessfully to have Sashana'i and Aratra do. Bakali and Bala agreed she would need to wait until Be'i and Toma were prepared and able to make that decision for themselves. The prichava respectfully obeyed their wishes.

In the meanwhile, the two would have to bear the waves that had consumed them.

"Dos edisla tsa al ye'i.... Al tsa'ibra!" Her voice became shrill again; she shuddered and flinched as she clutched her legs, crying openly.

"What is she saying?" Susik breathed, wanting to reach out and shake her back into the present, but just as frightened to touch her.

"They cut away Yusi's hair, and she prays to the spirits for her patience," Bakali whispered, controlling her own tears as her child replayed the violation of their beloved regent's beauty and honor at the hands of the Unar, whom she was forced to serve not long after her capture. Bakali remembered such an insult painfully well. "Our dear Yusi's gentle spirit...committed to such violence..." The elder shook her head in shame, resisting her natural will to look away from the torment, to spare herself the ache the scene inspired. "How we accepted this is difficult to know, particularly seeing it as such again, even while I understand why acceptance was required of me... It yet disturbs..."

"Ma'avll! Ye'i al tsa macho'i!" she cried, throwing up her head, staring at the apparitions, her eyes darting to each, whom she saw with such horrifying clarity, snarling at her, beating her, sending her hair flying away in chunks around her--their fury and corruption. Her lungs felt as though they would explode for the terror and pain and sobbing. "Ma'all ostill *ai'otsav!*" she wailed, screwed her eyes shut. "Dos al tsa allu'evrra! *Awrr al i'ellva'i!*"

Her hand shot up.

She stopped--exhaled.

Her fingers dug into her long, thick locks. She pulled a section forward to stare at it, realizing.

She blinked. "Her hair," she whispered. "This is her hair...my hair..." Her lips pressed, parted, she blinked several more times to understand... "Yusi... The other had been Yusi. She shall be... No, she is--I...she was..." She looked up. Her hand was trembling within her dark curls, showing her elder what she knew. "This is Be'i's hair, Bakali."

The elder woman managed a small smile through her tears. "Be'i, ka," she said, wiping her eyes quickly with her scarves as she approached. "It is your hair, and you lie within the clinic at Azlre."

She nodded jerkily; her stare darted. "He is--my bondmate? Where is he?"

"Toma rests." Gingerly, Bakali pulled the shivering child to her feet to show her, pointing to the pallet where a restless form clutched at a blanket.

"I shall sleep with him," she decided.

"It is unwise to disturb him."

With an outburst of giggles, she threw her arms around the lady, kissing her sweetly. "Miztri, it was you who bore mention of my anxiousness for my bonding night--and, ka, my desire is heartily borne! I shall take my Aratra upon his knees then I on mine..." She stopped and looked around. "Who speaks just now? This is not my voice--"

"Be'i!" Bakali said with necessary firmness, snapping the girl back to the room again, making her blink, shake her head, and then nod. Bakali sighed, relenting. "I shall take you to Toma now."

"My thanks, good sister," she softly replied. "Now only should you hear my lady Sharana'i agree... Bakali! What a name from Noshaki she has chosen... Bring me a mirror. I need a mirror, my mother. I must see my face. She must look at myself." Shaking her head again, she struggled to push back the others; they cycled within her head so rapidly, she swayed on her feet. "I am Be'i of Azlre, Cezia," she told herself, attempting certainty but shuddering in each word. "She is called Be'i, bondmate to Toma... I am...no, not a--what is that? Who am I, Bakali? What must lie here, Aneschi, when I must be as I am not, hide in the pure sun before them? The scholarship is such, in this midnight... What is my calling when I do not think Commissioner Grejdrif prefers that his plate be served with Captain Janeway wants those sensor relays back online by fourteen hundred hours since my calling is Sharana'i, given as my elder-mother's... No! Please! Stop!"

Susik rushed up to help Bakali steady her friend's swagger. But seeing the Antral woman--then something entirely different a blink later--she dropped to her knees and held Susik around the ankles. "Di'ebli ma'ichna go'err!" she cried, sobbing into the cuffs of the officer, knowing she would be beaten, but begging her child to be spared of the same in her innocence...

Susik could do nothing but close her eyes and take a deep breath. "Patience," she whispered to herself and bent to help the crying lady back to her feet.

"Dalra! Dalra! Quickly! Bring yourself! Miztri!!!" His shouts echoed hard against the moonlit buildings of the square, rustling not a few of the people within it. He didn't notice it, but ran around in circles, swerving through the invisible rows. "Dalra?!"

A neighbor who lived on the street side of the building had woken and alerted the man; minutes later, tucking his robes around him, Dalra came up the steps from his flat to the open square. He immediately spotted his friend still sprinting around like a wood beetle unleashed in the sun.

"Dalra! Ab itra'ill!"

Taking a breath, letting it out, Dalra moved forward to meet the man halfway through. It was obvious he could not see him. "I am here," Dalra said, not knowing which spirit among all he might be talking to that time, thus beginning it safely.

Spotting him, he grabbed both his arms, staring wildly down to him. "Sashana'i," he gasped. "They have taken her and mutilated her! I found her... You must...Miztri, where lies Miztri?!"

Dalra understood. "Miztri sits with her now," he said soothingly, taking his friend's arms in return, bracing them soundly. "Sashana'i's mouth is injured, yet she shall not perish. It is not meant for her to pass here. I feel thi--"

"I *feel* it, my friend," he told him, in tears for the pain he knew he sensed--felt, truly felt. "I feel her agony! You may *not* tell me she is well when I feel it so!"

"Ab, we shall lie in wait, then. Bring yourself now."

He turned to follow, but then suddenly jerked back. "Where is my bondmate?" he asked, pulling his hand to his waist, straightening. "In which interment is he?"

"*Bring yourself*, Toma," Dalra repeated. He saw his friend close his eyes a moment, so Dalra put his arm around him to keep him straight. "You have tired yourself. You must rest now." Offering the

younger man a grin, he gave a nod. "I shall sit with you. Our good elders shall worry should you be missing long."

"This...insanity," he breathed, holding on to his old friend's hand, nailing his eyes on the facade of the clinic, praying suddenly that he could get there. He honestly was not certain if *he* would.

"You suffer from a common psychological ailment among the untrained, Toma," Dalra clarified.

He paused. "They...we. We took the Allanois memories willingly, Dalra, as it was needed. I took Aratra's hand when Sashana'i asked. Aratra bore barely enough life for the procedure; Everything he gave, I took. Yet...it is not believed it shall be accepted sanely. It may not be endured."

"You must, my good friend," Dalra told him, still leading him, slowly but surely. "Recall most that your mind as well as your spirit is bonded with Be'i's. In this state, you shall succeed or fail together. You must believe in your recovery, else neither of you shall and it shall overcome you."

"I have tried!" he snapped. "How can it be said Unar shall spite us so? Let them be, and they shall perish of their own accursedness according to fate's balance. It is the way."

Dalra bent his head but continued on, managing to return him to the frantic assistants who had only turned their heads a moment. Bowing as their charge chose his evening meal and searched for his libat coins, they eased him back to the corner ward and to his pallet, beside his trembling bondmate.

"I have ruled Desal ten years, yet nothing prepared me for this plague. All I touch and attempt rots, and for my very spirit, my bondmate curses me to Prihar. Her pure conscience to forces me to see... What shall be done?"

"I have borne six children, each nursed thirty du'ave. None but two have survived. l'utra is for the spirits now, soon, as I see him weaken by the sun, wilt more each moon. Sashana'i remains my sole hope..."

They sat on their clinic pallet in their bedclothes, facing each other with the twisted blanket between them. For hours they had been staring into each other's unfocused eyes, lit by the globelight above the entryway. Their hands were clasped together; their expressions were blank.

"Aratra followed me for three du'ave before I coyly suggested we meet privately--and then I truly surprised him with my own offers..."

"I told my tola too often he should not to take too much after Pajla's foods--I yet tease him that he shall grow outwards far more than inward at his years!"

It had been two weeks. They each had lost weight, too nervous or distracted to keep food down if they ate at all. Bakali sustained them by then with injected supplements. TThey could not keep themselves up, but relied entirely on what others could do for them. They had become so afraid of themselves that they did not think to go out--*when* they thought for themselves.

"I always believed that sirril wine was best served warm, yet Madari always slipped the decanter away to cool. I never complained, as her regard for me past the dinners were far more penetrating and delicious."

When they knew enough to, they missed Ba'ela desperately, yet were nervous in his presence. The boy

had been informed of what ailed them, and Bala brought him despite their wishes. Ba'ela missed his parents, too--and according to Bala, they improved during visits. It forced them to focus.

"Dulla held me at night, kissing my head and whispering to me while I cried... They hurt me so, and yet I cried only that I knew he must bear what I do too soon. I know I shall not survive the effects. I know this is meant..."

Most defeating to them was that there was no way they could be strong enough to accept the legacy and move forward again as many of the others had done, to be with their child without slipping into a being not known to him, frightening him with gibberish or outbursts. Ba'ela had only known love and assuredness from his parents. The idea that they might project other lives before him frightened their every instinct, even when they were usually uncertain whose instincts they were in the first place. They only knew the child was theirs and expected them to be *something* other than insane.

"Sachets in my robe sleeves are so lovely an idea, as the scent shall move with me. And the coral satin is preferred on moonlit evenings. Yet R'bapri always chooses my ornaments accordingly."

Bakali had gently reminded them that Sashana'i and Aratra had not been scholars, nor had they even committed themselves to the novitiate. Despite their possession of learned memories, they had no experience with the proper procedures of transferal. Transferal was a skill that took years of training to master, particularly for family archivists. When Sashana'i and Aratra passed the Allanois legacy to them, it was not done well.

They did not argue this.

"The Richill sector was the first to fall to Unar. Their weakness is apparent--yet I know not what I might do about a thing that was obviously meant. How would I be accursed for this, Da'ili?"

There were moments of satisfaction during that time, particularly when Cali and Aprra, or Yasis, Susik or Kurt, returned from Dviglar with news of the fronts. Desalia-Four's liberation had freed the databanks all of Irlae had sought. Plans to finally suppress the remaining sects of Unar were in the works. The fleets were coming home, group by group, readying for the next front. Desal and its neighbors were beginning to realize that the war would end someday soon.

Meanwhile, Desal's known regents, who had been a part of bringing it all to the fore in the first place, were convalescing in Azlre's clinic, useless and half mad.

She blinked heavily, forcing herself back to the present as soon as she realized it existed again. They had been trying to stay awake and with each other--sleep being far less preferable than remaining in the conscious world. Several times already, Bakali had needed to sedate them to force them to sleep. They resisted her efforts, however, scared to succumb to the maze of visions, a spinning hell of awareness, which haunted them, vicious and incessant even with the positive recollections there.

Even so, their tiredness was just as apt to bring it on, too. It was unavoidable no matter where they were, only better when they *could* try to control it.

She looked at her bondmate's haggard expression, his swollen, squinting eyes, and reached out to him. "This cannot be continued this moon," she told him softly, bringing her fingers to both his temples, forcing her eyes to remain with his. "Bring yourself to me. Let me sleep knowing who held me first."

His lips parted for a breath. "It is wished. I...It is difficult. My bondmate sits before me, yet I slip

away. My eyes and my mind differ... I try to hold..." His head jerked, but he refused to go there, to answer the people calling him out.

"The attempts are felt," she said thinly. Her eyes almost left his, so she moved closer to him. The memories loomed; her skull ached for the spikes of pain and stress, and she fought it and all of them less and less. Neither of them was strong enough to anymore.

"Sashana'i and Aratra are passed," he whispered.

A pause. "They passed on the field of Desal. When was this?"

"It is not known. They passed with the two before them. They were of some importance in our line...the line."

"The regency. To think it is borne now...it is unbelievable."

"Yet it is truth. They felt such guilt for bequeathing it...guilt compounded..." He felt water in his eyes, blinked it onto his cheekbones. Her firelit stare had begun to lose focus. "Stay with me, my love! Please do not--"

"I bear such effort!" she told him. Her hands tightened on his, shaking convulsively. "It is not known...how to resist this."

"Perhaps defeat is meant, then!" he retorted.

"To Prihar with what is meant!" she cried. "I care only for now--and it is only madness!"

He yanked her into his embrace and pressed his face against her, smelling her, feeling her arms wrap around him, hold him so tightly, he could barely breathe. Yet he did not wish her to let go in the slightest. It was the closest thing to the present he knew just then.

"I wish only to know my being," he choked. "I am lost with you. They are...we are lost...in this." His voice drifted away as he pulled her down by him on the small pallet at the back of the clinic, pressing her against the wall. He coughed a single sob, crushing his face against her shoulder. "I wish our beings returned...and yet now I hardly can recall them. Yet the others...we are all of them."

"We are all they are," she echoed numbly, staring at nothing in the middle of the room. "They *are* us now. What would that make us?"

"Drask. It is the Unar word for nothing, Da'ili."

"Irlae's peoples cannot be drask--it bears no sense, I should think. Certainly, M'hida, we might find another way to placate their revised way and assist our neighbors in their plight."

"It is not for us to interfere in nature's destiny. We shall wait and see whether fate would bring their poison closer. No. --No! He is... I am..."

"Yes." She could feel her backbone reverberating against the plaster wall for his trembling. "I wish peace could be within us, as well," she whispered. "Yet it shall not be. Sashana'i swore her guilt for this..."

"Why is but their guilt felt now?" he breathed.

"The reasoning is traditional," she answered sadly. "Sashana'i's sin is deeply felt; her prayers brought Be'i and Toma to her. She and Aratra believe in her ability to alter fate."

"Ka."

Be'i stilled a moment, staring at her hands, seeing them pressed against Sashana'i's cheeks. "They are passed." Her chest contracted with the horror of that memory, the hope, the excitement and joy, the disruptor shot in Aratra's back. In a flash, she felt the pain and flash of disbelief...Sashana'i's responsive agony...They all had felt so much joy for Desal's freedom--a blessing for all of Irlae...then her scream...her screams, and the sky, golden to blue, then black. "...as are we. We all have passed. Yet these forms remain among the living..."

He buried his face in her hair to hear Sashana'i's cries, piercing echoes within his mind tearing at his consciousness even as the memories ripped at his senses. He pressed his face deep into her locks, even while he knew there was no hiding in any darkness. Screwing his eyes shut, he felt only water make an escape.

"They remain..."

His hand shot out to the side as his eyes popped open.

For a second, he had to recall who was not there.

Then he remembered who--and that she was supposed to be there. He looked around the room: Not a one in the clinic seemed to notice anything amiss, but went along their way, unbothered or oblivious.

There were still times when acceptance annoyed him, even if he knew by then that taking that route could be beneficial. After all, Sashana'i felt keenly her righteousness in letting that monster Maghet into her, as she knew his filth would bring health to others who suffered there. It was not too great a sacrifice for him to make, knowing his cooperation was not a choice, and in its queer way would bring her some peace...

He shook his head again, reminding himself, cursing himself even when he was certain he could not help...

Because *she* could not help it. She was thinking about them. He was certain of it. Their echoes were louder, more persistent, circling.

Slipping into his robe, he treaded barefoot through to the back of the clinic, towards the hall that led to the rear court. Lying only partially, he told Norla, working there, that he was going to the latrine.

After using it, he drew the robe hood over his head and took the alleyway through to the north avenue. He knew which way to turn at the wall. Her pain was like a beacon to him.

Outside the north gates, there was a slight rise of rocks, a roll in the land before it opened onto the silver grasses they had always loved to watch. Soon after bonding with Mi'ejara, they came to Cezia to conceive.... Carefully, he climbed over the rest of the hill, feeling her presence with more ease than he ever had. Of course, once bondmates were joined for over ten years... His brow furrowed. Be'i and Toma had been joined only six ralkle--plus a few hundred.

She sat on the slope at the edge of the field, her knees held to her chest, tightly, breathing hard. Her

agony screamed within him, even in that happy place. Be'i and Toma had come with their son just before leaving for Desalia, he recalled in a small but gratifying flash. The last time the two had been together with their child, so truly what they knew they were...had been...

Her hair was loose and uncovered, hanging in thick clumps around her shoulders, running to her waist. His lady. Lighter strands and the open sleeves of her gown drifted in the breeze. So pretty, even then.

He missed that being. Knowing again its absence, he missed anew being something at all. Worse, a tiny voice inside him said they might spend a lifetime longing for their beings if they did not come to some resolution.

Sashana'i knew this. She and Aratra both knew, in their final moments they were inflicting their own burden upon those they loved. They had been more plagued than their outward spirits gave them credit for.

Promise me, Be'i, Toma! Promise me you shall continue for us--and for your birthpeople. I beg you!

She shuddered, stiffening. It would not stop, her sister's pleas, the terror and ache, the pain...

He stepped closer and her head rose slowly as she drew a deeper breath than the last. Lowering himself behind her, he looked out to the view she'd been watching, the early spring upon Mecrisop. Once settled, he straddled his legs around hers, wrapped his arms to embrace her against him.

Then he felt it, too. She was trying so hard to hold it back, to resist it, that he could feel her temples straining, see her face flexing.

Fate must be allowed its natural course among your birth, what my selfishness has estranged. I beg you both! --Oh, my ancestors, why is this brought to me, for all I have sacrificed and desired in your name?! This is not wished! I and Aratra wished to continue, dreamed so fervently! --Please promise me! Be'i, Toma! I implore you! There is nothing more but this!

He firmed himself against the pleas as well, yet could not push back the desperation, panic and open guilt Sashana'i experienced in her final moments. Indeed, Sashana'i had been so surprised that the spirits would take her so soon, she had suspected Prihar of calling her instead. That despair, in addition to everything else, had been one of the last impressions she had left with them. More, he knew that his bondmate, being the direct source of Sashana'i's transferal--as he had been directly Aratra's--heard the voice and sensed the feelings most powerfully.

I shall never rest in you without your promise--your acceptance of the fate you shall know is truth!

She turned in his arms, pleading silently to him in her own right, even if she knew he could not do the one thing she wished--to make them stop, to give her peace, to make it quiet again with but her own thoughts. She begged, knowing it was useless to, but so weakened, so defeated, that she had nowhere else to turn but to him.

He wished he could, for her and for himself. He touched her face, stroked her temples, apologizing typically for a thing he could not do. To see her face, in tears he had almost never seen her with, made his own ache so much more...so much...too much, even for her, whom he had always trusted to bear strength when he could not. She, who had given so much inspiration, love, who had helped make him the man he was...had been...could never be again...

She sank in his arms. The burden was too great and it came too quickly, the mass of lives coupled with that...those...all of it. She was exhausted. She could not hold them down any longer; she had to let them overcome her. They easily did, and she could do nothing. Nothing. Nothing...

His head bent as she finally released her sobs into his chest, clutching to him as if he were the last string of her spirit, so wanting its freedom, trapped within the maze of lives, other feelings and reactions, none their own anymore, but all their own. The cries had consumed them, smothered them. There was nowhere to run and they must accept the stillness. So she cried in her bondmate's arms, her last recourse.

They were completely aware of their madness: Frustrating, draining, excruciating, and more maddening still for those alone.

He felt his chest constrict as his eyes screwed shut. Her sobs echoed in his ears and within his mind, where he could only feel her agony and his own, while those others continued, that ceaseless awareness...

Her back heaved; she choked and gasped, torrent after torrent of emotion piled up over not only her own years, but generations of acceptance and pain, selfishness and ignorance, love and birth and death and dreams...desires...hopes...hopes crushed...

Her lungs and throat ached and burned; her skull and swollen eyes pounded. She could not stop, not once it had started. She had nothing else but what she held on to; she would do nothing also but beg between sobs for sanity for find them again someday.

She felt his pleas, too, and yet answered them with as much use.

"Doctor, I've locked onto the first set of coordinates."

"*The stasis chambers are ready.*"

"Activating a level three force field."

In its own way, this procedure would be more time consuming, Janeway knew. Having been kept in stasis at the point of death for nineteen and twelve years, respectively, Nicoletti and Benders would require extensive regeneration and several neurological and pulmonary resequencings to return them to adequate health, much less revive them.

Thankfully, the Doctor had already been briefed--extensively by that point, thanks to a catacomb scholar called Brymare'i, so said an addendum Janeway had glanced at while rushing out of the city. Anai had contacted her on three occasions to dredge up the needed files.

As she worked, she could see the planning Ara and Anai had done with the help of Desalia's regained medical records and technologies. She even saw some of Bakali's work in there--briefly, of course. Janeway skimmed the medical part of the process as it came up, but programming had to be more her concern.

Without a doubt, Desalian medicine was as good as their transporters and shields. Unfortunately, it

wouldn't be good enough...though Janeway easily decided to worry about that later.

"I'm beginning the transport now," she said, staring at the pad. "And Doctor?"

"*Yes Captain?*" He seemed distracted to answer just then.

Janeway grinned despite herself. "Be careful the next time you say you have nothing to do on your downtime."

She could see his look from there, but forgot it immediately to see, shimmering onto the pads, two still forms, wrapped carefully in a copper-like foil and flanked by several nodes and wires, presumably the stasis chargers.

Janeway took a quick breath at the sight, looked aside to Kes, who was smiling already, nodding at her readings.

"It's them, Captain," she said, breathless with relief and excitement. "Doctor, we have Lieutenant Nicoletti and Crewman Bendera. Their biomatter is in tact and they are able to be transported to sickbay."

"*Commencing the transfer to stasis,*" the EMH replied, "*so I can start my new career in archaeology.*"

He had not even finished his sentence when Janeway started working on the next, barely noticing Chakotay when he finally rushed in.

He only caught a glimpse of the corpses as they began to dematerialize.

It was well over a du've past the inheritance of the legacy by the time she managed to stumble to the ground basin in the nook behind the old kitchen space without someone needing to rush out after her.

She hardly felt the sun in the little court, warm and dry, nor did she smell the recently planted rock flowers, and she looked at neither. She only pulled loose her laces as she approached the stall surrounding the bath, her ghostly stare aimed at the space within. A memory somewhere within her told her that her father had recently repaired it, since the severe replicator restrictions had been eased enough to allow more than a sponge bath on occasion. Yet she, who wished so to submerge herself, had never used it. Something told her... No, she knew there had been too much business at hand. A war was being fought. Be'i...*She* and her bondmate had fought a war...on the Azallis. Be'i of Azlre had.

The confusion that followed her so faithfully was the reason she had slipped away. Hearing some attendants speak on it, she decided to take her own water allotment. She dropped her thin gown as soon as she came to the edge of the pool, unmindful of the gate wide open behind her. She had no concerns about being seen.

She wished to feel clean. She needed to feel clean. Four generations of filth was stuck to her small body, waging disgust with more generations still, who had known only cleanliness. She wished to cleanse it away, if only to silence the ones who reeled in horror. Would it only wash away the disorder, as well.

She had laughed at one point, to recall that once, long ago, the girl called Be'i had been so concerned with having two bloodlines warring within her. How naive the child had been, what ignorance and peevishness had lurked. She had known nothing. Nothing.

It had been long enough that the personalities did not jump out...very often. Rather, it was a constant blur of visions and voices, emotions and senses. As a result, they both had become catatonic in their worst moments, heavily distracted in their best. They had begun to eat again, but barely tasted it--barely knew they were eating. They ignored people most of the time, wandered away only to catch the doorframe they were trying to exit, blind to it for the jumble behind their eyes.

The water might help, however; the warm flow around her might give her a distraction she desired.

Yet all she did when she crouched in the shallow pool was hold her knees to her chest and shudder.

So consumed was she with herself just then, she did not move when she felt a soft sponge and the warm water caressing her back. At first, she did not notice, either, the dulcet phrases drifting into her ears.

"Zha, Be'i," Miztri whispered, "you shall find wellness with time and the spirits' blessings." Dipping the sponge again into the water, she rubbed an orb of soap before bathing the lady's back, so terribly thin and small, like Y'dri's so long ago, when she was a small, sickly child. Like Y'dri, too, she seemed to calm a little at the slow circles and gentle pressure, though her muscles remained rigid.

Miztri smiled tenderly. The lady was truly attempting to bear it.

"Bear you recollection, sweet child, of when I bathed you on Uillar? The many suns when you had need for my care? Or the first sun, when we found acquaintance? You carried great strain then, as well, and yet I bathed you, knowing you would persevere. You have done this, always."

The voice moved through her, through the others and out again. After nearly stopping at two, it centralized in another memory and connected with the mentioned place. The voice recalled a specific time, the meeting...on Uillar, Be'i--B'Elanna--and Miztri. Sashana'i had been there, but later, after B'Elanna slept then awoke with the sear of a thousand lances in her skull.

Sashana'i had been assessing that fate she'd called to that terrible place, feeling her first waves of guilt, a creeping feeling that she had brought on the well-tended strangers' pain. She would give herself to Maghet to cure the lady who had come because of her. She had already named B'Elanna Torres for the deep brown water flower, the daknal be'i, native to Desalia-Four and once cultivated lovingly by Sharana'i, her namesake, who was a botanist of much regard, whose final dissertation had been such a challenge to her that Mi'ejara felt compelled in his sympathy to delay their bonding, which was performed on the steps of her family house by...

"Bear you recollection, Be'i, when you were brought to Uillar? Dalra and I took you and Toma from its searing sun, and I removed your boots against your will."

She shivered. The water flowed over her, though only her skin felt calmed. The words found her better that time, however.

"You name me Be'i, yet that hardly passes my ears; the child is no longer known to me," she whispered, staring at the ripples in the water, which Sharana'i purified before dispensing it onto her more sensitive projects...

"Your being must be rediscovered," Miztri told her quietly. "When Dalra and I bonded your siblings, we too were almost overcome by the weight of what we had to transfer between them--and quickly, as it had been difficult to keep in but our forward consciousness."

"None was retained in you."

"Merely the impression remains," Miztri admitted. "Yet it is known what now resides within you."

"Nothing is felt," she muttered, "can no longer be... Nothing is seen; nor tasted. No sense finds me, nor is anything wished but the impossible..."

Miztri dipped the sponge again, squeezed the warm, soapy water over the lady's bony skin. "The water is felt, is it not, my friend?" she queried.

She paused as the water trickled down her back; then she breathed and nodded slightly.

Pleased, Miztri continued. "You must learn to concentrate on the present, for only the present is what can be acted upon. This was my first lesson in the novitiate. It is an exercise to center your spirit on what is only before you. Frustration and arrogance is what easily comes to the one who seeks to control what they cannot.

"There is--as you and Toma have taught us--a purity in action as opposed to lethargy, in rising to our fate, rather than simply permitting our ends. The eventual result is not fought, as this wastes energy. Fate shall make of itself what it shall, merely influenced by what acts have been committed to it. *This* part is not for us to choose. Thus, when it arrives, we know what was truly meant to be, and this is accepted.

"In this most basic principle, I should believe, you have grown to understand your limitations and need for humility in such matters. This must be embraced utterly now."

After another pause, the younger woman drew an incomplete breath then said, "The prichava wishes to take us into the novitiate, to train us to the scholarship. As ashna'o, she has said, further education in our trade may be fairly delayed. Our parents concur. We should take ourselves into the novitiate. I heard them say this...some time ago. The...Lledri wished the same of...of Sashana'i and Aratra."

"You must commit of your own will," Miztri told her. "Your way may not be turned by us."

"Be'i and Toma... The thought had been discussed, for what would be done after the fight was complete. It is not recalled when this was, however. Miztri, is it known?"

"It is not important when, Child."

She watched the soap well into the clean water, its pink slowly overcome the clear pool... "I wish for control. I wish for my bondmate in our pallet making love to me, and I to him. The child...Ba'ela lives without his parents; the family suffers. The resistance continues as we lie here useless. "What sort of regents might Desal endure when those they would look to bear but madness?"

"Yours is not madness," Miztri said, dropping the sponge to steady the lady's shoulders. "You have undergone a great trauma in this transferal--"

"So arrogant!" she shot. "So arrogant to accept the inheritance!"

"You acted upon what was needed. Desal--"

--"Shall bear nothing without regents bearing some sense of wisdom!" she hissed, glaring at the muddying pool. "Sashana'i and Aratra are the regents in truth, not these shells of beings hardly able to see before their own eyes! We are the *least* fit--could barely carry a scholar's robe. The regency?! It is unnatural to wish such a place!"

"Your place shall be learned," Miztri pressed as she turned the lady in her grasp to look at her. "Be'i, you must. Should you act but for your child, this must be endured and accepted by you and Toma. To hope without expectation--"

"This would be a fool's hope." Quieting suddenly, her stare became as blank as it had been angry before. Traces of water pooled, but then faded. Her mouth was flaccid for a moment as she found her words within the rest. "Miztri...it is not known by us how to proceed from this point. We are lost in... They speak.... They call out, always."

She stopped, shaking her head, forcing back against the pressure behind her eyes, threatening to emerge, to take over, though it hadn't actually stopped...

"I wish only for rest. They roar in my head, like the sound in a shell or upon the ocean, constant waves of thought and... Shall the novitiate teach this? To bring peace to this?"

"It shall teach you discipline," Miztri nodded.

"And the lady Lledri?" Her eyes darted at the images, trickling over and through the gate of her forward mind. "She may do this?"

"She bears a full scholar's training, though lacking a formal trade education," Miztri told her, "as do all covertly trained during Desal's night, myself included. She bears every capability of instructing you in the spiritual discipline, I would think, particularly as you are legacy bearers. Ka, you are correct and Lledri shows wisdom: Scholarship shall be most beneficial for you both, particularly now. Your beings shall be discovered through it and the spirits' blessings."

She closed her eyes; the voices rose again. Turning completely, she leaned into the welcoming arms of her old friend, released her breath as the lady's strong, thin limbs folded her into her motherly embrace and rested her aching brow on Miztri's long, red hair.

She felt it.

"You have said this already, Tola," Ba'ela said, frowning his brow in a way many had attributed to his mother.

The father grinned slightly, reaching out to touch his son's arm. "Your forgiveness," he said. "My words at times are not recalled. It is like walking through the fields and knowing you have seen that hill, yet you tell yourself it is a different one. In truth, you walk in circles. It sometimes requires another to...to show you your way." He looked at the little boy's large brown eyes. "Do I confuse you?"

Ba'ela shook his head. "I know you and Nali walk in the field, Tola. They have told me that Yeshalli and Teshalla passed our family onto you and Nali, and you bear them with much effort."

He breathed a laugh. The boy certainly had his mother's sharpness, too. "You are a brave one," he told

him. "I cannot think enough how we are blessed by you. Even in this confusion, it must be known our love for you is not forgotten."

"This is known, Tola," Ba'ela said, offering a smile as he leaned up to hug his father. "And Nali Bakali has said you shall bear wellness in some suns. You show courage, too. You are better than before."

He squeezed the boy in his arm, his grin but the remnant of the previous one. "My thanks, my son. You are, of course, correct."

He yet struggled, willing away the roar between his ears with a skill he forced upon himself at present with, indeed, a great deal of effort. Any other seeing them so affected, they could bear and often did not care or notice. In the presence of their child, however, he and his bondmate did not wish to waver, so with the help of some scholarly memories within him and that inspiration beside him, he *forced* some sanity into himself.

It was a sad relief when Haviki came from the next door and called his child to their lessons. A lovely girl, grown already to nearly her mother's height with good health, Haviki bowed gracefully to her chosen teshalla with a smile he hoped he returned. Kissing Ba'ela, greeting Haviki, he let them go.

He watched them skip across the square, their scarves and coats adrift in the circular breeze, like birds flitting off to the flock of other children, whom Lrrili used to watch. Unar often showed no notice of them, yet the officers could never be trusted. They had been known to take children, and so she watched the progression of flowers before him, trying to choose the one which his lover had set out for him, a game of the wellborn, who had never wished his thoughts within her and resisted them, even if she knew she would bear his regret of her for it, yet she would not allow him her clean spirit...

The droning became louder as his son moved farther away, yet he did not return to his pallet within. The walls some days felt like a trap; the air felt good within his tear-bruised lungs. It felt good to breathe air that was not of Terblis, with the smog-infested mines and the dust filled lower atmosphere. Though he had survived that world, he forced himself to remember, bringing himself back to Cezia, where she stroked his hair as the final coughs consumed him...

Again, he shook his head. The unintelligible was less disturbing than fading off into another life, though both erased his present, numbed him to the world around him.

He wanted himself again so badly--*any* self--he felt pains in his chest to remember that desire.

He tried to think of Toma's birth, of the young man before he came to Lrllae. It had become a sort of game, to try to recall that person, that boy who once possessed that body but now was such a small part of those more recently gained and more insistent for his attention. Insecure, reckless at times, but good-natured, playful--a youth, High Commander Gychak had said that the young man had passed on Uillar. The man the boy became agreed so casually, having retained a manner of that carefree nature.

He now believed Gychak utterly.

All that was left behind by the boy...his birth father, a doting mother, sisters, people, mistakes, needs, desires...

He tried to recall the pilot, the thoughtless arrogance, the boyish hope, the talent and drive, the potential and even the uneasiness he felt in certain company for his own hard conscience. Yes, he could recall it if he truly looked, found him there. The images were detached, though, floated between and

behind the others like a sheet of paper in the wind, drifting and slipping around the feet of trees. He wondered how he ever had been that young man, considering what he was at present.

He wondered more how he could ever be that child again. It seemed impossible.

Sashana'i and Aratra both had believed it feasible--and necessary. With their philosophy and rationale in his mind, the reasons were clearer. Had Sashana'i had truly pulled them there, had she interfered with fate, then returning them as what they arrived as would restore what was meant to be resolved there. The two could return to the lives they had been born to, and their birthpeople would be blessed with that balance, too.

Toma and Be'i, however, had concluded years before that it was simply their fate to be in Irlae and that they belonged there, that their people were meant to be Desalian and their changed lives there were of the natural course of events fate had laid out from the start. The spirits having accepted them upon their bonding was a proof to them of that.

Mi'ejara would find approval in such reasoning.

They bowed to him with due respect in passing and, still seated upon the front step of the clinic, he gave a single nod in return, touching his temple solemnly. But he did not bring his head back up, nor did he pull his fingers away.

Once he was there, he could not think to pull away again, as if he had connected himself. The game was done and the rush had resumed.

Then he felt her small hand wrap around his. It was cool, smooth, gentle...his bondmate's, he reminded himself, though he had to press himself for a name.

He looked up to see her half-empty gaze, the gold-flecked hazel, focus upon his hollow one, a deep, blue-tinged ochre. That was what they recognized; they could not recall the former colors. Her mouth was parted, lost of sound for all that she already knew. Her hair was moist and partly braided beneath her light cloak hood, but she was clean, freshly dressed.

She knew what he was thinking about.

He pushed himself to his feet without words, held her hand as they moved out and away. Strolling as if with no direction, they paced silently through the winding streets, where the people kindly smiled and bowed, through the outer avenues, alive with trades and talk. None of it caught their attention.

Without disturbance, they took themselves through the north gates, where the rustling, clinking and chattering city sounds drifted away into the nature, noisy with but that, brushing and buzzing in the warm grasses. The droning within them hardly shifted with the change.

She brought them to where they had been a couple weeks before, on the knoll just outside the city. She showed no excitement, but rather a plainness just short of sureness as she lowered herself to the drying grass, pulling him down behind her so she could draw his arms around in an embrace, as they had been the last time. He followed gratefully, hugging her close to him, burying his face in her thick, damp locks. She leaned her head back, stroking his head with her cheek as she stared at the rich blue sky.

"I am feeling you around me," she said, her voice but a breath to the sky, knowing her mind more than she had in some time...however long that had been. "We must make ourselves well again. This cannot

be allowed to continue within us."

"Yes," he said into her hair, taking her scent, so familiar. It was like none other, utterly hers, though slightly tinged with soap. "The distraction eases at times, yet I am so...parted. It is not wished we become accustomed to it."

"This is known." Her eyes turned back down to stare at the rises, far away, yet so tall, they seemed nearer. With the recent rains, they had grown bright teal, spotted with red. Those flowers would be collected for wine, such as a sort Felisdi once sipped from her favorite venue, waiting for her lover...

She blinked, squeezed his arms. "I cannot understand why no anger is felt toward Sashana'i, now. For all she has had made, most all by design... Harder natures within me tell me to spite it, yet I do not. Only pity meets the struggle."

"More would have been regretted had Allanois been lost," he told her. "The legacy would have been taken even with a complete warning."

"This is truth. For this, she despised herself," she whispered. "It is difficult to know...as are many things at present."

"She did not wish her and Aratra's deluge be given, if but to maintain the ways she required. --And yet, her love was truth. Aratra would have found agreement with that. His last thoughts were of regret."

"It need not always be such, however. We may offer ourselves assistance and ease their spirits."

He nodded, putting his chin on her shoulder. "The novitiate. No resistance meets the thought--or perhaps it is desperation for sense in this damnation. No, it is more. This has been discussed before; they were... There was temptation to inquire of Lledri."

She breathed her relief to hear him say that, to hear his confirmation of a statement she had only that day uttered without complete confidence. "Is there recollection of when?"

"Three years past, I would believe, was the first." He felt her relax in his arms and smiled slightly. "Perhaps the children would like to hear the story, too?"

"I should think they would," she answered, kissing his fingertips. "They had never seen Yutars and now that the incursions begin in that sector, perhaps it is--"

"Gyi'all." She stiffened, but he nodded before she could curse herself. "My apologies. That was my doing...my doing..." He paused, willing himself to stay with her, with their present. "What shall be done with Desal? It is now our duty and heavy within our conscience."

"It remains to be believed in full. Yet this pales in comparison to what all is also borne and could never have been ours had fate not turned our origins so." She looked down to the hands she held. "I was born on Kessik-Four, far away."

"I on Earth, in San Francisco."

"Thirty-six years."

"Thirty-eight."

"B'Elanna Torres." She looked back at him. "Tom Paris."

They were but names, blank on her tongue and meeting his ears with equal reaction.

Yet it was their birth.

She considered his hands again. They were working hands, many times scarred and golden tan with exposure to sun, like the rest of him. Yet he was no less handsome to her, no less desired by her...

"Sashana'i and Aratra bequeathed their duty to them...us. This meets more approval than their belief that those people should rule these bodies once more. They cannot be again, even could the legacy be reversed. It was agreed the other matters had been grown away from, that life among those people was no longer needed or desired. To reverse what has been done bears no possibility. Yet it is known..."

He blinked a nod. "Their beings shall always be a part of our spirits...part of this...entirety."

She swallowed. "They flitter so far within, their truth no longer bears presence. Yet it *had been*...me, this body, this mind, as was. Suddenly, the girl is drifted away; she cannot meet my being...lost in the shadow. I am left wondering--"

"What is left and who I am," he finished soberly. "Indeed, the initial memories remain, yet they are...unimportant." He paused at that truth, staring at her small hands below, rested on his. He could barely feel her touch, though he felt it more than anything else just then. He suddenly remembered, and he missed the joy his predecessors had in all the things around them. He sighed, even as he resolved, "Only what remains here with you and our family, those immediate around us, is what I own now. I wish to claim but that."

"Yet *are* we those children? Those outsiders?" Her eyes misted as they rose to the view. "Were we ever those who became what we loved and seem to long for now?"

"We are more now, I should think," he mused, "not any, but all of them."

She shook her head from side to side. "Ka, and thus my being is lost. It is too much...too much."

"Then new beings shall be found," he told her. "A center lies within us, a core of being created from the whole. This must be believed now."

"Ka," she whispered. "Such duty lies before us, oceans of understanding yet to grasp." Her wide stare took in the panorama around her, the rich, feeding fields, the thrilling rise far beyond and the deep blue sky, devoid of clouds. Her mind turned over to all the work of her life, and then the other lives--but then she stopped the flow when it became too quick, pushed it away with an ease that allowed no comfort. It only restored the noise to save the confusion.

"It is desired," she said, "and yet, there is such...defeat. I despise that the control so needed...that it is erased. Humility has been brought sternly upon this poor spirit. And now this enormous thing, which in any truth is not a matter managed with any ease."

"We would take more than we might bear, however," he muttered humorlessly, stuffing his nerves for the moment, forcing himself to see what had been an underlying worry for them both since they realized that they were all that was left to lead Desal. "Yet it must be reiterated: All that was fought for, sacrificed, wished to see, it lies in *our* hands now. Every string of our strength is required for this, yet my feelings of inadequacy likewise loom. It seems ridiculous that any among Azlre alone would take as truth

our status."

"Even as regent siblings, there was no preparation for this," she agreed. "This status, too, had been borne aside."

He considered that. "Yet bore Sashana'i any true preparation? Or Dulla? Neither had been trained properly for the bequeathals, nor had the legacy given them all they needed to learn as regents. The single difference lies in birth. Be'i and Toma became Desalian, and yet Desal's redemption and recovery has been wished for as much as..."

As his voice faded away, her eyes focused on the peaks of Mecrisop once again. There was something there, in his words...

"...As much as they did...as much as they..." she whispered, barely audible above the breeze, the joth cry, the field birds, shuffling in the grass...all of which she suddenly heard, perfectly. It stopped her, stilled her. She silenced to listen, smelled the warm soil and the flowers...

He too looked out at the range, also sensing...realizing, "As much as they *do*."

The breeze stirred, and she sensed a miracle form from her many desperate prayers. Within her, the noisy memories found some agreement, found one thing they could voice simultaneously.

Suddenly, there was a moment of...clarity.

"They yet wish it," he continued in awe. So simple, but equally amazing that one simple wish could quiet their minds for a moment. It was an incredible feeling, even if it wouldn't last, even if he still felt the chaos there. He treasured that silence regardless. "In their spirits, within us. For that, no completion was had. Yet we might ease all them in the completion of our duty. They do wish it..."

"As we do," she breathed as her mind grew clearer still. "And then we might find completion, too, either in passing or what Sashana'i designed for us. The previous had been a blessing to those who preceded us."

"The latter we shall be unaware of for the most part."

"This is unimaginable," she said. "To be on that ship again, yet bearing no awareness... Our spirits shall not bear change, only our forward minds, our bodies. We would essentially begin again...and yet with aged spirits."

"Very aged, I should hope."

She nodded. They did have a good deal of time to think on the second part of the promise. There were other things, far more important things to them, for them to accomplish, after all, and much more to consider...

"What names shall we bear in our scholarship, my spirit?"

Again, he did not know, but could answer, "We are not required to choose different names of being." A moment later, though, he nodded to what he knew they felt.

"What I was exists no more," she told him. "I require a calling with...belonging."

"This is truth." His eyes followed her path. "It is the way to choose a name of an honored spirit."

"Yes," she said softly, turning her head up once again to feel the sun, the warm, white star, upon which their bodies fed.

The light hurt her eyes, but it was a pain she no longer minded, especially then, when for the first time in over a month, she felt some purpose aside from her need to regain some measure of sanity. She could actually *feel* that pain and know to whom it belonged, feel the warmth of the sun on her pale cheeks and her bondmate's arms around her. The voices remained close, their echoes swimming just outside the borders of her present, but for the moment, she basked in that small clearing, breathing its sweet air. It was far more than what she could do only two hours before.

"A ra'ill rachall n'trritsal," she thought aloud.

He responded in kind. "Ralid tsir i'a nai shto'ise tall wi?"

They considered that, among other things.

Janeway drew a steadying breath as the last of the near-corpses disappeared from the pad. She had begun the reconversion of Nicoletti and Benders's recorded DNA, though the Doctor would be the one to progress with the trickier neurological work. She still wondered if it was fair--even if they had wanted it--to erase everything they'd learned along the way.

They would know of it soon enough. Anai had seen to that by telling the stories, their intimate details. Though, Janeway recalled not for the first time that Nicoletti and Benders's "histories" had been somewhat slim. Perhaps because they didn't want so many people to know all their intricacies and personal moments.

Ara and Anai, however, who though Desalian had far more latent desires for privacy, had told them nearly everything about their lives as Toma and Be'i. They had committed the remainder of their lifetimes and the legacy they carried to databanks as well, which not only were distributed among the family and the scholarship, as was traditional, but given to Janeway as well.

She could be certain there were no details left out of those memoirs.

In the end, they had given them everything...only so they could get it back...in minds that didn't remember it personally.

As the transporters automatically reset, Janeway's stare hardened upon the pad.

Despite their objections about continuing as elders, they never wanted to lose the wisdom they had gained if they did end up returning to Voyager as "children."

They didn't want to change.

"Locking in on Ara and Anai's coordinates," she said, not for anyone but herself at that point.

"Their stubbornness cannot be blamed," she said with an old, wise smile that faded easily away.

An odd mood had led her steps in the direction of the internment. Having seen their friends off to another front, having visited their ship, which respectfully had not been flown without them except to bring them home, she had found herself wandering by. Her bondmate, still watching the fleet disappear, hardly noticed her go.

Only minutes later, she found their more recent prisoner sitting on a concrete bench, taking in the sun and similarly watching the sky.

He looked well. His wounds were gone, his burnt hair had grown in. Though he had been permitted to retain his ornaments of rank, his clothes were of casual Unar society--a boxy grey tunic, plain trousers and tall boots. They had taken similar care of all the prisoners, provided them with clean housing and adequate cleansing rooms. This was pleasing. Self-made enemy or not, the Unar prisoners should have known only Desalian hospitality there, as an example for them to carry. Desal could be strong and wise, yet show respect and peace. It was a fair balance. For that matter, it would inspire no retaliation.

Not heeding the caution which rang within her, she deactivated the force field long enough to enter. Indifferent to his stare and the stares of the other Unar prisoners there, she carried her cloak slightly above the stone court as she moved across and took the seat adjacent to him.

After a moment examining the officer, reminding herself that the man would do her no harm, willing the other inner warnings to settle for the moment, she put together enough words to inform him where that fleet he had watched was going. He bore the news with somber acceptance, yet again showing his curious thoughtfulness. Of course, he was intelligent enough to know he could do nothing about it.

"Unar rally as we speak around the Antral perimeters," she told him quietly, "and shall fight with as much skill as we have known of them, I should think. They shall be overcome, however. Unar shall not persist, Commander Gychak."

Gychak nodded slowly, naturally torn between desires of his own. "I understand."

"Yet you shall be returned to your own." He looked at her again. "My bondmate and I have arranged this with the Antral, the Koba, among our other neighbors. This had been planned before the taking Desalia-Four, in truth. You bear as much right to live on your world as we to live on ours, should no further incursions occur."

"I thank you for that," he told her sincerely. "I cannot deny that I miss my homeworld."

"It is but fairness." She paused, drew a breath. Focusing on his steady expression, an idea that had piqued her before was recalled. It seemed far away, though it was only a couple months ago. Toma had agreed with his bondmate's thoughts, as did Sashana'i and Aratra... "I would believe you could be trusted in that respect," she told him. "I would wish you continue as a leader, Gychak. You bear a fine intellect and your people need ones who would guide them well."

"You would say this?" Gychak asked. "I have been an officer working against your people."

"This has been discussed," she replied, "and you have been told we bear no less guilt but for our reasons. Gychak, all life may grow and change. It is the way, a way I and my bondmate know intimately

at present. Yet you too have grown with the events fate has pressed upon your experience. Please give our suggestion consideration."

He eyed her closely, seeing the strange aura in her gaze as she returned his attention. It was a rather self-possessed look, direct and distracted at once. Or perhaps it was her clothing, finer than her usual attire, her intricate braids and long, draped scarves, which lent to her unusual presence. Perhaps it was a holiday. Conversely, she did not look as well as she did when they last met. She was thinner, sadder, distant. Her small hand, resting on the stone seat, shook slightly. Perhaps she had taken illness. It was not severe enough to merit any concern on his part, but it was enough that he noticed.

"You still despise us, I thought. Have you made your peace so quickly?"

She smiled slightly at his ironic question, but did not dare address the swirl of thoughts that met it. Holding that conversation was difficult enough.

"What was done to Desal, to our people and to others in the hands of Unar, shall not be forgiven by me, not in my truest being. There would remain a part of me which distrusts, and the rhetoric shall never be heard easily. Yet I would hold company with you in spite of these feelings. I am not so young and single minded as to despise my adversary without condition."

"Only be watchful," he noted.

"Your people would do no less with us, I should think," she returned.

Accepting her point, Gychak leaned back against the hard wall behind the bench; for a moment, his eyes considered the horizon, not the sky nor the land. "When I was in the nursery, my mother whispered to my ear that once, long ago, Desalia and Unar had great friendship, were scholars amongst each other."

"Our histories agree," she confirmed, seeing it, too, in her mind...a dinner among them. They had not been aware at the time of the gradual shift in Unar society, though Mi'ejara had been curious at the more strident attitudes of their guests during their meal. Feeling it, too, Sharana'i had served their wine generously, hoping they would relax to enjoy it properly before initiating another round of debate. Perhaps that was it--overwork. Unar tended toward perfectionism.

"Then it is conceivable," Gychak continued, catching her stare again, "someday, when the stain of our transgressions may be forgiven by another generation, that our peoples might be allies again."

Her lips flickered upwards. "It is quite possible...someday," she said. "Yet now, good leadership is required on your world, true beings and much labor to produce such a blessing."

He nodded slowly, feeling his own grin grow as he considered the possibility. "And what have your regents to say on this matter?" Gychak queried.

The lady's face froze. Her small fingers clenched the stone she sat upon as her eyes turned. She breathed, and yet it did nothing but drain the blood from her face.

"Be'i Azlreat'i?" Gychak leaned forward, almost touched her arm, but she pulled it away, shook her head.

She drew a deep, cleansing breath, concentrating. Forcing the words of Lledri and her elders into her forward mind, she found the clearing again then thought to speak. "Sashana'i and Aratra are passed to our blessed ancestors. I and my bondmate are Desal's regents now."

Though this news did indeed surprise him, the Unar bent his head respectfully. "I hope they found death with dignity."

"Ka," she said hoarsely, understanding what it was for him to say such a thing, having known her siblings as but drasks of former standing in the Uillar camp. But then, all that he had done showed both fortitude and a peculiar compassion. In her eyes, deep as they were becoming, she knew he had been very brave. In truth, he was a good man. Terrsba bore memories of many Unar like him.

"We are to enter the novitiate," she informed him, breaking herself from the distraction. "We have been...unwell since assuming the line, the legacy of the Allanois. To enter the novitiate had long been a consideration, yet now this must be our fate, for our promises and our people, whom we would have served unflinchingly in either manner of continuance."

Gychak looked at her again, almost smiled to know he had been correct. "I noticed your unease," he said.

"My purpose in telling you this is that you must give of yourself utterly to save what you love, too. Despite the hardship you shall incur in your recovery, your people's welfare and lasting prosperity requires all you may bear to them."

"I should, however, think there is little hardship in assuming the regent's role," Gychak commented. "It is a substantial rise in position."

"My bondmate and I never bore ambitions of nobility," she replied, coolly for his suggestion, though such a statement from an Unar was not unusual. "Quite the opposite, in truth. A mere knowledge of the ability was preferred, certainly not the rank. The influence that accompanied the positions as regents' siblings was rather avoided. Only as captains and teachers was the place necessarily assumed--yet nothing more."

Gychak was not surprised. "Yet you are regent now. You may do with it as you please."

"We may only do with it as what would restore the true way," she said, but then thought about that, recalling... "However, such a way among regents is not unknown, and in fact is our truth and desire--to be one among all and but a binding influence. We once were truly equal to those we lead."

"I heard such tales in my village, of Desal's egalitarian beginnings."

Her eyes found his again, surprised that she had not given that as much thought as the uneasiness which met the mere idea of her changed status. "My thanks, Gychak," she said quietly. "I shall take this to my bondmate well. It shall please him to recall this."

He bowed his head to her again. "Perhaps we shall enjoy other occasions to offer each other our thoughts, for our mutual benefit."

She blinked slowly, considering the ground before him. "It pleases, this thought." Her eyes rose. "In time, I would hope we shall."

"Even should you never forgive my people?"

"Even then," she assured him. "As a child, I was employed among those who once had been my claimed enemy, with some success..." Seeing the the flicker from her birth's past, forward among the others for a moment, she grinned. Such a different life it had been, to see its images from time to time was oddly

amusing now. "As I recall this, it may well have had...some benefit."

"I should think it had--'Chief.'" It was not Gychak who had spoken.

Turning, she found her bondmate standing just inside the forcefield. His comment was quietly amused, which was more than he had been capable of for some time, she knew. His expression remained, though, as he gazed tenderly at her from beneath his fine headdress. The tail of the soft cloth floated forward to brush his jaw when the air turned, but he did not seem to notice anything but her.

Her smile flickered up a bit more as she stood, touched her temple to address Gychak once more. "Until we meet again...good man," she said softly then stood to leave.

The Unar commander watched the man take his lady's hand after deactivating the forcefield for her then help her over the grid threshold. Before turning away, he looked back long enough to offer Gychak a customary bow. Gychak gave him a nod in return, a small grin.

The regents. *How irony rules us.*

They turned after that and moved across the entry court, their steady gates shifting the hems of their robes and the untied portion of her scarves. The man's hand was placed around her waist; her own hand rested on top of his. They seemed aimless in their direction, heading to no precise point that he could see; yet they walked, their postures straight and their bearings befitting their rank at least from that vantage...

In that small detail at least, Gychak thought, they had not changed so very greatly from the time they were but drasks on the opposite side of the forcefield, when he was the one to walk away.

Strangely enough, he too would leave and begin again from near nothingness. Like them, the future would only be what he chose to do with it.

An intriguing thought, he mused, leaning back to study his fellow prisoners...and perhaps hope it could be.

"We still haven't gotten past the neural resequencing problem with Ara and Anai," Kes said as Janeway continued to prepare for the transport, download their coordinates, recheck their systems--seemingly all at the same time.

"The Doctor can try it anyway," the captain replied bluntly, "but they're coming back."

Kes' eyes widened at that. "Captain, they told us they would rather die peacefully than continue with their memories--"

"We'll cross that bridge when we get to it," Janeway told her, furiously programming as the upgraded transporter resequencers merged into the present configurations. "First, we bring them up here--then we deal with the consequences. They told me to do what I felt was best--and this is it."

"Captain--"

"I am not going to lose them again!" Janeway snapped and popped the second program chip into the console drive. "Not when we don't have to and not when there's a chance. --Chakotay, tell Mr. Carey to boost power to the transporters. --Captain to Sickbay."

"*Lieutenant Nicoletti and Crewman Benders's bodies bore the transport well, Captain,*" the Doctor said. "*I can begin work on them as soon as I reconfigure the equipment I need.*"

She nodded to herself, unstopped in her simultaneous tapping and reading. "I'm bringing Ara and Anai up now," she told him.

"*Now? What about--*"

"Prepare for their arrivals and do everything you need to do to save them. Disregard the neural resequencing if you have to and concentrate on reintegrating their recorded DNA."

"*Captain...*" Janeway's head fell for a moment to hear what she knew the Doctor would say. "...my programming will not permit me to make them undergo this procedure against their explicit disapproval.*"

"Doctor, I have their permission to proceed," she responded. "Contact Havetsi and Cera if you feel that's best, but prepare for them--*now*."

"As it shall be, in my spirit and among all..."

It was often but a family event, yet Azlre had never seen such a ceremony, they realized one morning as they walked with Ba'ela to his lessons, looking around the busy square. Three generations of their people had grown up without the scholarship, only whispers about one. Only a few among them had experienced a committal celebration; those trained in Desal's midnight of course did not have one.

Desalians, they knew all too well, learned by watching, so they decided that their first public act as regents should be to commit to the novitiate on the same steps that had borne their bonding, the steps of the Azlre silag. Their people would see the ancient act themselves and perhaps be inspired once Cezia had an institute of learning again. To balance the publicity they had never been comfortable with, they decided it to be an unannounced occasion, an Akosa'o of sorts.

Despite--or perhaps because of--their tactic, the citizens steadily gathered at the unusual activity around the silag and watched with rapt attention as the few elders there breathlessly identified the invocations sung by Bakali and Bala and the responses of their charges and the prichava. The news spread like floodwater across the square.

Hearing the buzzing behind them, the new regents couldn't help the look they shared. It was still strange to think that they should be ones to look to in society as well as for knowledge, would always be an influence and all matters Desalian. The oddness and fear of such responsibility was fading into a resolved acceptance, however. They soon would be too busy to think on any residual strangeness.

"One among all, in my spirit as with all things living..."

The opening meditations completed, and with an assuredness which belied their recent conditions,

they presented themselves upon the ginhra cloth before their elder-parents, touched their temples with their fingers, bent their heads to accept the white scarves and headdress traditionally bestowed upon ones of their increased stature.

"I, this sun, consecrate my body and spirit to the novitiate in preparation for my life of service in the scholarship."

"And what shall be your being, Child?" Bakali asked in her turn, smiling proudly down to the lady, her chosen daughter. So troubled still, so often distracted and full of sorrow, she yet looked lovely that day, had honestly wished to bear herself into her new life with what dignity and beauty she could manage. "How shall you be called from this sun unto the ancestors?"

Staring up into her elder-mother's bright eyes, she knew her answer.

"For my sister, whose prayers were made with guilt, yet were blessings upon me in life and spirit, and as she is a part of me always, I take this sun the calling of Anai, my spirit's being."

Sashana'i would not have been particularly pleased with the idea, she knew, would have insisted she were not held along the living through such a cause. But if her namesake need wear her hair in regent's scarving and beads for the remainder of her life, Sashana'i's spirit might at least accept the honor.

"And your being, Child?" Bala asked the man before him, who looked up with an unreadable expression. But finding his spirit-father's eyes, his lips turned up. Bala smiled back. "How shall you be called from this sun unto the ancestors?"

"For my brother, Aratra," he answered, "who with Sashana'i allowed our spirits their present temperance and blessed us first with acceptance, and then with love and family, which we shall carry into eternity, I take this sun the calling of Ara, my spirit's being."

Aratra's laughter at such a compliment echoed within him. Yet despite their wryness in remembering their siblings, he and his bondmate had chosen their names in all seriousness and with much consideration. It was truth that he did indeed "look to the stars," as she could "see with hope." Their siblings' memories were very close upon them, as well, and in some ways they felt they were continuing their dreams, dreams both shared and not. The names were of honor and meaning, and very proper, ancient conjunctions in Desalian.

Most of all, they felt right with those titles. They created them, chose them. From that, they could rebuild the rest.

Not a quarter after the ceremony, the traditional offering of bread and wine to the onlookers and accepting their friends' and crew's congratulations, they passed under the great arch and entered the silag for the final consecration. The excitement of the morning and the strain eating at their still unsteady minds had begun to show, and in a moment's severe distraction while they discussed their plans with Susik and Latsari, they had snapped themselves back into the present only to return again to the haze of numbness all too familiar to them and their family by then.

Seeing this, too, Lledri was the first to suggest their entry. Allowing them to kiss their son farewell for the day, she led the two into the doors of the temple they had helped to rebuild only a few years before. She recalled quite clearly their sweating limbs, determined stares and their pride upon its completion.

Much had been rebuilt with them. Even they had grown anew, those children, now consecrated to

their adult lives under her guidance.

No other duty could the prichava have wished more than that.

In the incensed foyer, they stood, their fingers gently woven, their eyes solemn but sane enough to recall the way: They bowed to the woman who would be the first to guide them. Lledri returned the gesture with due respect. Though not of Desal's blood at birth, she had no doubt whatsoever exactly who and what they were now. Once the clever children sitting on her pillows and resistant to citizenship, they had faced every trial in accepting it and had soon become most exceptional Desalians; learning their names as they took Desal in that most sacred way sealed her faith their spirits absolutely.

From the entry, the two parted to be led into the chambers that had been prepared for them. First among all, they required cleansing and rest. The latter was not always traditionally practiced. Yet in their conditions, Lledri felt it would be a benefit. With a nod, her assistants began.

She stood, properly compliant, as the women undressed her, removing her blue cloak and gold gown, easing her legs up, one after the other, they pulled away her leggings, unbraided her hair and eased away her scarves and beads. It was hypnotizing, she thought, feeling their hands bare her, so softly, kindly, as if revealing her to nature itself, freeing her of the weight she bore upon her life.

She felt the memories of the others who had undergone the same swimming in her, and her head lolled a bit at the rush of it. But the scents, the gentle bells, the warm light glowing through the golden dome above them, all relaxed her enough that she simply swam with them and into the marlai-flowered waters when she was led there. The fragrant wetness was the temperature of her body, and they poured it over her, caressed her with it then leaned her back into it to wash her hair.

To this all, she gave herself completely.

Her eyes closed slowly, opened lazily, unfocused as their hands moved over her and into her hair, and the bell song filled her ears. The daze within her own mind sang to the song, the rush becoming melodic and the thick citrus aroma filling her. She could not have moved if she tried and yet felt light, warm in the glow. There was nothing but the fragrance and the song, the golden hazy light and the watery blanket around her.

"You have carried the worlds of many upon you too long without ease, my child," came Lledri's soothing whisper as she felt the attendants ease her onto the edge of the pool. "Sleep, Anai, release this aching weight, for you shall cleanse your spirit, as well."

She obeyed.

He had allowed the same, oddly taken as well by his senses, so completed in the soft chimes, the scent of the water, into which he was submerged and bathed. It was a strange sort of peace, the harmony of those within him, chanting, a peace that had been desired for so long that the granting of that wish relieved him to the point of utter exhaustion.

He did not sleep at first, but lay numb in the attendants' arms as they washed away what earth might have been upon him. Breathing the scented water as it caressed his face, rolled down his jaws and neck and into the water again, he indeed could feel it slipping away, the world at least.

Who might have thought it of his birth? he mused in a moment of remaining consciousness. But this fell away to the water with the rest, and he floated, dreaming within reality, utterly unwilling to disturb

the comfortable daze.

His placement turned as they completed his bath; the song progressed easily into another melody. He noticed, but was not distracted by the change for the smoothness of the transition. Some time after he knew he was lying on the edge of the water, he felt the old, bony hand of the prichava stroking his short hair, lulling him yet more.

"Your lady sleeps, as should you, Ara," she breathed. "Sleep, and then wake cleansed for prayers to the spirits."

His eyes closed upon her words.

The sun fell hazily through the long rear panes when they entered the high temple at opposite ends. They had woken well, far clearer minded than they had been in some time, perhaps for the rest, perhaps for the medicinal value of the marlai, or for the song, seemingly far away, a steady echo in the altar. Well prepared for the consecration, what they saw in each other, however, warranted at least a pause in the entry arches.

They decidedly had wrapped him in clothes befitting the occasion, she thought, in earthy trousers soft against his lean body, a fine tunic buttoned at the neck beneath a dark green kneecoa, finely embroidered and tied at the waist with a wide sash. A tailored white robe framed the array. His head was wrapped with scarves as soft and white as his robe, intricately plaited at the side with chain and tied with de'ih beads as was proper for his place.

They had taken special care with her hair, he noted with a small grin, braided several dark strands with silk and beads before draping them around her crown and over her forehead. Sheer white scarves had been threaded through the braids and drifted down to the floor behind her. Her shin-length gown and coat were silks in shades of blue with deep-toned stitching; dark indigo leggings fell over her cloth-wrapped ankles; upon her arms hung her robe, white embroidered with silver thread.

So strange, they thought at first. For the first time, they looked as regents should. *For it is what we are*, they understood. And the longer they stared at each other as such, the less it was different, and the more it became proper. Indeed, it was agreed upon within them, that this array was right; it belonged entirely to many of those who had been given unto them, and now what they had chosen, accepted-claimed.

Finally, he stepped forward, extended his hand. His stare was bound to hers. She held it without wavering. When her hand slipped into his and her energy joined to his once more, he breathed again.

"Anai," he whispered, stroking her fingers with a thumb.

"Ara," she answered, pulling her chin up a touch.

Their mouths turned up slightly. This was their truth. The names were welcomed within them.

Bending, he brought her palm to his lips, pressed a kiss to it, and then to the soft of her wrist. When she touched his temple markings, he rose, capturing her gaze once more and turning them towards the warm light. Together, they stepped to the altar, a plain nook of the room, decorated with but a tray of heavy incense and subdued ginhra panels.

There, they sank slowly to their knees, folding the fine fabrics upon the soft pillows, deriving their

sureness from their touch, needing it as they began to offer their first prayers, their prayers to the living.

Their hands waved the gentle white smoke over their faces and necks. "Tsa'al ri'emondre ye'o, tsa'al gibre'ull nacsharr..."

They prayed for their son and for their parents, for Miztri and Dalra, Susik and Gatra, Derra and Yasis...their chosen family. They prayed for all Desal, blessed by the spirits in its new hope, yet to be vindicated and yet saved, should fate continue that path. They prayed for the strength they needed to make that path possible. They prayed for their crew and for their friends, for Novren and Medrove, their closest comrades and for all their neighbors within Irlae who would likewise begin again in their people's resurrection.

They waved the incense over themselves, turned their hands within the wafting curls, feeling the slight drift in the draftless room. "Ye'o tsa'll monra'ull vjarr..."

These things they would keep in their present world, the realm in which they would retain influence and responsibility, on which they could act, and would according to what fate would have of them. The ones among them, peoples around them, moving and living, growing and learning and yet entwined in whatever was intended. In these things, they would place their hope.

They prayed for their own spirits, as well. They asked for what allowance of wisdom and strength they could derive of their present selves, of all those many who had come into their beings and the children who had preceded them, whose knowledge and experience yet wandered within the flood of voices. The remainder of that childhood was now set aside utterly.

"Deliver them safely," Anai whispered, "our childhood spirits...and keep them at peace in their sacrifice..."

"Safe until the time," Ara finished, "when they might be brought into the sun again. We give them unto your care, blessed ancestors..."

"For Desal, for the future, for the children among us and those who shall follow us..."

"We ask this."

Their eyes had closed, their heads bent, for their humble pleas to the spirits, never before so sacredly spoken from their lips. There had never been such a need in the past.

They prayed to let go, completely that time.

Upon the altar, shed of their origins, their former beings, they felt that release, the weight of that youthful conscience fall away. For all their former doubt, fears and insecurities, they knew that they could take back only what was theirs--their family, their people and their desires and dreams: their truest beings, their very present.

The rest was fate's hand. Someday, they would see its purpose. For the present, they would only know their own.

Their fingers still entwined, Ara and Anai prayed most sincerely to bear the strength to wield that freedom and that sublime acceptance, that balance within themselves.

In that way, they continued.

In the airy, silent room the two regents felt their elders' lives slip completely, finally away. Watching their last breath expel, their last blink, twitch...

Havetsi let her tears drop over her cheeks and past her wistful smile. She loved them so, would honor them devoutly and always.

They were the sorts who had shied from the attention their deeds in life inspired. Rather, they let go and moved on, back to their source--their family--onto a new challenge, a new question or curiosity. They accepted praise with true humility, though their spiritedness was as much a part of their beings. They sought to live simply, bore their pride in others, though they did know their own accomplishments and took on as much responsibility and purpose as any might have expected--and far more when they believed it was required. They had much complexity and bore their secrets as they felt necessary, and yet they had given everything of themselves.

For all that, aside from her own strength, Havetsi knew she would do all she could to have their histories known completely from that sun forward, to never let any among Desal or Irlae ever forget them. They had earned that honor--and would again, she knew contentedly. They were only beginning...yet again.

As she decided this, sharing her peace with Cera, touching his temple lovingly, she blinked to hear a familiar trickle of energy breaking Desal's tradition, just as she had hoped.

Turning again, they watched their elders fade within the shimmer. Not the spirits, but spirits still among the living were calling them. Havetsi's smile grew.

Within herself, she already felt their initial pain and desperation, disbelief, and then curiosity. Yet then, the hope, the work--always such work and uncompromising dedication--the continued wondering, the warm regard, deep love, resistance, tiredness and yet, particularly in the end, resolution.

It was an unsure end, and yet their final act was truly felt, giving to the woman and others who did so desire them, and wishing only they would fulfill the destiny their siblings had staked their spiritual peace upon. For themselves, however, they had also finally chosen to resolve their foreign birth, one hundred and ten years after renouncing it.

So, it was done. Fate would be balanced. There would be peace for the birthpeople, for their sister and brother, for the family and perhaps eventually for Anai and Ara's spirits as well.

Havetsi and Cera watched the transporter take the bodies from the bed and continued to stare as they held each other's hands, well after the elders had disappeared. They were not gone, however. The elders yet lived, within them, truly within them and now beyond, in a continued life. It could be said to merely be a small delay in the spirits' realm.

"*Voyager to Captain Havetsi.*"

It was Voyager's doctor, she knew with a blink. Still a bit disoriented, she did not think to speak immediately. With her well-learned expertise and a calming breath, she managed to stave off the rush of memories that attempted to follow that recognition, tucking them safely back. Her own memory of the

EMH would do.

"I am present," she said. Her voice was a little thin, but she was assuredly herself.

Anai's eyes opened upon sensing the light, and yet she did not see the familiar plaster ceiling at first.

"You may find the point of balance within your mind," she could hear Lledri say in the first lesson they had taken. A few other scholars, true and quite elderly scholars, had come to assist teaching the new regents, yet it was the prichava's voice she remembered most clearly then. "This you have touched before. When you bonded, you learned a way similar, the balance between each other. Now you shall learn to center your singular, entire presence. Kneel now and we shall use the clearing of which you speak...."

The eaves creaked and far below, Rahna's call of bread was answered by several men who greeted him with the dawn. The chatter faded naturally as they continued moving. Through the shutters, the new sun began to creep in.

Her fingers fell upon her belly, warm and flat, drifted over a spontaneous quiver within her. She breathed. The air was cool and dewy as were most mornings in Azlre. She turned her head to take in the scent of her bondmate, as warm as she was in their old, beloved bed, musky with incense and the deeper traces particular to him. It was almost strange to feel her senses so tuned, so sharp after nearly three du'ave all but lost of them.

It had been so long, she knew, since they had made love.

"As none can doubt your race beneath this sun, never doubt your spirits' truth, which is this place of calm you achieve. Embrace it as your very nature, and your steps shall gain assuredness."

Ara's eyes opened to hers: oddly calm, clear...knowing, utterly aware and yet learning. It stirred her deeply to see him with that much peace, even if they had so much more to gain still.

"From this point within, you shall learn to access the remainder of what lies within you. The lives you carry shall assist your training when you learn to access them correctly. To call upon them--and not they upon you--shall be learned as they embed themselves properly within you...."

It had been a challenge. For the third time in their lives, they had to learn how to process information, recall and interpret--and that time, like the last, in a completely different manner to what they were accustomed. The advanced meditations were performed both together and individually, sometimes with their elder-parents or sometimes with Lledri; that had greatly assisted their recovery, as did their relative seclusion.

While the battles and skirmishes waged on in the ever-stubborn Unar territory, their lives were spent between the silag and their home, in study and in meditation, in their dogged need to reclaim their senses, to rebuild their beings from the scattered fragments within them. In time, it all would merge.

"The spirit alone brings bodily life. The legacy is life and spirit already touched by fate. They are now a part of your experience--your life; they gather in your peaceful state now to help form your present being. Welcome them now, and always. You shall find constant teaching from them, even while utterly

among the present...."

From what Anai could tell in those first few minutes of her morning, it was beginning to work.

She stretched her arm over him, filled with his scent and his stare. Never losing either, she moved, sliding herself over him almost as if she was the trail of incense, covering and encapsulating him within her streams, moving against him, upon him, tempting all his senses, inciting him to breathe her effects.

He showed little surprise, but undoubtedly was pleased. He added to her aroma when his hands lifted from his sides to wash her against him, pressing his hands against her skin, over her soft curves as she undulated against him, arched to his motion.

"I am fertile this dawn, my mate," Anai whispered playfully into his ear before she tasted its lobe, nuzzled her nose against his markings, reveling in their similar alertness, as if the sun had finally broken through their morning mist and fog. "It is felt."

"You bear more warmth, ka," he breathed in agreement, inclined to grin as he grazed her warm neck with his teeth. "You wish for another child?"

She smiled as her nuzzle became a kiss to the sensitive nerves of his temple. "I awoke inspired," she told him without complication, lightly flicked her tongue along his indigo marks. He groaned, low in his throat, causing her to sigh with a doubled satisfaction.

"Then I shall have to indulge my spirit," he said, letting his fingers fall between her parted legs. Softly, he brushed her swollen flesh, rocked his hips against her own sinuous motion, and matched her kisses, tastes and soft, encouraging sighs. When his touches deepened, she arched hard against him, drawing her head back as she allowed the rush to wash through her. His other hand slid up to cup her full breast, gently squeeze her nipple between his marked fingers.

"Ahh...more..."

She caressed him with her moistness as he complied, watching dreamily as her pleasure radiated from her open-eyed expression. It had been far too long since they had been well enough to have each other like that, he decided, drinking in her responses, her motions, her soft, throaty song.

Shuddering deliciously, she rotated her hips to stir his increasingly wet erection, and felt her nerves and muscles clamor for more attention. "I am ready for you," she breathed, a seductive smile curling her mouth. She slid her center over him again, trembling slightly with another wash of sensation. "Take me."

His lungs filled as his body surged. Her words had been coupled with her knowing, her feeling... "Ah, Anai..." Pulling her down to his open mouth, he tasted her upon contact, burying his hand in her long curls, turning them over like the tide and shifting himself down so to bury himself in her.

She welcomed him with a long moan of approval and drew her legs around and up his firm thighs and hips. He moved, and her heavy lids closed with the pleasure and relief, to have her mate feeding into her body and her joined spirit, drawing out every ecstasy in them both. Her calves pressed his weight more fully onto her as she drank his open kisses, his quickening breath, muffled his moans and hers between them.

"We shall make a child this sun," he whispered, parting from her a moment to find his breath. His sleepy stare smiled down to her, warm and sure, even as he pressed again into her small body, watched

her relish in her fullness.

Her gaze drifted down to his. "We shall, yes," she whispered, ending on a deep claim of the cool morning air as he completed them again...and again; then he rocked his hips against hers in a timeless rhythm she countered as if by nature. She almost laughed. It was wonderful, the motion, the sensation, building upon and over the last.

He thrust harder, plunging his hand behind her nape to draw back her head. His lips and teeth went to work on the flesh of her shoulder. Upon contact, her nails tightened upon his hot skin. It dawned on her a moment later that he would not be patient in it that morning. It had been too long for that. Considering how he compensated, she did not mind.

She instead met his strengthening rhythm, holding his stare as his face tensed, as her upturned lips twitched, completely in each other. He was straining within her, surging against her riveting muscles; she felt the small muscles in his temple twitch as his mouth locked onto the curve of her neck. A strangled growl rumbled in his throat; her hand flew between her own teeth to stifle the cry she might have voiced freely had their son not been sleeping nearby.

It barred nothing in pleasure, though. Moments later, she felt his warm seed spreading into her as his mouth parted to gasp for his breath. A moment after that, she bit her hand to feel her climax rain through her, arching her body and clamping her legs, pressing her foot on the inside of his thigh to hold him where he was. He did not resist, but fed it more, bearing hard into her in another small surge, tasting the soft underside of her exposed neck lovingly, gratefully, shuddering again soon after she did. He nuzzled there a minute longer as they began to relax.

In that moment, all was quiet within them. Looking to her again, adoring how she looked just then--sated, completed, at peace, her small, kraja-marked hand at rest beside her face, touching her temple with the backs of her fingers--his lips pulled up into a similar smile.

"M'ves ye'a," he whispered, his emotion crackling in his throat. She was so beautiful to him, so able and inspiring to him...

"M'ves ye'i," she responded softly, with a slow blink in her misted eyes. Sometimes, not necessarily at times like that, her breath caught to sense what he felt for her. It never failed to raise the same regard. Reaching up, slowly caressing the long muscles of his legs with the arches of her feet, she led his lips back to hers.

He went easily to her, tasting her full mouth once more before pulling her over with him, onto their sides. He drew their blanket over them again, still kissing her intermittently, whispering his love of her as they nestled into each other's embrace. Their eyes closed slowly, without attempt or argument.

The rustles in the eaves, the clinking of the kettle downstairs, the sun shining fully into the little window at the center of their attic room, all of it they enjoyed as they lay entwined in each other below their soft knotted blanket. They smiled gently with the knowledge of those first facets of peace within them...and perhaps soon a happier distraction, would the spirits bless their hope and fate saw it to be truth.

"Nali? Tola?"

Their eyes drifted open.

Their son stood at the curtain of his pallet, sure on his small, sandaled feet and yet prepared to go any direction with but a word. His dark brown gaze was rather plain below a raised brow; his bottom lip was lightly snagged between his small teeth. His fingers, entwined upon his ribs, fumbled with each other.

Since their inheritance, Ba'ela had been remarkably strong for such a high-spirited child, though a little hesitant to approach his parents at first--careful, in truth, not to surprise or disturb them. There were several mornings where they, so wrapped within their own minds, did not hear him calling them, or thought he was someone else.

That morning, they heard him perfectly, and they found their mutual grins grow to know it. Turning onto his back, looking to his son's questioning face, Ara outstretched his arm. "Bring yourself, Ba'ela, the sun has not grown to great height as yet, I should think."

Seeing his mother's grin, his father's welcome repeated with a turn of his fingers, the boy smiled widely and hurried over. He slipped off his house sandals once there and crawled onto the bed, giggling as his father pulled him over and between his parents. Placing his dark, curly head on his mother's breast, Ba'ela snuggled in with them and gladly closed his eyes, felt both their warm arms rest upon him, hold him gently. The child relaxed in mere moments.

Anai caressed her child's hair, placing a kiss on his fluffy crown before looking up to Ara again. That time, she thanked her bondmate with her smile and her gleaming eyes for the one they had already and the other that might have been made that sunrise.

For all the guilt and regret her sibling might have felt in her prayers and actions, Anai knew she regretted not a moment, especially then.

There was a palpable pause in the transporter room when the systems whirled down.

The elders of Allanois lay, still entwined, their marked hands bound with their center finger rested in the other's palm, their beautiful clothes and ornaments spread around them, staring serenely at each other.

Dead.

Chakotay took a step forward, seeing their array. In a blink, he was in his quest, watching the youthful forms in those same clothes walking away from him, having said their goodbyes. He almost held a hand out to prevent Kes from disturbing their grave, but then he suddenly understood that she was supposed to.

For that matter, on Desalia, once their spirits had been freed by their loved ones, the body did not matter.

"They've only lost pulmonary function about a minute ago," Kes said, her voice rising with contained hope as she double-checked her readings. She looked back at the captain. "Their neural pathways are still functioning. Weak, but present."

"Then we don't have much time," Janeway said, her stare locked on those forms, whom she'd left only a half hour before.

She was notably rounded with child--two children, in fact--when her bondmate opened the door of the silag for her and they walked out onto the front steps. Ba'ela, who had come with them while they received their ornaments and dedicatory prayers, held his father's hand, his eyes wide to the scene before them.

Upon being seen, a roar of celebratory greeting enveloped them.

Anai laughed, leaning into Ara's arm. It was as beautiful a sight as they had hoped. A dream and prayer breathed by billions finally brought to the present by an inspired fate--not to mention a great deal of education, hard work and sacrifice--had resulted in Irliae's boundless rejoicing.

The ancestors were certainly pleased.

All of Azlre and Cezia looked to be in the square, celebrating the end of the war with Unar; it seemed that half gathered close to the silag when the regents made their presence known. They gratefully greeted and thanked the two, whom they knew when they were children--children who had struggled to improve Azlre and Sacezia, who had plead for resistance in that very square, who taught their people and fought for their people, suffered and overcame, as well. Seven and a half years after beginning their fight, they all were free, their regency and lands restored, their spirits unpoisoned and ways unspoiled, their blessed futures before them.

"Zhra'o ka!" and "Zha hevrre!" echoed through the crowds, some waving from as far as the east avenue.

In response, she drew a circle with her fingers upon her temple and bowed to them. Her bondmate mirrored her, sinking to a knee with all respect yet cheerful, too, to hear another wave of welcome rise from their fellow citizens.

Turning to see Lledri and her attendants gladly following them out, they lifted their robes and stepped down with their child to join their people in their joy...

Their fingers slipped under the crust of the soft, puffy dough then rolled it around the joth cheese and harisde they placed in the middle. Anai ate her portion quickly, hungry not only for her burgeoning belly, but for the busy, happy day, spent amongst her neighbors, friends and allies. It was nearing sunset by the time they were able to sit and take their meal.

She did not complain, however, even as her legs cried relief when Toma helped her onto a sidewalk step. They basked throughout the day in Irliae's accomplishment, even while the reality was still sinking in. Anai and Ara, among the others, had known for nearly two seasons that the Unar would surrender. After a decisive series of attacks on their homeworld and a final pinch of their resources, their prediction came true.

Sashana'i and Aratra would have felt incredible contentment in that, Anai knew. Much of what had consumed them--the very reason for their initial prayers, in fact--had at last been vindicated. And yet, that was only a part of what would be Desal's peace. Next must come the long, difficult and far-reaching work. The restoration of Desal would consume at least a generation.

However, she managed to set those thoughts aside to celebrate that blessed sun. The next sun would rise soon enough.

Looking at Ara's wise grin, she could tell he understood the same.

"My children," said Bakali as she and Bala brought forth another elderly man. Gaunt and trembling, the stranger smiled kindly then bent in respect before taking a space on the ground precisely six paces away from them. "Beneath this sun, I bear the honor of presenting Shantsa of Desal, leader of the new council of elders which has formed in the city."

Anai sighed to see the man's terrible state; Ara, feeling equal compassion, leaned forward to offer their tray to him. "We welcome you among your own, good man," he said, bowing his head. "Please, bring yourself forward and take your meal with us and our family."

The elder was visibly surprised to hear such words and to see such simple people. Somehow--perhaps for his own memory of so long ago--he had expected the two, though captains and laborers in the resistance, to be more formal with him. "My thanks, good regent," he said and crept forward to choose a spool of bread and some fruit. When Anai poured him tea and set it by their tray, he breathed a laugh, bowed again to accept it and the close seat. "It pleases, the spirits bless you, good regent."

"Shantsa wished to speak with you," Bala said, nodding with approval as the man took his bites. "He brought himself with Gihetra this mid-sun for this purpose, sent by his council."

"My infirmity accepts travel poorly," Shantsa admitted, "and yet, given my past placement among Desal and familiarity with your family, I felt it proper that I be the one to address you both and beg of your duty, as you are now prepared for it." His eyes roamed around the square, sunken and sad. "I should feel an eternity's weight of guilt for asking this of you, however, seeing your beloved home."

Anai leaned back on an arm, caressing her swollen abdomen as she regarded him again. "Shantsa," she said, "a great many spirits committed to the ancestors bear a measure of guilt they have placed upon themselves. You need not add pain to the stars in requesting what we are, by right and duty, committed to give you."

Ara reached over and stroked her arm. Best they began their regency with some measure of poise, he thought. Anai had begun well.

"Thus," Anai continued, "you shall take your meal amongst our well-earned peace and then we shall speak on Desalia-Four."

They could be patient, Ara knew. They already knew what the elder would ask, having not been isolated during their training. They had rather insisted on being fully informed of Irliae's developments. Unfortunately, the news on Desalia-Four was surprisingly bad on a continuing basis.

It was not for a lack of relief going to the homeworld. Food and medicines had been brought and distributed. Some quarters there had unbelievably resisted the help, claiming that Desal had not served in its contrition well enough. Also, the conditions of the planet were such that much of the effort outside of unraveling the massive catacombs of historical and technological archives involved keeping those volunteers healthy and safe.

Disease, bacteria and blights, infected insects and animals, had sunken into the very stones of Desal, much more so across the continent; the generally temperate climate did little to kill it. More, the power

systems they had needed to obliterate during their invasion had no replacements. The Unar had removed all the original systems, including the sanitation control and food services, so they could maintain complete control over the retained population. The land around the capital city had been abused with force, preventing any productive growth for at least another season, when the rain season might help wash the deluge away. Even then, the poisoned waterways and wells would need to be purified in order for any irrigation to be successful.

People like Shantsa were in desperate need. Certainly, he would not have come had his home city did not needed an assured sign that it the resurrection had come, a presence that their citizens could look to and the work those new regents had always been prized for in their trade.

Those not like Shantsa and in utter disbelief that Desal was vindicated and ready to grow again were likely in worse condition. They remembered too well the empty looks on the natives' faces when Be'i and Toma had broken into the city, their lethargy even when they killed the guards there.

They were spirits living in corpses.

Those citizens would have to learn by their regents' examples, Ara and Anai had decided, watching Shantsa obey them and continue his meal, his long, ancient fingers trembling with but the weight of the bread.

They ached to merely think about leaving their beloved homeland, waking in the cool air in that tiny loft, taking their morning through the square and enjoying the company of their fellow natives, all of whom they could name as friends. They would indeed miss Azlre openly.

Yet their responsibility was to their people, their calling to bring Desal back to health and contentment. There was no formal scholarship to speak of--more simply, no government--no proper schools, medical institutions, food supply, housing, training centers. These were but their local concerns. There were six Desalian planets, fifteen smaller settlement worlds and about five billion largely uneducated people. Thankfully, they were also a people whose love of learning had never ceased, even in submission.

On that, Ara and Anai were basing much of their optimism.

It would be like their work on Cezia, they imagined, only more widespread, far more encompassing. They felt ready for that new challenge. Having completed their spiritual training as well as being learned in their fields, they felt confident and relatively secure with themselves and the legacy that had been left with them, with eight lives worth of working during the occupation, nineteen more of working in peace, plus two foreign born ashna'o, whose experience spanned both conditions. This all at work within them, they had little doubt that they and the other captains, their dear friends, the surviving scholars and their beloved elders, among others, joining their efforts, could repeat the process they had fought for years ago in Azlre, spread their knowledge and purpose. The next generation would show some of the fruit of their labor.

At least it would not be completely new to them. Then again, nothing really was anymore.

Ara nodded to himself as Shantsa completed his meal, careful not to waste a bite. The elder looked as though he would burst with the relative feast he had consumed and he stared at the bared tray with what almost seemed like regret. For that, the younger man offered him a small, warm grin.

"Your care shall be seen to during your suns upon Cezia," he told him then caught Bakali's visible

approval. Ara returned a little grin and continued, "You shall take food and gain health, enjoy this blessed world and its citizens and remember it dearly."

Shantsa sighed. "Should this be what you require of me, good regent. And yet, I must beg your--"

"Not beg," Ara said gently, reaching out to the man's heavily wrinkled temple. "I would rather wish you remember Azlre, Cezia, as that shall be our template for Desal--for now. Even Azlre should require great improvement. Someday, it shall be but a memory given to our grandchildren and great grandchildren, and all after that who shall see us, all of us, as ancestors willing to sacrifice what little they had to allow a future peace to flourish. Or I should hope we would be blessed by fate so dearly, for the amount of work which must be committed to." His eyes crinkled with his grin to see Shantsa's smile slowly grow. "Remember it all, good man. It shall be again, should our acts lend to the future. We should intend they might."

The elder Shantsa breathed a thick but resolved sigh then nodded. "It pleases, good regent."

"Only allow my bondmate and I the proper amount of time..." he paused, glancing to Anai, "...for proper preparation and to settle our affairs."

Anai straightened, pulling on a brave little smile for Shantsa. "It would be all we ask of you," she said, "for ourselves and our child, our friends, to allow us a gentler parting. Suddenness in these matters is not preferred, should it be unnecessary. This is...our nature."

"Janeway to the Doctor. Prepare for your next patients."

"*You'll have to begin the regenerations sequences there,*" he informed her. "*I'm transferring those parameters to your location. When you've completed the first re-encoding sequence, we'll bring them to sickbay to prepare for the next.*"

"With or without the neural resequencing?" Janeway asked, watching Kes examine the pair then move away with a nod.

"*To honor their wishes, I'll attempt it,*" the EMH replied. "*As the Desalians say, we'll find out what is meant to be. --Yes, I have spoken with Captain Havetsi. She says they would find the spirits regardless of what we are able to do here. I took that as a yes.*"

Janeway let out her breath, nodded. "Then I suppose we'll see soon enough," she said, breaking her eyes away from the pad to examine the genetic data uploaded from Sickbay. They merged into the present program with but a tap of her index finger, and she looked out to the couple on the transporter pad once again.

"Just one more blessing, you two," she whispered. "That's all I ask."

A moment later, the pad filled with light and energy, which poured into the lifeless elders.

"She does not wish to see you," the nursemaid told him from the crack in the door, plain and cold, as any good nursemaid would. "She states that you should wait until she is fertile."

"I did not return from three-quarters a year in interment to wait, woman," Gychak responded. He pressed the door open easily. For their lack of activity, Unar women were naturally not very strong limbed--only strong tongued. Striding through the foyer of his wife's quarters, he collected his breath, however. Despite her usual and frustrating dismissal, he could not curse a woman who had lived her life looking at the world from a chamber, whose cleverness had been restricted to her small cells.

He saw her near the wall, just how he last saw her, years ago, sitting in her reed chair, staring up to him with a mixture of surprise and hostility. Somehow, it was a relief to see her, even like that. He raised his chin to her, respectfully...perhaps even kindly. Her floor-length hair was bound tightly, hanging over a shoulder and contrasting with her grey dress and perfect, milk-white skin. Between it all was her thin, wide mouth, long nose and high, arched brows. She was very handsome. He had almost forgotten how much.

"I would like to see our son," he told her quietly.

She almost refused him outright, but peered up to him in afterthought. "You have been among Desalians for some time. They obviously have shown you some sentimentality."

"They treated me with kindness that, even considering their manner, was generous," he acknowledged. "Though, I was among my crew in their internment and had little contact with them. --Our son, Rejkisb. I would see him now. It is my right."

Thinking a moment more, looking over his commander's uniform, his silky black hair, his long firm nose, tensed with need, she gave the nurse a slow nod. "Prepare Tchutur for his father's audience," she told her, and then met her husband's gaze again. "You might have asked he be brought out to you in a more proper forum."

"What is improper about having a forum with my own woman?" he queried.

"Do not play games with me," she warned. "Unlike you, I have no such heartfelt yearnings. So tell me why you break my isolation? Only to see Tchutur? I think not."

"I might have obeyed your conditions, Rejkisb." Gychak did not release her stare. "But, simply, I wanted to see you as well."

"For what purpose?" she asked. "I am not fertile."

He sighed audibly, turning to stare at the gauze-covered windows. "I believe it is unnecessary you live in isolation when there is no need. Those restrictions were imposed again when the Plodischik Sect overthrew the central commissionery a century ago--an unnecessary action by the revisionists, as we had overcome the affects of Gozhor with proper treatment. There is no comprehensible reason for you and others of your sex to live bound by walls."

"There are many who would burn a hole in your sternum for that," Rejkisb commented.

"Those *many* are largely dead for their beliefs," he countered. "Who is wiser, I wonder? The sentimentalist or the fragments of a corpse?"

She allowed a nod to his point. "It seems I knew you less than I believed."

Tilting his head, he accepted that and continued soberly, "Consider this, then: I believe that Unar should regain its prosperity in its older ways. For that matter, we require all our people now--and as much knowledge as we may manage to gather. We are very poor for what we sought to do in Irliae. We have been disgraced and degraded beyond measure for that abundance of arrogance and violence with which we stripped the liberties and livelihoods of all within our region, and then attempted a controlled genocide upon a race who once were our allies, among others."

"This much is true."

His eyes lost a bit of focus as he thought on that. "I shudder to think what our finest philosophers would have assessed of our last century."

"Doubtless, they would have cringed at the lack of adherence to the precepts of Crishog," Rejkisb said plainly, "to the tenants he laid out concerning the respect of all minds equal to one's own. It is obvious now that those who turned Unar towards desire for regional purity similarly ignored the possibility that the remainder of Irliae were indeed equals, only saw their differences and named them weakness so to vindicate their political objectives."

His eyes widened with her admission, and he felt a thump in his throat for the hope she had just planted in him. "These are your thoughts in this, wife? Do you wish to end this isolation? These plans for dominance? --Yes, I realize the latter is already chosen, but I would like to hear you. You are educated fully and the literature you have produced is exceptional."

"This has been my only known life," she told him then turned her stare again, "and you have been at war a long time."

Watching him hold his face strong to her even then, however, she sighed thoughtfully. He truly wished to know her mind and was not toying with it, as he once had. Once--and he had disgusted her to the point of never allowing him into her chambers again. But, Rejkisb thought again, perhaps it was but his active mind which had produced such a needling curiosity. Or at least maturity had made him bearable...even intriguing.

"With such progressive thoughts," she stated, "and as you are still rather young, you might want to attempt your own campaign at the commissionry."

"But would you stand with me?" he challenged, turning fully to her again.

Her light grey eyes flickered a bit as her brow drew down.

Gychak willed down any sign of amusement. It was good to know he was able to surprise her, to take her off guard, hold her interest. Still, he yet did not wish to turn her quick temper when he had only begun with her again.

In the next room, he could hear his child being prepared for presentation to his father. But Gychak did not look back. He needed her answer, and he thought that perhaps the Desalians had influenced him after all. Or maybe he had finally learned to listen to his thoughts and desires. His father and brothers seemed to agree with his views, particularly in the light of Unar's need and gladly in spite of those who yet held onto the ways that had all but destroyed them. Now, he would take his woman's words, as well.

"Would you be a true wife and bear my side in this," he asked again, "as did the women of our people in our greatest age? Rejkisb, your words will influence my policy. I have chosen to trust and respect your

opinion."

Rejkisb broke the stare to glance towards the shaded windows, knowing that she had never looked outside them, yet had considered it. Why she never tried, however, was suddenly a mystery to her. The same could be said of all their people--why they as well had never questioned...

"I might like to see the sun," she replied softly.

Gychak's lips pulled into a grateful smile.

It seemed disrespectful, Kes' parting the couple then, though it was necessary--and even she had paused before separating their fragile, skeletal hands, which did not come apart easily. Janeway might even have stopped the whole thing right there if the young lady had been any less quick about it.

From there on, she shut back her emotions and focused again on the technical. Kathryn locked her stare on the readings as the transporter began to reintroduce the most recent samples of Lieutenants Paris and Torres' DNA into Ara and Anai of Cezia. The genetic samples were not dissimilar to their recipients, in truth, only that they had been taken before they had been affected by environment, illnesses, injuries and time. Ara was given the first reintegration, since his medical condition had been dire.

Looking up, she watched intently, as though she expected someone else to be left on the pad when the cycle was complete. But she knew that was still to come, the more precise treatments that had been planned. When the transporters stopped cycling according to the program written almost a century before and amended as late as a month ago, Janeway numbly repeated the process with Anai.

She was beyond feeling by then, but watched with the detached calm of any scientist, even almost wishing at that point she could see where each cell was being met and merged. But as the program ended again, she grit her teeth at the thought. Those were no science projects, there.

Still ancient, still dressed in their wedding clothes and bearing the same peaceful expressions she'd witnessed in their chambers, they did not move, nor show any signs of life but the neural energy detected by the sensors. Her heart still thrumming in her chest, her eyes still aching and face still pale, Kathryn blinked and tapped the next commands into the computer.

"Doctor, the first reintegration sequence is completed." Her voice was hollow even to her own ears. "We'll continue the upgrades here and have the transporters ready for the next sequence within the day."

"*I have their stasis units ready, Captain.*"

"Transporting now," she replied. With a whirr deep within the buffers, a shimmer radiated around the two once again, filling and consuming them within seconds before they were gone.

It almost seemed too easy. She knew it wasn't, though. But at least her part in it was done for the time.

Suddenly, seeing the pad empty at last, she needed somehow to get away from it. She had what she wanted, even if she hadn't even asked for it...but would have. Either way, she could do nothing more.

She'd done enough. The Doctor would handle it, or call her if he had problems...

Or he'd better this time, she thought and looked to her side. "Commander, arrange a briefing for the senior staff at fourteen hundred. I'll be in my ready room until then."

Moving off from the console, taking the boxes Anai had given her, Janeway passed Kes with only a glance, and would have left Chakotay too if he hadn't stopped her.

"Captain," he said, realizing that any question he would come up with would likely be useless. He'd put enough together already to understand what he'd just witnessed. He asked her anyway. "What's going on?"

She stared up at him. "Kes will bring you up to date," she told him. She turned a look back at the young woman. "It's about time you explained it."

She didn't stay to listen, but let the cool whoosh of the transporter room doors give her at least some relief.

As she began her stride down the corridor, however, and her hand fell to her side to touch the soft, embroidered sash Havetsi had tied around her waist, her escape only served to make her wonder what in the world she'd just done.

"One might say that Sashana'i and Aratra wished to thwart the fate we had been given," Anai said, held up her palms. "She blamed herself for our pain, even as she encouraged us. I cannot be certain of your agreement, yet Ara and I have long felt her sin to be our blessing, our being brought to Irliae. We bear no regrets." Shaking her head, dropping her hands with a slight shrug, she looked at her friends in turns. "We have promised to make their work our own, however. Or we would work for a method for you to leave earlier. Your choice is simply that--yours."

"It does not seem like it would be too much of an inconvenience to us," Susik said, liking the idea of going back someday without feeling the guilt of leaving the others, or taking Marise away from the only home she knew, which honestly was the only thing that held her there some days. "So, at the point of our deaths, we would be cryogenically preserved until they come looking for us."

"Ka," Anai said as she leaned back on both her hands, allowing the sun to peek at her forehead. "The technology requires revision, yet this is the gist of the preparation Sashana'i and Aratra have made."

"It is equally insane and workable."

"It shows promise," Anai agreed.

They had heard the idea rather well, she thought, smelling deeply the rich air and the trails of the market, floating outside the south gates of Azlre. Anai grinned a bit to herself, remembering exactly where Toma, then Be'i's lover, had given her their first hovercraft--her birthday present, he had insisted. In the distance, Dviglar's highest communication relay could be seen over the rises, yet she recalled the children's first walk out there with Sashana'i and Aratra...not to mention Sashana'i's clever withholding of Desalian computation, among many other things.

She knew she should be more compelled towards acceptance, but Anai still missed them. Aratra's playful chuckle and love of mischief, Sashana'i's dancing stride and her bright-eyed glances; his subtle favors, always dropped quietly by with a wink, her soft touch, adoring embraces and simple kindness. Even when she pulled at her sister's hair and fussed with her dress, she always gave a peck on the cheek and a girlish giggle that somehow made it all worthwhile. Their siblings lived within them in every detail, thought and sense, vivid upon their beings, for good and for bad; however, it was their presence among the living that Anai simply missed, and she knew Ara did too.

Their spirits would have peace, if they had anything to do with it. For those last pleas, which she knew would echo in them both for an eternity, Anai could not deny her sister's final wish, as much as she would never have asked to return to her birthpeople with her own tongue.

The thought of being again those selfish, pained children with so much yet to bear in life was not a pleasant thought to them. They were certain their spirits would lay in agony behind those narrow, youthful eyes, silent and forbidden their own voice. More, they would not be able to resist each other's bonded spirits for long; fighting that would be a greater agony still--and possibly hazardous. Yet even that would be better than their returning to that place with their minds in tact, only to long for Desal, their friends and family, and to carry forever the burden of their legacy in their forward minds among a people who they were now alien to. For all the lack of unity they felt before, even as officers, it would be nothing to what would greet them as Desalians.

The only solution she and Ara felt secure with, when they discussed it, would be to make certain their own lessons in Desal would be pressed upon those necessarily restored children--and if fate had any kindness, the two would look into it, learn from it. They would be stubborn, yet they would be changed and would adapt to that change with time. With good fortune, they would embrace it and someday find the spirits waiting within them. It certainly would be better than releasing them back into the emotional and spiritual wilderness from which they had come, ignorant and unprepared for the inevitable.

Thus, Anai and Ara had come to peace with Sashana'i's desire and their promise to her.

Perhaps, in the end, she could treat it as her only way to truly thank Sashana'i for the life she did so cherish. The beginnings had been difficult, indeed, but Anai knew she was satisfied, she was happy, and she had made more of herself than she ever might have dreamed--and she yet considered herself a young woman. There was still so much for them to learn and do.

Sashana'i's self-named sin had given them that. The least they could do was to fulfill her wish--only that they would do it their way.

"Voyager's transporter records are the other half of the equation," Anai continued. "What must be done is to assure the mechanics we are working with, and then be certain they are in possession of the technology. As they are recalled, the transporters would require modifications and a rather adaptable program."

"It sounds like a coin toss," Derra said, resting back on his elbows, his legs crossed at the ankles.

"Should it be unsuccessful," Ara said, "it would not have mattered. There is no harm in the attempt, I should think."

Susik eyed him. His face was perfectly casual as he spoke, though his eyes looked dreamily outward: In one way thinking on the possibilities and in another way shrugging them away as if it didn't matter. Not that either would surprise her. Ara and Anai--names she *still* forgot sometimes--had been different in

ways both subtle and obvious since Sashana'i and Aratra passed all those memories to them, just as Bakali had predicted. It was possible that they were acting only on those influences. They had admitted, after all, that they'd promised their siblings. That said nothing of their desires.

"It seems cruel to raise Voyager's hopes for something this uncertain, though," she noted quietly.

Anai's lips turned up. "Ara and I already consider those arrangements," she told her. "Certainly, there lies much time before us to make the whole more feasible--and none of it shall be committed to them should we find the plan to be impossible. Such an empty hope would never come from us. Yet this is all to be seen. In the interim, our lives may be led as it pleases."

Derra shrugged, but Yasis poked him in the ribs. "You might have another turn at life," she scolded him. "You would be a fool to refuse such a chance. If I thought I belonged out in that expanse for a moment, I would ask the same for myself."

"Well, I might want the company of a nice girl who doesn't know the territory."

"You will go, Kurt! Do not be flippant with a dead woman's last wishes! How could I ever have thought a man might have any more sense than a pile of--"

"I was not disagreeing with you, oh wise one!" he insisted, chuckling at her tirade as he pulled her closer then hugged her into silence. "I will miss you--memory or not."

"We would be dead despite anything," she told him, softly then. "It is making one's present life important that matters."

He grinned again, pressing a kiss to her curly crown. "Yes. It is." Looking at his friends, he nodded. "Like the lady says, I have nothing to lose. Count me in."

Leaning back against the soft stone wall of Azlre, Susik couldn't help but sigh. "I am unsure about losing everything I have known here. Much as it might be comforting, the more I think about it...it does not seem right."

"The same may well be said of preserving corpses," Ara pointed out.

"That does not bother me as much as waking up someday to hear I lived another life somewhere lost behind me."

Ara gave her that, as if he had not thought of it, too. He could imagine within his memories that boy trying to grasp the concepts of lifetimes being buried within him, and that his present being was not his truth; he could hear that youthful voice deflecting the issue or lightly consigning the issue to another day, even while knowing it would never leave him again. In truth, such a jolt would do the young man good. It would force the boy to think on his truer worth, his possibilities and desires.

Perhaps it would be good for them all, those former incarnations.

"Desal shall keep your histories without fail," Gatra said.

Susik did not argue it, considering the unbelievable mass of historical databases she had barely grazed in the months after Desalia-Four was liberated. She knew from minute one that she among others would be working on unscrambling those and other records for years at best--and she had only to handle the Antral portion. "Regardless, I am not going to like hearing about it."

"And yet, it shall be learned from," Ara replied, reaching over to rub her calf when she shrugged. "Your compliance shall not be forced, Susik. You must truly wish this."

With but a pause, she met his stare again. "Well, I think Captain Janeway does need the help. Who would we be to deny her that when we would not suffer for it?"

Anai laughed. "Always so practical, Susik. Antral hands shall be full with you."

"It will be good to go back," she admitted. "I love it here, but Novren really needs help with the records and systems--not to mention someone to handle his affairs. He is absolutely hopeless. Mother Kichyrn needs me, the family, and Marise needs to live there now. So strange how we finally see you again and think of home, but then we realize how much we have all made our lives here."

As Susik finished the sentence with a quiet laugh, Anai nodded understandingly. "We shall speak often, Susik. I would believe we forget that Irlae is not terribly large. --And you, Derra, see to the preservation of the clinic? The new council has asked it stand as we leave it, and Ara and I would prefer this, as well. Ka?"

"Less for me to do," Derra grinned. With a glance towards the south gate, he got to his feet, gave the people on the path a nod, a small wave. "Your entourage is here."

Anai looked and breathed a deep sigh. They had spent another du've shoring up all their details at Cezia, installing Hanla'i and Sollve'a as the new city leaders, arranging the first schools and building projects, particularly at Sacezia with the new leaders there, and the trade base, which now exclusively operated out of Dviglar under Cali's administration. A handful of surviving scholars would remain to assist those processes.

They arranged and planned until every detail of Cezia's well-being was attended to. It took Cali to gently remind them of the date.

Three suns later, Ara helped a heavy Anai to her small feet as Ba'ela hurried up to walk with them. On the path stood their elder-parents, smiling and, despite their adoration of Cezia, well ready to end their seventy year exile and return to their homeworld. Nearby walked a good number of their crew, who loyally asked to continue with their former captains and assist in Desal's rebuilding. Trailing just behind them was Dalra, Miztri and their family, who all had also asked to come, to remain near to the regents and someday complete their educations on Desalia. Dalra also wryly noted that he still needed to be watchful of those passionate spirits, lest they cause any trouble.

Satisfied with her view, Anai set herself to the last of her necessary matters there. Turning, she opened her arms to Susik, who filled them immediately and as best as she could. "Regardless of subspace, you shall be missed, too," Anai breathed.

"Have someone contact me when you go into labor," Susik told her. "I will come and help you...visit a while."

Anai squeezed her more warmly. "I shall, my friend." With a kiss on Susik's cheek, Anai released her so Ara and Ba'ela could have their turns. She reached out to Derra, who gave her a kiss and a warm hug, a pat on her big belly.

"Keep it together, Torres...for the most part."

She grinned at the memory. "I'll give it my best shot," she said, humoring him, and then finished in her tongue, "my good friend."

Ara, having passed around his regards and invitations to all four of their friends, took his bondmate around the waist and reached for Ba'ela's hand, still tiny but strong like his mother's. His gaze remained on Susik and Derra, who remained beside their mates, seeing them off with no more farewells.

He liked that, as he was not particularly fond of goodbyes, himself.

"Until another sun," he said to them all, his smile real, but his eyes saying the rest. With a deep breath, another look up at the city wall, he started them off through the short grass and to the path to Dviglar.

From there, they would take off with the Merraj and the Ibatlen, who would assist them in their journey. The war was certainly ended, but there were yet some Unar fighters in the myriad rocks floating through that space. There had been incidents, thus, their people were triply careful for them. They could not afford to lose their regents again--truly feared it.

Ara and Anai had no such concerns. Aside from a growing confidence in their fate, they knew well that a minor Unar scout was no match for the Azallis even in bad times, which might have been arrogance were it not a proven truth. Rather, their discomfort had centered merely on leaving.

They would be able to return at times, they knew, would always have communication with their friends. It was not far away. Even so, they felt a need to hold their heads high, keep their stares forward, as they followed the others over the rises and turns in the trodden path they knew for every stone. Their pace, not so much for Anai's pregnancy, was unusually slower than the others.

Bala and Bakali, arm in arm, tread the path steadily, commenting on it all, perhaps for the last time, they said. It was a typical day, warm, dry, sunny, and the usual breeze swayed the sweet silver grasses and occasional scrub tree, heavy with fruit pods. On the horizon, far past the hills, the dark blue sky went untouched with clouds. To hear them call attention to it, Ara gave Anai a warm squeeze. Her head eased down to rest on his chest. He rubbed his son's soft hand, glanced down to see Ba'ela's little smile, pointed ahead.

They did not look back to the city.

With work, persistence and love, it all was possible, they told themselves as he eased her around a slightly larger rock on the way. Their people would have joy again, relish in nature and technology again, and make their lives all that the spirits would have it. Cezia had risen during the war, had become strong and lively during a time when supplies were still very limited and all its citizens needed to work thrice as hard to maintain them. There was no reason why the product of their efforts could not be repeated on Desalia-Four and its colonies in better times.

However, that place would never be their spirits' home, only their bodies'. They would always be Ara and Anai of Cezia, scholars of Azlre. Leaving was merely moving on to their next duty, they understood and had finally accepted, as they carefully made their way down through the knoll on the road. Dviglar was only around another bend. The Azallis was waiting for them.

They stopped.

A herd of joth needed to cross, and they kindly greeted the herder as she passed with them. In a way,

they wished they might hurry, lest they turn right around and go back, crawl up into their old, knotted blankets and take but one more day. Of course, they would not do that, but it was a thought as they watched the unbothered animals cross, their creamy white fur floating up a bit with each canter, some hopping ahead and others balking before turning again to follow the others.

The throng was not large, unlike the ones that would be led through later in the afternoon, and so they were able to move again less than a minute later and even walk alongside the herd a while as the path straightened on the final stretch to Dviglar.

Without thinking about it, as a relatively old joth strayed near enough, Anai's hand drifted down from her belly to give the goat a little scratch on the ears.

Ara lips curled up. "Have I told you, Anai, not to play with your food?"

The look she turned up to him made his day worth the trouble.

Kathryn dropped down onto her ready room couch, her back straight but the remainder of her glad for the relief. She let out half a breath, feeling an odd sort of numb that typically followed a period of stress: the body trying to get back to its equilibrium, the mind taking a necessary break from the strain it had been under.

Resurrecting dead crewpeople. *Shock is more like it.*

It was done. Time would tell the rest.

The Doctor could keep them alive. The studies Ara and Anai had done during their lifetimes, their precisely kept medical records and those of Susik Kichyrn and Derra of Azlre, their supplied Desalian medical technology and theories, were all extensive. Whether the elders had wanted to honor it or not, they had certainly made good on their promise to their siblings and gave it every opportunity to work.

Reintegrating their DNA into their present forms would be a gradual process--the less shock to their already fragile systems, the better, the Doctor had said--and would take several days. The neurological resequencing, the troublesome procedure that had almost kept Ara and Anai from agreeing to return, would come last. Despite the outcome, all four patients would require regular neural regeneration for some time to strengthen their recomposed cellular structure.

Though Janeway was anxious for the outcome, she couldn't help but think it would give everyone time to recover from the news that Chakotay was just beginning to explain to the others.

Kathryn sighed. She knew she would have to do the same herself. But she really did need that minute to settle her nerves, to will away her anger, her hurt, her pity and the other mess of unsorted feelings.

She could see why Ara and Anai didn't want to do it all over again. She even understood why they didn't tell her, had wrapped their entire family in that one last Allanois intrigue. For the elders' mixed feelings about the entire matter, throughout their lives, they had kept the details of their own histories vague, deciding to wait to decide exactly what to do. The only thing they planned was the telling and their memoirs.

Meanwhile, they lived their long lives, remarkable, successful and important lives in their own right.

They faithfully performed their many duties to the best of their abilities, went where they were required to be, did as was needed and gave all they could, always.

They were entirely happy in those lives.

It was strange to think how right Dalra had been so long ago, when he cautioned them about the kraja. It certainly had ended up being irreversible and in far more ways than the man had meant.

Funny thing was, Janeway didn't know whether it really was as bad a thing as Ara and Anai had imagined, remembering everything, starting over again in life with all the wisdom of their former years. But that common phrase, "if I had it to do all over again," was more a curse to the two, who seemed to wish that if fate were served and they return themselves to their birthpeople, then they should return as they were when among their birthpeople.

Perhaps it had something to do with their spirituality, their belief in restoring fate's balance correctly, not just in any way possible. They had almost chosen a peaceful death for it, had deceived Voyager's crew so that they could come to that decision. Only Kes had kept them from giving up when they knew it would be impossible. Frankly, when she considered the same question, Kathryn's first response was to choose continuance. Of course, she hadn't lived their lives. She'd only heard about them--and only about their youths at that.

"This shall be known," Anai had said in the gardens the first time they had spoken closely, after the first story. *"With fate's blessing, all shall be known to you in time."*

As she began to feel compelled to move again, when her mind stopped turning loops around itself and began to focus, when she became a little drowsy from the stress just passed, Kathryn's gaze drifted across her ready room to the box she'd placed on her desk when she paced in, not thinking about anything but having a seat.

"...another thing I learned from those who made me what I am is that the flower of purpose can be better brought to fruit with more suns--with patience. When you look upon the bloom, it is difficult to see what the food becomes--unless you have seen already the harvest."

She wondered if Anai and Ara had thought about that when they came to meet them at the Institute, if they wondered whether they would be recognizable. Likely, they had. They probably smiled at the curiosity and had plans for that contingency.

"I too bear the burden of my past," the ancient lady had said, a teasing lilt in her voice, *"and thus the only redemption I may earn is through these acts I perform at present. It is my privilege as elder and regent. Such power in placement offers an odd comfort, ka? And yet, how arrogant are we to be, good child, in claiming charge of fate, which is ever untamed?"*

As thoughtlessly as she put it there, Kathryn pushed herself to her feet and stepped to her desk, where the memoir box sat.

With a finger, she drew open the top of the beautifully carved and inlaid box, sighed to see again what was inside: hundreds of data files, every sixteen or so carefully stored in thin cases. Their lives, recorded meticulously for over a century. The years before their scholarship--before they arrived at Uillar, even--had been covered in retrospect and with as much detail, it seemed. The labels had both Desalian and Federation standard characters.

She turned it as she moved around her desk, sank slowly into her chair.

They had meant to give them their histories, wanted them all to know what had happened to them...wanted them to celebrate their proud, fruitful lives, as was the way--their way.

A transcriber had been built into the ornate lid, along with an audio console and holo-imager. Staring at the selections for a moment, she opened a case and inserted a chip. Looking through the directory, she chose the file detailing the day Desalia-Four was liberated. The diary was recorded five months after the fact, she noticed, looking at the transcript header. Frowning her brow slightly at that, she activated the file.

She chose audio only that time, and was glad she did when she heard a voice, slightly tinged with age and rather heavy with experience, begin to tell the day.

Kathryn leaned back in her chair, closing her eyes to save her tears.

Though thickly accented in the Cezian dialect, translated from simple Desalian, she knew the voice without a doubt. It struck her heart immediately.

And she had only begun.

"...Take one step, then take another, and then you shall be another step further,' my elder-father told me. 'It is but this simple, Child.'

"Bala had almost made himself done with the rolls as I and Ba'ela, Plicta and Bolmra had completed the condiments, which we would feed to our equally thoughtful crew. We all bore awareness, after all, of the challenges to be faced on the homeworld, the terrible many things required for its mere health. For myself, apart from Bakali's hourly assurances that the injections she had given Anai and Ba'ela would maintain her and our children's wellness, the list Anai and I had compiled of our own duties was blinding but to think on.

"Thus I sliced vegetables and worried in circles to my father. Bala, of course, remains Bala.

"Your paces may only be taken one at a time, Ara, and in the direction you feel most proper. Trust your spirit that you shall not fall should you not look at each one--or all the ones that keep themselves distant. Concentrate but on the present and simply know what path lies ahead. You shall know you should turn, when you bring yourself to it.'

"This is truth, my father.' I said this as I turned to see my lovely Anai. She sat on a hip with the other women, folding napkins. To see her place each square on her abdomen as if upon a table.... She was so heavy, but ah, so lovely, always. Seeing her perform such simple matters lightens every mood in me--particularly when it is well known what complicated acts she masters, often with equal simplicity.

"See there your nali, Ba'ela?' My smile was indeed broad to watch her continue, unbothered at most at my attention. 'The same way was hers when you lay within her belly.'

"My boy giggled and pulled the hem of his tunic up over his eyes. 'Was this why it was dark in Nali's womb, Tola?' he asked and we all laughed. This was needed; to prove it, I snatched my boy up and teased that exposed stomach. His squeals then filled the room and echoes of amusement followed. Yes,

this reminder of joy was a blessed thing.

"It surprises me at times, that a young man of my past might have run as quickly as a field di'agret from a hungry gask from the life that blesses me this sun, for all its complexity and little allowance for diversion. As I am, however, I cannot not imagine any other way about contentment, and nothing but this life is desired. Many times, I have recalled this; each time, I am left more thankful than before."

The moon was setting in the wood and all he could hear was the crinkle of leaves beneath his feet.

No animals strayed or burrowed; the waterfall trickled into a calm pool. The rocks there held no visitors.

It didn't feel right somehow, or perhaps it only frightened him that no one was there. Perhaps there was indeed no one left to see. They had met him during his last visit, had been waiting for him to come and had said goodbye in typical Desalian fashion--told him that they would meet again, when time held no power and their spirits would be truth.

Why Chakotay had come again was still a mystery to him. Maybe for their presence in sickbay, he had thought that they would see him a bit sooner than he imagined.

But there was nobody and nothing there, no fish in the pond, creatures in the trees, birds nestling above or flying elsewhere...nothing. Behind him, trickling through the tall, thin trees, the sun began to rise. The moon was still to set.

Accepting the light of day after illuminating the night, the moon floated lazily towards the horizon.

Tom and B'Elanna...B'Elanna, or at least what had become of her, staring up to him that first night with brightly flecked eyes over a century older, a result of her bonding. He had felt something in her there, but the elder was so intense, so subtly evasive, holding all the cards and choosing which few to reveal. When he met her again in her house, too, telling him the meaning of his name, even teasing him about it, she was actually testing him, just as she had tested Janeway.

In one way, she was hiding; in another, she was asking them to know her. Ironically, that reminded him of the B'Elanna he knew, if nothing else did.

She never did get back with him to teach him how to write his name in Desalian. He could understand why. It would have made things even more complicated, and B'Elanna had always hated that, though she attracted difficulty sometimes, made it for herself.

Meanwhile, Tom's elder ego had taken his seat at a distance, his dark hazel eyes peering askance or simply listening, but still expertly deflecting--putting Chakotay off guard, even, with a romance novel or a cup of tracha, or sitting by his wife during the tellings with a relatively unconcerned air, or just sleeping. But Chakotay hadn't missed from time to time those watchful little glances Ara turned, his minute responses and raised brow, his occasional mumblings nor the little whispers into his bondmate's ear.

In truth, Ara cared a great deal, was directly involved with the process and the outcome. He just wasn't going to say much about it, but talk about something else to bide the time until the moment came. It was not too unlike Tom.

It frustrated Chakotay just as much.

They had pushed him away. In those same woods, they had first ignored him, leaving Kurt and Susan to desert him, too, and then they'd admonished him from pressing them, following them. Lastly, they had said goodbye. --But then, Chakotay had to remind himself that all of it was *his* perception, his interpretation of the situation carried to a higher level through his quests.

Or was it?

Either way, they did not come again to the woods well after Chakotay arrived. He did not call them, either, only paced around the clear lake, feeling his heavy feet in the thick leaves, careful for mice though he didn't hear them anymore.

Thanks to whatever determination that had made those old people change their minds in the end, their spirits would still have some time to wait for the peace they sought. They hadn't wished their duty upon themselves for good reason. Even so, Anai didn't seem to mind at first, painting her stories to them. In fact, she was honored, relieved, welcoming, even excited.

"Then, you wish to hear the words I shall paint?" she had asked, and he had nodded, telling her about his own people's traditions of taking lessons from the stories the elders told. She'd been pleased with that.

Chakotay still didn't know what she meant to teach them but in history. Of course, that was the trick, one he'd already discussed with the captain. The elder's job was but to lay out the colors and patterns. The children around the fire, listening, would have to find their own meaning in it all, just like Be'i and Toma had to years before, when their ultimate duty to Desal had been thrust upon them. Ara and Anai had definitely earned the right to be host to their own challenge.

He still hated it when elders did that sort of thing to him, though he found himself grinning when he realized his old, common annoyance had come back to haunt him with a vengeance.

That amusement faded soon enough, when he finally, simply, took a seat on a fallen tree near the shore of the pond. He felt tired, and he wondered why he bothered remaining if there was no one there, nothing left to look for.

The truth of the matter was that he didn't know what they were all getting back in the end, for all their trouble. Had it not been for her extraordinary and dedicated belief in balance of fate and the empty spaces her siblings had left in their former incarnations, he might have said that Sashana'i shouldn't have bothered. Ara and Anai might have been able to live out their natural lives without that specter of responsibility hanging over them.

The comfort in it all was that whatever happened, the elders could be content in that they'd finally followed through.

Perhaps that was why the wood remained silent as the sun began to warm his back, reflect upon the clear, stony pool. Perhaps their souls were preparing for their new journey, since everything that was meant to be had finally come, and that those involved in that destiny had done their part and were ready to accept whatever came of it.

It was time to start over--for them all. Perhaps that was some lesson to be had of it.

Chakotay sighed, staring at the little ripples.

The wind stirred, but he didn't move to observe it, only let his eyes drift up to see the full, white moon finally begin to sink through the trees, over the horizon.

An animal mew softly sounded to his side; as his stare turned down, he saw a goat-like creature with a flat muzzle and large mud-brown eyes creeping up, almost as if ready to spring back away. Her long, white fur shone in the dawn light as she inched up to him. Her hooves made hardly any noise, not stirring anything around her. Her gaze was wide but steady.

As if too curious to stay away.

Chakotay remained unmoved, at first surprised to see the joth, and then relieved that there was indeed something there. The wood had been discomfoting in its silence. He also did not want to scare it.

She crept up a few steps more, leaned her head just near enough to stroke his leg with her jowl, purring a bit before she looked up at him again.

Carefully, Chakotay reached forward and stroked her soft head. Her fur was as silky as it looked. With a jerk, the joth maneuvered his hand around to her jowl and rubbed him a second time. Grinning, he scratched her gently there. For a second, it almost seemed as if she'd smiled.

When his hand paused, she took a step back. With another look to him, she turned and skipped off towards where the moon was finally about to set. Just before she disappeared, she looked to rejoin her mate, and then a herd, darting into the fields beyond the wood.

Watching after her, Chakotay stood again, deciding it was time to leave. The sun had risen, and he had gotten more from that barren wood than he'd expected. Best take what one can and be thankful for it.

And maybe *that* was the meaning to be had there.

Figuring the rest of it out would be another thing, though he felt confident that he would someday. He had the time. So, he left it at that.

As he finally began to make his way back to the clearing where he'd entered, when he was just about to leave, the last thing he heard was a thrush of rustling leaves and the busy giggles and chirps of mice.

"Odd it was to me at times, when I allowed myself to think on it, how well Ara and I had accustomed ourselves to paper and pens, physically doing what was required, or simply recalling our knowledge without any aids. --Our improvement in the latter has been greatly influenced by our neurological changes and training, certainly, and yet drawing out characters, pictures, what our minds saw, is oddly satisfying to us both.

"Needless to say, a good deal of rubric was spent on the flight to Desalia-Four. Using all the memories within us, the plans we had made were brought out and final revisions were begun. It was a book of square sheets littered with thoughts and lists and diagrams and maps.

"A large portion of our bunk is now filled with me, still we nestle there quite comfortably and work likely more efficiently than with the distractions of the bridge. On that mattress, we have divined those memories all to organize a true plan, which shall be prioritized according to what Shantsa regretfully has relayed to us. It should be able to be followed. The list shall be shared with Dalra, Miztri and Gihetra, our parents and others among our new staff past our tour of the city and upon their comments shall be revised yet another time before settling into a policy for all to look to. Yet even then, there seemed to be so much that was needed, our lists began to look as would a book of days.

"When Ara saw I grew too frustrated, and regardless of our wish to finish at least one matter of official business this moon, he was quick to yank my gown to my belly, toss all our paper aside and kiss my bare skin there. Then he stroked my sore sides with those lovely hands, which certainly had been divinely blessed at his making, and blessed me, in turn, with the easy promise of a most pleasurable diversion.

"Nevertheless, I first demurred: With all which was needed to be done and he wished to play with the mass I carried! --Not an unusual act, I readily admit...and it is known well I enjoy this, too. Yet there was much to complete before arriving at Desalia.

"All my protests, of course, went ignored. Without words, my stylus was plucked from my fingers and he lowered his head like a sunset beyond my bloated belly, his soft, warm lips turned knowingly up...

"Indeed, my sweet Ara had also been blessed with exceptional wisdom...."

It was strange to see so many stars again, after almost six weeks in Irliae.

The morning shifts were starting to file out of the messhall, but Kes didn't find it in herself just yet to break away from the view of the stars. They had stopped for a moment, possibly to investigate a cluster she could see a bit of at that angle. It lit into her heart almost as much as first time she had seen one, like a precious miracle.

Traveling in Irliae was a colorful event, strikingly beautiful at every turn. But it did not feel as expansive as open space was. Desalians of course knew of the space beyond their region, but only through probes they had to wait a long time for. And though they had breathlessly accepted and devoured Voyager's astrometric database, a bare few ever chose to leave Irliae, but rather committed their careers to building very good sensors and waiting for them to return.

If anything spoke of their patience, it would be that, Kes thought with a smile. Then again, none of the other races of Irliae had an exploration program that they knew of. The few who left belonged to independent ventures.

They had left Irliae not long after the Doctor had completed the first of the major procedures on the four, when the captain was certain they wouldn't need their Desalian friends' help again. When they came to the Zi'ihar Ralle, near to where they had entered the region, she and Neelix were invited to the bridge for a formal farewell from Osna and Babaki. They were quiet but smiling, assuring them that their regents Havetsi and Cera were well and happy with matters as they had developed.

With a touch to their temples, a slow bow in Voyager's honor, they cut the comm line. Captain Janeway gave the crewman at the conn a nod, took a short breath to give the command.

She had tried to look calm and in control, but a closer eye knew better. Part of her wouldn't have

minded remaining, another part needed to leave. One part of her was reminded of so many times she'd said a fond farewell and left with good memories to carry with them all. Another part felt a lack of completion somehow, an uneasy longing. They did have to get on with their own journey, however. That part won in the end.

"Take us to the edge of the Barrier and then jump to warp three," the captain said, "just long enough to get us through the field." She had been reminded yet again by Babaki that it was far easier to pop through the plasma field rather than let it pull and burn them. More, she hadn't forgotten why they had ended up in there in the first place. "I want a full, long-range scan of the surrounding space before we leave the outer nebula. Shields up. Activate harmonics pattern Sigma-four-two, Mr. Kim."

Voyager turned itself around but a moment after that, and with the benefit of its newly repaired and fully operational drive and upgraded shields, burst into warp a few million kilometers before the Barrier, and then stopped as suddenly the same distance outside of it. They experienced similar tremors as the plasma field seemed to be pulling the ship around within its shell and several seconds of the temporal "bending" effect as they pushed through. However, the speed and their upgraded shields, set to a precise frequency pattern suggested by the Desalians, indeed had made it easier. The shields but marginally weakened, all systems were online. Janeway seemed to be at a loss for a minute, partially for regaining her equilibrium, another part surprised that they didn't need to send out damage teams that time.

Somehow, it might have been easier for them if it hadn't been so simple--though Kes had to admit she was glad it had been.

Janeway called for a full stop after they were through, staring at the nebula they'd come from, the peeks of stars beyond. She asked for a full round of diagnostics to be certain there were no deleterious effects from the plasma field in the gel packs or among the crew. She then repeated her order for a full sensor sweep to scan for Kazon ships and quietly asked Tuvok to reinitialize their weapons systems.

Waiting for two small cruisers to move away, Janeway watched the diagnostics play out on her screen and the status reports come back as manageable. Tuvok reported that their phaser and torpedo bays were online and at full capacity. Some time later, long range scans showed no more Kazon activity in the area. All was well. She sighed, gave a nod.

Before she could open her mouth to direct the ship, however, Tuvok announced an object coming through the Barrier. "It appears to be a capsule, Captain. It is of Desalian origin and homing to our warp signature."

Janeway's eyes warmed before her lips turned up. "Beam it into the cargo bay--and send one of our smaller probes back to confirm we've received it and...to say thank you, for whatever it is."

They later discovered that the bulk of the capsule had been packed with news, letters and personal items for their patients. Havetsi had also included a beautiful letter to the crew, with updates from Desal and wishing them all the best in their travels and in their lives, not to mention several more recorded discussions from the Institute concerning warp propulsion, their transwarp project and Starfleet technology.

A few days after leaving Irliae, Kes gazed at the stars from the viewport, smiling on the memory of those gentle people. They reminded her of her own, the Ocampas, but independent and forward thinking, while yet entwined in their history and traditions. They'd had the time to make the best of it, she thought, with the right guidance and a good deal of faith. Perhaps her people would achieve the same someday, too, in time.

Ara and Anai returned to her thoughts. The despair and fear they had in the end of carrying their burden with them into the afterlife was understandable, but Kes was thrilled when the Doctor confirmed that they had finally given their consent to the captain. Kes still had the feeling, somehow implanted in her when she sensed the plotting of the elders in their garden, that they wouldn't curse the outcome. She could see how they would be curious--and yet still hesitant, stubborn, frightened...and tired.

"It belongs but to fate now, Children," Anai had said several days after her last painting, when Kes and Tuvok visited at the latter's request. Sitting on the pillows of their study, she had been reading Institute reports while Ara, terribly weak that day, rested and listened. Graciously, Anai invited them in and heard their further requests patiently. Her answer was kind, but plain.

"All we intended, all we promised, has been done. The remainder, which you shall yet hold among yourselves for the present, is otherwise yours to do with as you please."

Kes lowered herself next to them, glancing back to Tuvok before addressing them. "Anai, you can't tell me you don't care, that you don't want this to work."

"I have cared, Kes," Anai replied. "Twelve times your people's life span, Ara and I have lived and worked amongst our people--always worked as diligently as we were able in order to serve our people, our allies and our families, and to see to the restoration of our civilization. Our remaining youth was entirely spent on this, as was our scholarship. All we have dreamed and desired has been accomplished.

"The remainder should not be our concern. Rather, *your* desire should bring it, and only should it be meant. It was not our wish initially, rather an adopted one which we have honored to the best of our ability. Ka, we bore some curiosity. No longer, however, not in the manner I know you shall propose."

Kes sighed.

Anai reached out to her, touched her cheek softly. "Good child," she whispered, "I do feel sorrow for your part in this. I confess, we did not, in the beginning, anticipate the extent of resiliency in Desalian neurology, though we were aware of it in itself when we offered the program to you. We could not have tested it efficiently; one on Voyager was required to confirm our findings and you were chosen by me. We were prepared for this difficulty--and prepared you, you should recall. You were told it was but a curiosity, not a certainty. I yet intend Havetsi to procure your transporter upgrades, with which you may perform more tests. With or without it, however, you shall enjoy a partial success. You shall yet regain those you call Nicoletti and Bendera."

"But that's not enough," Kes insisted, wondering where all her stubbornness was coming from while knowing just as well that she meant what she said. "It wouldn't be right to take them and leave you behind."

"It shall need to be. You must not expect too much, else live with disappointment. You were not included in this only so your spirit would not be given pain, only..." She smiled slightly. "Perhaps a small part of us did want for the *hope* and knew you would make that be. Perhaps we did wish some connection to our pasts. Seeing you again, knowing you again...it has been a good thing. --Yet our original plans cannot be compromised so much as you would wish it."

"What would be so bad about keeping the memories in tact, Anai?"

"It was not wished--it is not wished," Anai told her.

"But why?" Kes pressed. "Why would you have your younger selves--and all of us--know everything that happened to you if you really wanted to forget? Why tell us the stories and send the rest of your memoirs with us if you don't want to continue?"

"I am an elder and a scholar, as is my bondmate," Anai stated. "Ara and I are agreed--now more than before--that there is no belonging on your ship for us. We are *Desalian*, not the ones you knew. We bear no desire to be again what we were when you knew us. In this, you are quite correct. And yet as we *are*, we bear no place among you and are tired in this life."

"Do you really think it makes a difference to us, what you are now?" Kes held the ancient woman's stare. "If it was only because you were old, Anai, and you really thought you had nothing left to give, then I wouldn't argue with you. But I can *feel* that you want this."

Anai likewise maintained the child's attention. "Should the obstacle not be overcome," she said, quiet and firm, "then you shall not proceed, Child. Respect the spirits who bear that desire. All our spirits shall allow has been given to you."

At that point, Tuvok finally spoke. "You have stated that the primary and most practical reason for the procedure was to replenish Voyager's complement, as they were much valued members of the crew."

"This is the *practical* reason," Anai agreed.

"Then it is not logical that you would deny our attempts solely for the inability to return our crew members in the way you insist upon."

"As has been said, your *crew members* would not be procured in any way but ours," Anai replied. "Rather, two Desalians who had a preference for being precisely that--of Desal, old regent scholars, and exiled among you. What balance could be achieved in giving a life's work to those who have already completed theirs?"

"It still does not follow that you would have all or none," Tuvok told her, "when you claim that fate is not in your control."

"Yet one part is. the coordinates remain with my bondmate and me, as does the power to mold what shall come of them. Additionally, it has already been stated that Susik and Derra may be given back to you through your efforts. Beneath the sun that witnesses our passing, when our memoirs are released, you shall be given the coordinates we feel you shall bear, and theirs shall certainly be a part of that inheritance. This is not nothing."

"True," Tuvok replied.

"More, good Tuvok, I would never claim myself as belonging to the realm of logic, nor even good sense at times. I myself shall rather act as my spirit dictates and change as does the wind, when it suits me--or yet I may hold fast when I wish it. Had I been apt to follow my mind with exceeding loyalty, I would have passed when still a girl."

"Is it this same 'spirit' that brings you to deceive Voyager and the captain in this endeavor?"

"Ka, it springs from my spirit," she answered. "And Kathri's shall not be broken. It bears enough strain and feeling of responsibility. Should it not be meant, she shall have lost nothing more, nor shall the crew have. To commit them to pain when it is unnecessary would truly be senseless."

Ara's fingers tightened in her palm, into her markings. Moments later, Anai's lips twitched upwards and her eyes closed.

Kes had opened her mouth to speak again, but they were asleep almost immediately after their contact. She decided they'd had enough. Ara did seem very weak. He had barely said a word but to greet them. Anai had grown irritable with the topic instead of only saddened.

"They do deserve their way," Kes thought aloud as they turned to leave.

"Indeed," Tuvok replied. After his gaze had examined once more those relics of another time, he blinked a nod in his final assessment. "We will continue our research, but also respect their wishes."

Kes looked up at him, her brow raised to hear him. "You agree? I didn't think you would."

"On the contrary," the Vulcan replied, "I, too, understand their positions among their people and the status of learned elder. While illogical, they have proven themselves educated and wise enough to make their own decision in this matter. They have the right to choose. However, they have also given us the right to continue our attempts to resolve the problem they proposed to you."

And so they had tried--and Ara and Anai had chosen again, chosen to give them that attempt, much to the Ocampan's relief. As much as she respected Anai and Ara's positions, she couldn't help wanting them back in any form. She understood Sashana's enthusiasm about the idea and was thankful the young regent had died pressing it into her siblings as she had.

Before coming to breakfast, Kes had visited the patients. They were still protected in stasis fields and being prepared for the last of the regeneration sequences. They all looked very much as they used to already. Not completely, however, as the kraja markings had grown too intrinsic to their neurological framework to be safely removed, just as Ara and Anai had predicted. The Doctor had chosen to work around that until B'Elanna and Tom were able to choose for themselves how to address that change.

She was beginning to feel more anxious than ever for when they would be revived. She wanted to see their faces when they felt their life within them again, when they learned of Irl'lae, and when they saw the stars, as she did just then. She wondered if the view would matter to them as much as it did her.

"Thinking about our patients again?" Neelix asked.

Kes looked up and smiled. Neelix had brought her some juice with a small smile he'd been giving her since the crew learned about "the plan." With a gesture, he sat beside her on the window couch to share the view. She took a sip of the juice and blinked with a bit of surprise. "It's delicious, Neelix."

"Just a little sirril nectar with kosi water," he shrugged, wrinkling his nose slightly. He hadn't particularly liked the combination. "I thought they might like having a taste of home after they wake up."

"They probably won't remember it," Kes reminded him.

"Then, when we tell them what happened, they'll probably want to know more--well, maybe not Lieutenant Nicoletti, but I know Kurt would. And Tom and B'Elanna might like to have a connection to what they were. Who knows? Taste can be a powerful memory." He drew a breath and turned his eyes out to the viewport. "They had a lot of time to get used to living in Irl'lae."

"A lifetime," Kes whispered. "When I was folding their wedding clothes, I kept thinking about how old they were. They'd somehow kept it all so beautiful, every stitch of embroidery, the colors, all their

ornaments and scarves. Everything about them was preserved." She paused, drew another slow sip of the juice. "Even for humans," she continued, "they lived long lives, so differently than they would have here or at home."

He nodded. "Ensign Kim and I were talking about that."

She looked at him. "I haven't spoken with Harry recently. Is he doing better?"

"Oh, yes. Nothing for you to concern yourself with. Just shock, really. Well, he didn't like their being so sneaky, but I think he understands they believed they were sparing our feelings."

"Good," Kes said. "Because Ara and Anai really had been happy to see us again, and really wanted the best for us. All the upgrades on Voyager were their suggestions, and the supplies were arranged mostly by them."

"Really?" Neelix furrowed his brow. "I thought that was Havetsi."

"She carried the supplies through to us, but Anai made most of the suggestions and sped the procurements. I came on them them once when I visited. I was reminded a little of Tom, hearing Anai arguing with the Koba representative about trade shares. She wheedled him like a professional pool shark."

He chuckled, gave Kes a hug in his arm, sighed out at the view again. "If they remember anything, I hope they'll adjust. They haven't lived on a starship in a long time."

"I think they'd do all right," Kes said, smiling at the starfield as it turned with the ship. Voyager paused a moment before it engaged warp speed, streaming the stars across the viewport. "They did before."

"'It is known that presentation is half the battle in influence.' This I told her while eking out that tight muscle in her arch, up to the ball of her foot. --By the spirits, they were afflicted and bereft of warmth despite our lovemaking.

"'Of our elder father, I should think,' said Anai, with that soft growl--that lovely sound--as another knot was eased from her arch.

"Anai's toes curled as each was serviced, and she stretched the remainder of her presently sated body. With business or otherwise, it pleases to see our respites are enjoyed. I know well enough we have both required them, as we are prone by nature to work, to maintain our concentration rather too well, in that we exhaust and frustrate ourselves. With time and maturity, I would believe some reparation of that fault has been made, however....

"Vya! What nonsense do I speak? Our passion has always been treasured--and resisting her shall never find me at ease. Yet we bear as much intensity in our labor, which consumes much time and wears at us more lastingly. Yes, that is a better telling.

"Anai added, 'Certainly, Dulla bore great presence among his own. It offered him great success, for what he could attain at the time. We have presented ourselves in good fashion as well, and shall, I should believe.'

"To this, I replied, 'Yes, and I am glad to bear such truth in our ways. Still, we must be more than what we desire to be in our people's eyes. It should be an interesting balance to attain among them, who have borne so little influence outside Unar these past generations. Yet I would believe they require regents as the histories would impress just now--as Shantsa had need to see and know.'

"There is a smile about Anai which faithfully amuses me, a clever one touched with a certain playful sarcasm. She once wore it in childhood, and I now know our good regent Mi'ejara bore the same manner. This Anai reflected as she told me, 'In our presence, he would not act without our *decree*. Would Desal hear our edicts with as much humility and willingness to act! Our work would make itself done with far greater ease. The span of our power we must adjust in time, yet not at present. Desal has known much change and must feel security in ways known to them. Desalia-Four should need yet more of the same, though with quicker change of its physical nature. Yes, our facades alone should be an interesting matter--as well for all who arrive with us.'

"I nodded to this known truth upon that older topic. We among others had discussed the differences between the Cezian population and the homeworld--between all the colonies, in truth. We were yet learning of the horrors all Desalia had endured; we would see far more, most certainly. 'I should think those ways bear use in moderation.' This I told Anai quietly, easing away from facts to hopes. She had only just relaxed enough to sleep, after all. 'We shall see about the excesses soon enough.'

"I moved to the next foot and began again. My poor bondmate bore such weight upon her body at present that her arches may as well have been flagstones. As much a part of it were our many concerns and untested plans.

"This was set aside from the present, however, as it was a step still to be taken, among the many others. Anai required her rest, as did I."

The Doctor roamed around the tables, possibly for the hundredth time to be certain the last level of cellular reconstruction was going as planned. There had been a scare with Crewman Bendera's white cell regeneration, which had piqued his more cautious programming and kept it active throughout the remainder of the procedures.

In all, the EMH had thought from the first that those procedures would be fascinating to do himself, being aware of the precedents in Starfleet and even there on Voyager. Working on Lieutenant Torres not too long ago, he had merged and restored her DNA in a similar fashion with great success. Now he had four patients to do much the same to, that with a far more delicate process. Still when he first read about the planned procedures, he was fascinated with the idea of expanding his own knowledge with something so revolutionary--in a word, giving four crewmembers another full life.

It was not necessarily an easy issue for his ethical subroutines to measure and re-measure, however, except that he had the permission of those involved and the encouragement of the families--and the captain's orders, which though not necessary, certainly gave him the official justification he wanted. He could see how such a procedure could be abused by those without the same controls he had. These incidents had precedent, too. So did restraint and propriety.

According the Desalian belief, the very idea of returning the crew as they had might be considered selfishly averting fate, even betraying nature. Anai had spoken of it and agreed with the latter. They were not acting for themselves--this was clear--but instead denying their bodies' natural course among the living, a sin dating back to their Desalian creation tales.

Of course, that sin was to be committed to correct greater ones--willfully tampering with fate, lying, "stealing" memories and committing murder to protect the products of that first sin. Though excusable by many standards, the traditional Desalian faith, which Sashana'i of Cezia had been taught in her youth, would find such acts worthy of spiritual banishment to their version of the devil.

On the other hand, more liberal Desalians like Ara and Anai would argue that their sister could not have averted fate in the first place--as it all was meant to happen, that everything preceding them had made that fate both possible and unavoidable. Their belief allowed variance in precedent, making conditions ripe for an effect--but the ultimate reality was not in their control. While similar, it was significantly different in one's ability to influence an end.

Apparently, Sashana'i had inherited her predecessors' assumption of power and ability to rationalize decisions more than perhaps even she realized. In a way, she was notably more arrogant than her siblings, an irony that brought a significant pause to the Doctor, considering who those siblings were.

In either case, that second aversion of nature was Sashana'i's only way to balance her first sin, if it could ever redeem her taking the full spiritual responsibility for sending her people to war with intent to harm others for their benefit--another thing any good traditionalist would have balked at. Only the fact that they also gave themselves for their fellow citizens and neighbors excused that--their sacrifice for their lack of action a century before.

The EMH released a sigh through his nostrils, getting back to his work. The Desalians were a good people, but their constant balancing acts could be confusing. In one case, it had almost destroyed them. Much of their ethics, based on their histories' lessons, were in weighing a bad for a good and also the mediums, while seeking to live an equitable middle ground and accepting fate and the spirits blessings....

Of course, not many humanoids had simple standards of morality, he reminded himself.

Looking at his patients, knowing what two had permitted from the start and what the other two had finally agreed to--another set of extremes in itself--the Doctor had a feeling that the ethics would probably be the easier part for them.

..."The sun of Desalia-Four had finally grown to rest when we took ourselves back to the Azallis for no other healthful place to sleep. Ara bore well the words while staring at the ceiling, his warm embrace such comfort, 'How strong and proud we must seem to them, for how they looked at us, groomed and dressed as we are. They seemed to stare at apparitions, impossible of themselves. Our previous thoughts have been correct yet now bearing greater depth: We should not be impossible to follow, Anai. They should be equal to us, not regarding us as deities.'

"This, of course, was agreed upon, even in my exhaustion for that terrible yet telling sun.

"As has been said, we wished not necessarily to bring ourselves to the homeworld, though we were required to as regents of Desal. Missing Cezia as a mother might miss her lost child, when we landed at the same field where our beloved siblings were sent to the blessed ancestors, our duty was immediately seen: Desal's need. Cezia had been a comfort to us, though the homeworld and all the colonies' needs were known. Developments had been followed closely. We were painfully aware that we would be required to leave, that our fate would call us away.

"Finally, it did, in Shantsa's wretched form. We felt guilt but to look at him. Yet perhaps our spirits

had required remaining at Azlre more than even we had awareness of, that all our strength should be regained before assuming the great task before us all.

"We knew immediately its truth upon first sight of Shantsa's bondmate, who had brought herself to greet him and us. To look upon her, tears stung my eyes. Her appearance was no better than the tatters brought from the Rulafla camps, in rags long past stained with grime, as gaunt an elder as she might have been with as acrid an odor as the remainder of the city. She had borne great beauty once, however, with nut-shaped eyes and a small, round mouth. And, equally to both pity and admire her, she held herself with some remnant of grace, a fine posture and gentle expression.

"At my side, Ara sighed to see her. More than half a ralkle past their liberation, they had continued with such deprivation and unnecessarily extreme humility. Bowing as would slaves, to their knees, as though we were *Unar*, their greeting was followed with a prayer for their beleaguered spirits. In any other circumstance, this would have been seen as an utter insult to us both.

"Yet more frustration simmered in me to know that they would, though free, continue in such a state--and more horribly, that some would *choose* such a way. Once again, we faced Desalian complacency at its apex. It was no easier as a regent than as a child to see--more difficult now, I should think.

"This shall change,' I thought first, examining her and the others who had arrived with a horror I felt lurching in my chest, well-weighted alone with milk. To see and sense my Ara then, it was known that he and I understood our work with a newness and devotion, which in itself gave us courage. Our planning was well enough, yet the true importance stood before us; within, our reactions were now to be put to action, beginning beneath that sun.

"At last since we took our inheritance, bearing the regency pleased me well, that we had been given Allanois by our blessed siblings was a blessing. We could act with all the privilege and ability our positions afforded us--and would. Sashana'i, certainly and thankfully, had known this.

"And our first acts there, I knew as we neared to greet those who had brought themselves, would be to incinerate those horrid rags and feed those hungry faces...."

Janeway cut the log and leaned back in her seat to close her eyes, rest them for a moment. Truthfully, she could use a month's worth of rest for all the reading and listening she had done. Her eyes felt swollen from the insides out for being so glued to the imager.

It had been a week since they had left Irlae. A quiet ride at warp eight-point-five, with one short stop at an interesting cluster, it had given her a good deal of time to think and to look over the memoirs of Ara and Anai of Cezia, regents of Desal.

How they had gotten to that point... How Tom Paris and B'Elanna Torres--Be'i and Toma of Azlre--had wound up on the footstep of a post-apocalypse with an entire civilization's faith and survival resting on their newly learned shoulders, had been more than enough for Janeway to understand why they had done what they had, and why they had separated themselves utterly from the "children" they had been.

Simply, they hadn't had any room. They had taken what they needed of their origins and from all the others they had inherited from Sashana'i and Aratra and recreated themselves, those two being Ara and Anai. They renounced their previous lives in order to regain a sense of self, paradoxical as that was.

In another way, they had been becoming those people all along.

Reading their thoughts and feelings since that terrible day, after Sashana'i desperately flung all her and the Allanois' memories and desires into Be'i, and Aratra likewise into Toma, Kathryn finally understood what Beshelli had said, that Anai had not lied when she said that the two had passed on the day of Desal's liberation.

The last log she had heard had been recorded a century ago, the beginning of the challenge that would consume the rest of their lives.

She had only scratched the surface of what had become of her officers, she realized.

"*Sickbay to the Captain.*"

Janeway opened her eyes. "Yes Doctor?"

"*I have completed the final procedures on Lieutenants Paris and Torres. They are ready to be revived...if you would like to be present.*"

"What about Lieutenant Nicoletti and Crewman Bendera?"

"*Their systems are more fragile, having been in cryogenic stasis for as long as they were. I'd like to let their systems stabilize another forty-eight hours before awakening them. But Mr. Paris and Ms. Torres are remarkably well, considering.*"

She drew a deep breath and slowly let it out. "I'm on my way," she replied. She pressed her hands on her desk to stand, made her way around her desk and through the automatic door then stepped out onto the bridge. "Chakotay," she said to the man already glancing at her then gave a nod to Tuvok. "We'll be in sickbay. You have the bridge."

"Are they awake, Captain?" Harry asked suddenly, snapped up from the diagnostic he'd been running.

She turned a commander's grin his way, cautious but sincere and seemingly in control. "Not yet, Ensign. Soon."

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him nod, grin slightly in return--the anxious little smile he often gave when he had more to say but didn't want to get in the way with something that could wait. Someday, he would learn that her expression meant about the same. Regardless, it remained with her as she continued to the turbolift, where she waited for the commander then called for deck five.

The trip was silent. The whirr of the lift produced no breeze; the artificial light above held no warmth.

"I should think I heard it for the krelia'ave time--and I have sworn never to hear it again.

"Hibca insisted upon burning those words into my memory one last time, the poor spirit: 'Yet, with all humility and thoughtfulness, good regent,' he had said, 'it must be asked whether we are deserving of such benefit. Since my birth, it was known that our way was of what fate chose to bring us--which was Unar.'

"And fate brought you *us* past Unar defeat,' I told him among the others whom Shantsa had managed to enlist from the healthier of the east district's survivors.

"This full week has seen our work, leaving us filthier than we have been since Uillar, I would believe. Miztri suffered injuries when an unstable housing section nearly crushed her; our parents have become too fragile in health to assist outside Bakali's house of birth, where their efforts now are concentrated and Ba'ela is kept safe. Latsari and Bolmra are both required to rest at their chosen family house another du'ave past his contracting Murrajir's Syndrome, leaving Dalra to the organization of all the base repairs and as temporary technical liaison. Anai continues to work largely from the beleaguered house we and our parents have claimed, adding to her frustration in her late term. P'llaja'i has been a humbling nursemaid during these horrible suns.

"Stable power is yet to be established. Unar's preference for laridium has corrupted more than we had known--until, of course, we began to clear the piles of dung and rubble away, and also the corpses, whose spirits had long left them, disrespectfully left unburned or unburied in the alleyways so many months after Unar was no longer there to order that desecration.

"To work in those deathly conditions with such difficulty and more, I certainly bore no desire to hear of Desalian guilt or see our citizens' continued inaction, had I ever been. Behind me, I heard Anai exhale at similar comments made in agreement to Hibca's nonsense. Indeed, my bondmate's sole venture through the city this week could not have disappointed her more grievously.

"It yet must be asked, good regent, whether it is deserved, should we have paid--'

"My palm stopped him: 'Prihar eat your contrition!' said I. "Bear you no pride in Desal whatsoever that you would allow their dung to cover you when they themselves have sworn defeat?'

"Hibca bowed in deference as he did absolutely nothing.

"It ended at that. The patience upheld beneath that sun turned swiftly to a model of the indignant regent of dawdling children. We had thought to be kind and to tend to them gently, yet firmly, as such brutal Unar had ruled them previously, wish wished to show mercy. Then, however, the arrogance and uselessness of that way was understood. My hands had been bloodied, my eyes felt charred and bitter phlegm rose from my chest when my temper at last had reached an end and I knew that gentleness would need be borne beneath another sun. Should those wretches, such pitiful skeletons, not care for themselves and their own with any fairness, then I would, with or against their wishes.

"As had some at Cezia and many more freed from service or internment, simply no other way was known to them; affliction alone had been their guide. Very well, I thought. They shall need to learn what an end had been brought by finer example.

"Thus, I instructed them to bring themselves away from the area in question; then I dug into the equipment chest, extracted a zutya pistol and a tossed a trionic charge into the heaps within the nearest residential alley. My expediency flowed freely when I set the weapon's levels, aimed and incinerated the entirety of the row, dusting away the passed, the filth and all the other the symbols of Unar oppression in the duration of a full breath.

"Such satisfaction outside of my bed had not been felt since we brought ourselves to Desalia-Four.

"The Desal natives scattered at the fire, though they were quite safe. Our closer comrades of Cezia, however, watched with relief, no more words and certainly no guilt.

"Your contrition shall be taken by *me* now,' I told those who slowly returned to watch the off street smolder, the dust of the past blow away in the wind. 'As regent, it is my right.'

"As it is mine.' It was Anai, who managed herself, exhausted and bruised, around yet another pile of debris and to my side. That sun had first been cursed by her, yet her face had brightened with the opportunity to share her mind--and perhaps at last with some result when she said, 'Take closely my bondmate's words beneath this sun, blessed citizens. Desal's payment has been given by the spirits of our honored passed, who were sacrificed in our resurgence of healthy pride and will to survive the destruction Unar nearly had of us.'

"There, I continued: 'What honor offer you to their spirits in this laziness and disregard of Desal's future? Of Irlae's future? What honor is given to those who passed so honorably in Desal's long night, bloodied and raped by Unar at our own allowance? What good is done for your children by showing them but your selfishness and pitiful hopelessness? What acceptance of fate and the spirits' blessings, trying to make their work here truth, do you pay mind to--or would there be remaining will to feed your empty spirits?'

"Those of you who cry for contrition may bring it directly to us,' Anai repeated. 'Desal is in full possession of its absolution, thus now the time has arrived for our capital to be cleansed of its facade of sin. We would not have brought ourselves to the capital were this not meant. Indeed, your regents are present and one among you, good citizens, and we shall likewise give possibility to a new and blessed age, free of that which brought us to this need to heal. Accept this truth: My children and yours shall *not* grow to their beings in a drask heap!'

"Standing by me, straight-backed and round as a moon, her cloak snapping in the hard stench and her hand rubbing my sore side, I watched her final words burrow into each one of those who heard.

"At last, they looked to understand what change had brought itself."

...She was getting what she originally wanted--and a hell of a lot more she hadn't expected, hadn't even asked for, but was granted by two benevolent leaders...her people...once her people, who regardless would be again.

Or would they be? Janeway knew the Doctor had attempted the neural resequencing, at least to give it a chance on real subjects. Ara and Anai wanted that despite the odds. Like any good Allanois, they had dropped those bricks in fate's path and let them sink in as nature would have it.

Then again, they did *have* to give her that last brick to place, as they knew she would. To fulfill their oath once and for all, they gave her the choice, knowing what was likely to come of it...

"Her heels could be heard crackling on the old stone steps Tola had only begun to repair in our chosen home, which alone shall be for some time a work of great love. The whole of Desalia, as much of Irlae, would be. (How commonly this is recalled, particularly when fatigue claims me!) Despite the commonness of such reconstruction here and indeed upon Antral, my humility had great health for the condition of our home, in which our dear, dutiful friend would remain within this du'ave. This was not an unnatural thing, I should think.

"I felt gratitude for her arrival nonetheless. No matter or business would keep her away from fulfilling her promise to me and Ara, even while she required several inoculations to bring herself to this blighted

world safely.

"Despite the inconvenience and her long journey, Susik Kichyrn was a sight of radiant joy when our good Miztri opened the door of our chambers. As the light bathed over her, it could be easily seen how well she looked, though her eyes reflected a fatigue not unlike all of responsibility in Irlae. (Moreover, her work at the side of Novren Pridalar certainly has tried her patience!) She stepped in, careful for the loose stones at the threshold, staring to us with such a motherly wonder that shall not be forgotten.

"My smile grew, too, to display of the present state of Allanois, at rest upon a pile of pillows under the long bay window. Two sleepless scholars were my and Ara's forms, our tiny Mirai and Kyerani, were pink and cradled in our arms, and nestled between us was sweet Ba'ela, whose engagement with Kyerani's nursing from my breast was broken only when Susik came within.

Ara's face likewise grew with pleasure when he said, 'Susik abillosk.' That beautiful smile was warm in his voice--warmed me, in truth, to hear it, to feel it. 'Sit with us.'

Susik brought herself to the pillows by me. How Antral she did look in her clothing and posture! Yet such lovely burgundies and rich browns had always pleased her form--and being of good family and high standing, she would, with or without her wishing it, be treated to the finer articles Antral had to offer. Her inflection was strong, as well, though of its usual plainness when at last she spoke.

"I brought things--gifts from Mother Kichyrn,' came her whisper as she reached to touch little Mirai, in Ara's arms.

The glint of mist in her eyes, her smile and light, were as precious to me than any other offering of Antral. Once, it had been considered whether past the war Susik might find peace in this place, aside from her duty to her daughter, her husband's family and what work she would bear--and Gatra, for whom she has found increasing regard, perhaps even love.

"Yet in her duty as friend alone, no question remains that Irlae is home to her. While she has borne her share of tragedy, life in Irlae has given her graces, too, which could not have been claimed elsewhere.

When I touched her temple, felt her life, my first thoughts reflected 'sister,' and my smile was refreshed. Yes, the name was settled well within me. 'Our thanks, for that and your arrival, Yeshalli Susik'..."

...Still, Janeway knew--in retrospect, now--what bits of Tom and B'Elanna had survived in the elders. Ara's casual air of indifference and worldly amusement with matters around him, Anai's unabashed pride and will, right down to that "I told you so" look that Janeway had earned a couple times herself. It had grown from the look B'Elanna used to give when she knew she had gotten it right and was waiting for everyone to agree with her.

*And she called *Sashana* a snotty brat.*

"Here, Pe'atla, this is where you speak."

"And it shall always be preserved, Tola?"

"Yes. Always. They are our lives' thoughts and ways, preserved for the future."

"For the Institute?"

"For many people--our people and others; you and your sisters and brothers, as well. For us all, we are passed to those who follow, so that we shall not be forgotten. All scholars record their lives, and our friends in the catacombs perform this service for our general citizenry. Your nali and I likewise record those beyond Desal--a matter about which you shall learn when it is meant we teach it."

"Our friends at Antral?"

"Hmm, ka, they too, among others. Ab, Child, you may tell the future a thing, should it please."

"It does please, Tola. --Vaa... I am Pe'atla and I have lived four years, and my sisters make dibso plates on the garden for their course, and Tola-Bala watches them, and just past, he was laughing at their talk. Yeshalli visits from Antral, as well. She brought us fruits. --Tola? Shall it always be the way to recall this?"

"As fate sees it so."

"--Nali and Yeshalli and Nali-Bakali are making nido'ev pie this moon and it is my favorite!"

"Ah, for future generations to know this is most pleasing. Nido'ev is an important nutrient. Now, perhaps we may slip some away before your nali takes each half. You bear remembrance of her love for it, yes?"

"Yes, Tola! It is most beloved by her!"

"Ara? Mirai beckons you."

"A moment, Gatra, my thanks. --I suppose we shall learn who takes the pie another time, the next time...."

"...Of all nonsense! Eat the entirety of the pie? Ara, I should think your mind has turned to joth curd--or the product of it. You would ask the future to believe I bear such greed for pie that I would take it from my children?"

"Anai, should any fool treat my jests with more than passing amusement, they soon would find your image and envy your blessed form for truth."

"You have taken instruction from Novren again, with that smooth tongue of yours. --Gye. I am mistaken. It is simply made more slippery with age."

"You have taken to its smoothness well enough."

"Vya! Not this moon. There is little luxury due to you--and then, our guests await--aah... Our approaching meal is yet in preparation--a matter that must be attended by *you*. Our plans we have yet to procure for the... Ara! By the spirits!"

"My *deepest* apologies, my lady of Allanois, for consuming your time so selfishly. Allow my contrition

to be shown through sincere worship?"

"Ara, it is so soon past... Or perhaps..."

"Yes, good lady?"

"Vaa, indeed some show of...service, would procure...me'aa..."

"I should hope it might, my sweet Anai."

Janeway's mouth flicked upwards, even as her eyes nailed to the door then pointed down the corridor when the doors opened. Only her peripheral vision assured her Chakotay had indeed come with her. He was as silent, likely as consumed in his own thoughts, or perhaps only respectful of hers.

Likely both.

Into the next section, Janeway began to feel his presence, heard him release a breath, preparing for getting his curiosity satiated. She felt herself taking the same steps. She had not been to sickbay since the four had been transported there. Something had told her she shouldn't. It was an easy instinct to obey.

Another bend in the corridor, and as though it were any other visit, Janeway made the last turn into the sickbay doors and to the Doctor's station. There, she stopped and looked at what Chakotay had already paused to see, what Kes, looking very pleased, was still moving around scanning, checking, assuring.

Gazing at both patients in turns, Janeway moved forward, between the two beds where they lay, utterly still, blanketed warmly above their sickbay gowns...and young, maybe too much so. Somehow, the captain did not remember them looking so youthful.

Their hair had been stimulated to their usual styles, their scars healed and bones rebuilt or straightened during the regeneration sequences. Their hands, resting on their ribs, were fleshy and strong, fit for starship work as they had ever been. Their pigmentation was normal, aside from the kraja markings on their temples and left hands, slightly fairer on their youthful skin but obviously one regeneration the Doctor had decided not to pursue due to the neurological impasses he had failed to overcome.

Even so, it was hard to believe they were the same people she transported on board not a week before--nor even the two she'd seen in the image files. Rather, they looked like the people she'd sent on an away mission almost two months ago, one half-Klingon engineer too smart and sensitive for her own good, one boyish pilot with more skeletons in his closet than she wanted to know about.

Of course, that was what they were *supposed* to look like, those youths she had once smiled at so knowingly, had such hopes for as they rediscovered their potential with a second chance in Starfleet, had enjoyed watching as they met the challenges Voyager faced--and even a few of their own in the short time they had been aboard her ship.

Looking and being, Janeway knew painfully well, were two very different things.

Suddenly, it indeed felt like a hundred and ten years ago since they had been there.

It almost seemed...unnatural, welcome as it was. Little wonder Anai and Ara thought it would be.

Steeling a breath as Chakotay took the other side of the first table, Janeway finally gave the Doctor a nod. "Guess we have to find out sooner or later."

The EMH's mouth turned down. "So much for complimenting the artist," he commented and turned to load a hypospray. "It may take a moment for the stimulant to take effect."

Janeway and Chakotay both leaned over the young woman's body when the Doctor administered the dose. Immediately, the lady breathed, a long intake through her nostrils, which she let out again. Even that breath was youthful, clear and free, filling undamaged lungs.

Chakotay smiled with relief and placed his hand on her forearm. Hesitating for a moment, he decided to take the lead that time. "B'Elanna?" he said, rustling her arm slightly. "B'Elanna, can you open your eyes?"

She did not move--more, she stopped moving. For a moment, it seemed as though her breath had ceased.

Chakotay looked up, concerned at first, but Kes shook her head. "The Doctor said it might take a moment. Try again, Commander. Give her time to respond."

He blinked and resolved to try again with a nod.

But Janeway held her fingers up to his next attempt, silently asking her turn. She watched the young woman take another tiny breath, as if she was content to do only that--wanted to remain asleep. In the moment after the injection, her mouth had relaxed, as had her brow and eyelids. The plain, unconscious expression had softened, somehow seemed more...It seemed more...

More like the last time she had spoken to her.

Reaching down, Janeway placed her hand against the full, warm cheek there, stroked the woman's chin with her thumb. Swallowing, she drew a new breath, smiling slightly, sadly, knowing...

"Anai?"

She breathed again; her lips parted...

Janeway caressed her face again, sadder still in the absence of a miracle, but relieved all the same that the lady had chosen to stir. A strange fear told her they might not, that they would realize what happened, and then quietly die. Perhaps it was meant to be after all, that there was indeed something more for them to do there, a reason to remain alive. Janeway certainly would not argue with that. In any case, the woman's color began to increase; her breathing was thin but steady. She and her bondmate would awaken soon to that uncertain and lengthy future the captain had provided, just as they knew would happen.

Janeway breathed against her welling emotions and stabs of relief and regret, seeing the lady's fingers tighten lightly upon the blankets then relax again. "Anai, can you open your eyes?"

There was movement behind the patient's lids, and then stillness again. She drew another breath.

Finally, her eyes gradually opened. Rather than the deep brown they expected to complement the young woman's appearance, the color was decidedly hazel, brightly flecked in the lights above her.

The stare was blank.

To see the ceiling, the sleek grey, curling lines in the beams, the lights tucked within, to recognize its form in a faraway memory of temporary residence there, and to gradually recall all that had followed that place, those same eyes misted, blinked slowly...then focused.

For some time, she remained silent, interpreting all her senses, one by one. The quality of the light, the lack of scent but upon those breathless people around her, the static feel of the cloth which covered her, the touch upon her face... All of it filed into her, having been in a short hibernation...and another by her awakening, as well, recognizing, realizing with her...

One in life, there and beyond.

His inner voice, far deeper and utterly complete within her, called to her in what ways it could. Her spirit lightened immediately to know it remained there; his presence grew stronger, making her know that she remained within him, too. Still bonded, and so she answered him and felt his relief, his thankfulness. They had both feared...yet now there was no need.

The trace of a smile touched her lips. Then, they saw...

Two others, within them, reaching out to them...at peace.

They both stilled at the sensation.

Peace.

The cries were gone, the guilt, the need for contrition that had not faded in their many years--not until that moment. Her paled and desperate face, glaring up from the grass outside the gates of Desal, had changed. The image itself fell into the past for a sturdy young woman with golden brown hair braided with long, light purple scarves and hazel brown eyes above a rosy mouth. She held the arm of her bondmate, whose red-blond hair stuck out of his yellow headdress as always. His smart grin below his crinkled eyes seemed poised on the edge of a laugh, but his expression was also full of his love for them. Both stood proudly in their faded but finest gown and coat, tunic and robe, bathed in the peaceful whites, the threshold of Tsa'aista. So handsome and happy there, those refugee regents, their siblings...

Thanking them. Blessing them.

With gratitude and relief, it was accepted.

Despite what and where they were, there was contentment where it mattered. This was felt by all the voices who once had cried and urged or later had distracted and interfered, as they slipped easily back. Always there, yet they granted the two a relative quiet they had not known in over a century.

Their gift, in thanks.

For several long moments, the two allowed themselves that peace....

"Can you talk?"

She heard the thick but gentle whisper, almost hesitant as she felt a thumb stroke her cheek again. In the corner of her eye, she saw the captain staring expectantly, her eyes lit with water, her wistful smile twitching a bit, as though requiring an effort, even while keenly felt.

She knew the expression. It was far sadder when she saw it last.

To another side, the dark man had given her arm a squeeze. Concerned and curious, he managed to hold a similar aura of calm as his eyes darted over her then glanced back. When she was a child, she had thought that they had been through a good deal together. It was likely still a good deal to him.

Birthpeople. Old friends. They were the ones waiting that time.

She took another breath, swallowed to wet her throat.

Fate had chosen. The purpose would be seen...someday. They could only imagine what it might be that time.

For the present, she slid her hand weakly up to the one that still cupped her face, and then wrapped her fingers around it. She finally turned her eyes to the ruddy haired lady above her.

The captain's deep blue eyes blinked away the water upon the contact, her smile pulled up a little.

She blinked heavily, patted the lady's hand. "Ka...thri," she breathed.

Janeway coughed at that, neither a laugh nor a sob, then nodded.

"Vaa, do not cry," she whispered. "It was meant. It was all meant. For that...it shall be well."

The captain stroked her young, warm cheek again, leaning down close. "Thank you for coming back to us," she said, a little hoarse but as heartfelt as before.

"Yet we are not what we once had been."

Kathryn shook her head. "It doesn't matter. That you and Ara would let me bring you, after everything else, means more to me than you probably know."

There, her lips turned up; she patted Janeway's hand again. "Gye. It is known." Moving her other hand up, she gave Kathryn's arm a gentle tug, pulling her down. Then, surely, though weakly, she embraced the lady. Without hesitation, Janeway returned it, pressing her cheek to hers.

She turned her head in that embrace and found beyond the commander and Kes her bondmate, who had opened his eyes without assistance soon after she had; he gazed steadily at the scene, smiling gently at her. She drew a quick breath at that, though his youthful facade was not that which stole into her spirit. Rather, it was everything past his eyes, unseen by all but her and so felt.

He blinked slowly, his own acknowledgement and approval. Her own smile grew to see it.

They would bear the rest later. Just there, just then, it was an acceptable fate, if only for the grateful captain embracing her, and the others there, who had desired them so that Sashana'i and Aratra indeed were granted their last wishes.

Still near her ear, she whispered again, "It is known, Kathri."

"...A museum! Vya! The archive thought to place *our* ship in a museum! While, truth, our beloved Azallis bears great age, we own not nearly so many suns--nor do its systems, which Anai and I have upgraded to the finest degree Desalian technology could ensure. I should think what gave me most amusement this sun was the expression my dear bondmate turned down to poor P'drili's quickly crumbled note. For not being a captain, P'drili bore little understanding of the insult she had delivered and could not understand why it soon flew upon the morning breeze without apology.

"This should make interesting talk in Desal regardless. More talk, I should think, might likewise be geared towards Be'otala's bonding, but a tb'rass before us. Tejani of Azlre passed by me after parting with Anai, and it seems that lovely child bears equal bouts of anxiousness, though she has loved our Be'otala these past two years.

"Oddly, I am reminded of Toma at her age, so unsure beneath that grace and stance, seen only in the eyes and by those who bear an observant nature. It is also much as was her mother, as I recall her upon Uillar, on the moon of our liberation. Yet this is another story, well-told by good Suoti herself. I shall suggest to Anai that she tutor the girl in this experience. Tejani has much been accepted as a daughter by Anai, after all, as well as by myself. Her house is one we could not be more pleased to see our Be'otala enter. Ka, a most charming girl.

"Before the moon's rise, instructional lectures for the following tb'rass and three forthcoming seminars must be arranged, the new orbital stations at Ivlisa and Saha'aten assessed and the design schematics for the new agricultural bank inspected. Upon the next f'hajen, three new institutes are to be blessed by myself and Anai. Grateful events, all, though it must admitted how it shall please to see her brown silk gown again, and more to spend time upon Cezia past the final dedication. Afterwards, we should have found enough rest to begin preparations for the coming Arrellaros and outline the new topics for the Worlds' Council with Latsari, Bolmra and Tase'illa.

"When shall the council function independently? Within another generation, I should sincerely hope. I shall yet speak with Gihetra of our appearance and commit our topics to careful planning.

"Miztri's typically effective appearance should be made there as well, might I beg her away from Dalra's most recent restoration. Sadly, Anai and I are required to postpone our visit to that good work, as I do not doubt we would be expected to attend that council which Gihetra should be trusted in alone, particularly by our neighbors. A fine captain in the war whom they all admire, his ability and efficiency have never met question. Still, some wisdom would be shown to appear and present our 'courtiers' as representative once again, lest there might spring some unconscionable notion that the Regency again ignores them.

"Little wonder Anai notes her greying hair and mine have all but passed entirely. Always, we have borne desire and enjoyment for such challenges, for labor and purpose, and yet...

"Kash, I grow tired, I would believe. Much of our energy is to be expended on this moon's third and we wish to be distracted only by our eldest son's bonding. Be'otala is a fine-minded man, with a fine presence and nature he bears openly to all. He is our first to take to the novitiate and soon to bonding. I bear such pride and love for him--and to Prihar's tail with humility. Yet this has always been so with the children.

"So strange, to think that next it shall be Mirai or Kyerani, Kela or Pe'atla...then little Baki--and it shall be an untoward day when a young man seeks after her, I should believe, unless... No, I should think my

blessed bondmate would fling my spirit to the ancestors, only to follow with a vengeance prized in her birthmother's bloodlines, should merely the suggestion of another child pass her at her age. While certainly she gave no complaint, another blessing may well procure a measure of them.

"Distracted, indeed, as six topics have found me in fewer minutes and none completely--and it is yet the morning sun shining on the court, and my first lecture is yet to begin. Without argument, the Azallis shall take us to Oyal-Two for the Council; it shall be flown proudly there by us.

"Yet still a curiosity exists whether Anai would allow me to prove its continued agility when we meet Novren's ship. Perhaps past our morning's correspondence, she shall not refuse a healthy test of its systems. Considering old Tridl may well be with him, I should think she might find enjoyment in this...."

"Captain?"

Jerked into the present by his voice, Janeway looked up from her coffee and PADD to Kim, who had approached her usual dinner seat. She offered him the same grin she'd found while reading the last sentences of Ara's entry. "Good evening, Ensign."

Kim managed a small smile in return. "Hello, Captain."

The moment of silence following his formality was all Janeway needed to figure out why he had approached and greeted her only to say nothing. Kim had been more than uneasy since they had brought the four--such as they were--back to Voyager. In her own mind, and with the elders' acceptance of how they had returned, she was settled with it. But she knew the others hadn't seen the things she had, or been where she had been.

Harry Kim, of course, had suffered the least preparation and the most shock, having been their friend.

"Join me?" she asked, motioning to an adjacent seat, which he took and followed after another awkward moment. She reluctantly put down the PADD, leaned back in her chair. Seeing his eyes briefly examine it, she drew up her coffee for a sip. "While I was in sickbay, they invited me to keep reading through their memoirs," she told him. "I've been skimming through--it would take years to read them all, more so to listen to the translation. Thousands of portraits and images of them and the family are also in there; their friends and possibly every place they'd been in Irlae, official visits and vacations. They certainly left no stone unturned when they recorded their lives." She glanced towards him. "I seem to remember you were interested in finding any of their logs. Maybe you would like to look through them, too?"

"Thank you, Captain," Harry said politely, "but I don't think it'd be right, since they're here and that's so personal, you know?"

She eyed his obvious evasion. "They're a public record now, according to Ara. They won't mind."

"No, I guess not," Harry conceded. "Not after the stories."

Janeway drew a breath, warming her hands on the mug as she glanced out of the window. "Commander Chakotay and I are planning to invite Ara and Anai to an informal briefing after they're released from sickbay. --A sort of...re-acquaintance. We thought it would help." She had said it casually; then she saw his gaze draw up from the table. "Have you seen them yet?"

"No, Captain," Harry confessed, withholding the predictable reasons why, while still showing them

plainly. "How...I mean, are they all right?"

"They were quiet," she admitted. "Understandable in their circumstances. But they seemed to be curious, alert. I think they'll be all right."

Sighing, he leaned up a bit, resting his crossed arms on the table. "What's going to happen to them here?"

"They'll move on," Janeway told him. "I admit I had some trouble with it, too; I wondered if they were doing it solely for us, or even if I was being selfish in bringing them." She nodded to his reaction to her confession. He deserved to know she understood his quandaries. She was certain there wasn't a doubt he had that she hadn't already considered, didn't still feel in some way. "The only reason they even thought about coming back in the first place was because they had promised Sashana'i they would continue their lives here. It seems they want to give it a chance. They said fate gave them this end, and so they have to make what they can of it. I want them to have that and some."

Kim nodded, though his mouth was still turned down. "I don't know, Captain," he said quietly. "B'Elanna... Anai said when we met her that she was telling the stories to help us mourn. But now it only seems like they were... I don't know."

"Did it ever occur to you that it was to help *them* mourn, too?" Janeway asked. "They'll never forget their lives, so there's nothing for them to have to get back in that respect. But when they first planned this out, they knew that if they weren't going to die, they would at least be giving up their home and family, everything they'd come to know and love. Desalians thrive in their memories, their histories and traditions; it's almost as sacred as the adoration of their ancestors. So I understand completely why they were so against Sashana'i's plan at first. Regardless, they were dying--if not in body, then in their *own* history on Desalia. And all their lives, they had not shared in full how they came to be what they are. It was quite an event for them."

"They wanted to finish it with us there," Kim acknowledged, seeing in a flash the ancient lady, touching his face, staring gently into his eyes. It was still hard for Harry to believe that that elder was B'Elanna, patting his face like he was any grandchild...and the other was Tom, a closer friend still, nearby and falling asleep on the wall he sat upon, too ill to stay awake. At the time, Harry thought the old man was being purposefully disinterested. The more he thought about it, the more it troubled him, the more he didn't know what he'd say to them, how to reconcile those elders to his friends.

Janeway reached over, put her hand on his arm. "That word painting wasn't just a story of Be'i and Toma and the people around them. It was a way to bring that past alive--a consecration of what was sacred to them and their own closure--for them, their family and people and for us. It was their final testament."

"But they're not dead here."

"Only because they allowed me to bring them back--and I honestly don't think they could have made that decision without Anai's having told her stories, having made that closure there. Either way, their history in Irliae is over. When they agreed to return, they accepted the fact that they would be starting again, with or without their memories in tact. We have to give them the opportunity to fulfill what they were meant to do here--whatever that might be--with us, on Voyager...and back home."

Again, the ensign nodded, then shrugged. "Maybe. Maybe I just miss them still. I mean, Ara and Anai are so different." His gaze darted aside then back to the captain. "I didn't really see how much until I

saw that portrait of them from Cezia, the one Captain Havetsi gave to Commander Chakotay on the bridge. They'll look like Tom and B'Elanna, but they aren't the same people. Even in their stories, Anai said they didn't belong with us anymore--and that was when the war was still going on."

Janeway's lips turned up at the sides and she glanced down to the memoir she'd been reading. Placing her hand upon it, she slid it over to Kim as she rose to her feet. "Yes, they're not the same people. But as for the rest, they might still surprise us." She motioned to the PADD. "Have a look, Ensign. I'll see you in the morning."

With that, she left Kim with the log, which was still open on Ara's highly amused and flabbergasted reaction to the suggestion that their ship was to be grounded for the history books before its time. This had happened in the middle of a typically busy du've as regents handling planets and politics and their careers as designers, engineers and teachers, plus arranging for their firstborn son's marriage. Still, the Azallis' near fate was what had set the typically urbane and attentive Ara of Cezia off on his tirade, though he had recovered nicely in that same entry.

Once a captain, always a captain, Janeway grinned to herself as the turbolift doors opened before her. She almost wished she'd been there to see what they'd done to poor, foolish Tridl and their old friend Novren.

Well, soon enough, I will, she thought, remembering that the original of that entry was still in her ready room.

She could already see their faces as they whipped circles around the Antral ship, the gleam in their eyes, his winning grin, her satisfied smile. She hoped Harry might see it too.

No, he probably would, in time.

"Deck one."

10. A specta

"It has been said among us, that there is a use of patience, of prayers, and of love..."

"And yet there lies hope, promise and the unavoidable, the product of all life which has been before..."

"Do you want me to bring your tracha now?"

"Gye. My thanks, Kes. It can wait."

Kes smiled as she nodded to the unmoved lady; then she took herself back to the other tables to remove the dinner vases.

It had amazed them at first, the view of the stars.

Even in the height of the Unar War, when their days were mostly spent in the Irlae fields dodging through the barren and twin systems there, they never saw as many stars since they left the people of their birth.

Of course, that was Irlae, and they had become rather accustomed to it--an understatement, as even walking outside at night on Cezia, or even out to the fields surrounding Desal when they ventured farther, they had rather pointed at moons or nebulae or asteroid strings in their skywatching. They knew every plasma stream, each spot of radiant haze and, yes, the few stars that were visible, mainly Ivliisa's, a beautiful, blue star which lit most nights on Desalia with a lovely, violet hue.

It was Anai's favorite to watch, in its turns and frequent eclipses. Ara liked to lie back with his lady on the grass by the commune gardens and watch the shimmering Pashill Zi'ihar, which was the "neck" of the Desalian territory. A few lone, tiny stars lit it beautifully most nights, creating a golden scarf, waving slightly in the sky. They would watch those phenomena and recall the many times they flew through

them, during the war, or later in their travels.

But most often, they simply enjoyed the quiet there, holding hands or in an embrace, and they often kissed as though they were but lovers.

It was odd, that they had never really thought about the vaster starfield, not until they saw it again.

It still drew her eyes as she sat in the messhall, her feet tucked up under her on the couch, leaning on a hand, listening to the clinking noises behind her, her bondmate procuring their tray. So dear, he would not allow the good-natured but terribly misguided Talaxian man to meddle with their choices.

She watched the points of light pass at warp speed, from blue to red, streaming by, each star a piece of life in that galaxy among countless other galaxies. So many discoveries, still to be had, lives lived and still be to be lived and all those stars they left behind, how many lives they would never know until their true passing would take them, and they would be one amongst it all.

Just then, however, they preferred to consider what they were approaching and place hope in that direction. It was easier that way. It always had been.

And yet, they would always remember...

"It is ever-turning, that which is meant, taking us in what directions nature would require of us, and we are all a part of that. We all, as one, create the whole, even when this is not realized..."

Certain that all the precautions had been taken, that he would be reactivated should his patients have any difficulties or--with the first two, asleep again--tried to leave, the Doctor made a final round of his sleeping sickbay and nodded to himself. Standing straight, his eyes pointed towards the wall.

"Computer, set reactivation program EMH-beta-three and deactivate emergency medical holographic program until oh-five hundred hours."

"*Reactivation program activated.*"

A slight wish in the air followed, then the room dimmed further.

Several moments passed, where only the steady hum of the ship's internal systems could be heard, the light beeps of the medical sensors on the walls, the little buzz of the stasis generator...

Two sets of hazeled eyes opened upon each other's.

"I cannot imagine why he bears such meager trust," clucked Anai. Her bondmate's lips turned up slightly as his gaze darted over her features yet again. It was as much an appraisal as an examination.

With good reason, they had been staring at each other since first awakening. Not that their appearances were terribly foreign. What was strange was that they appeared much as they knew each

other in their spirits, younger and without injury. Seeing it and knowing they were in the *living* world was what would require adjustment.

Unexpected as it all was, stressful as it all had been, the peculiarity earned her a nervous grin. Ara did not miss it.

With another look around the plain-lined room, he pushed his covering (he would not have called it a blanket) aside and slid his legs over the side of the biobed, and then the rest of him. A little dizzy, a little unsure, he still managed to find his footing. He drew a breath to steady himself, to be certain that his knees were going to hold up.

His limbs were strong, however--young, he reminded himself yet again. Even moving, like breathing, smelling and seeing, was something he would likely come as a surprise to him for a while. And he wondered why he first felt discouraged about it. Probably for the newness itself, Ara thought. Seeing what awaited him, however, lying on her side, her head rested on her little hand, eyeing his motion curiously, almost cautiously, he felt somewhat better about making the three step trip between the beds.

"The Doctor shall not approve," Anai warned him, though her lips turned approvingly up as he steadied himself further.

"The Doctor may drivel to Prihar on sleeping arrangements," he replied, light despite his efforts. "I have shared your bed since our first moon upon Uillar and a learned projection shall not change it, regardless of our locale."

Anai's smile grew. "Then bring yourself to bed--granted your ability to climb up."

"Continue to speak to me in such a manner and I would ensure we were extracted from this public room."

"*That* would be most pleasing," she said, serious in her turn. Neither of them had been comfortable there, particularly with crewpeople wandering in and out with their own maladies--and acquiring another sort of shock to see the resurrected forms of their former officers. "This as well would require our survival, however."

"A risk which might bear worth, I should think."

She snorted softly, moved her covering aside as he neared.

Despite their wit, too easily recalled, her grin faded as she managed to sit herself up and scoot back, nearer to the wall. He climbed carefully up, hardly making noise doing so, nor in pulling his legs onto the thin mattress, cocking one in front of himself as he looked at her once again.

They both released a small breath.

He reached out to her, swallowing a bit, anxious to feel her warm skin beneath his fingers again, though still slightly hesitant. They knew they were still bonded--knew that perfectly upon awaking in that cold, grey room. Likewise, with but a glance, they knew their markings had not been altered.

But there were certain peculiarities to be had in sharing the feel of the kraja.

Not to mention, seeing Anai as she was in that physical world was quickly beginning to remind Ara precisely of his youth. Even so, the long afternoon, directly following their last memories of their blessed

spirit-children taking their memories and adoringly praying for their journey, and before that all the goodbyes, from their family, their children... All of their day had also reminded Ara of his own tiredness. Only the sight of Anai and their shared stunned state had kept him awake at that point.

Leaning into the approach, Anai locked her eyes to his and prepared to take his hand. But her fingers stopped in mid-air when she felt the soft of his fingertips brush against her temple.

She felt every nerve within her light up in a way they had not since they woke. Her lips fell apart for the sensation, his energy, his spirit, meeting hers. She felt his relief, too, washing into and through her--blending with her own. Among those not bonded, it was a friendly show of social and spiritual community. Between bondmates, it was a publicly practiced intimacy.

A long, mutual sigh escaped them both, and she turned her head to kiss his wrist as her fingers found his temple in return. He closed his eyes briefly at the contact, exhaling slowly to feel her lave his tender skin, feel her fingertips draw into his nerves, waking his consciousness while equally relaxing him.

Indeed, that much was well.

Her shoulders, small but strong, fell slightly. His steady, tender gaze, his presence, even his arousal--an understandable response she could also admit to--all reassured her. Those things with their kraja being undamaged were enough for the time being.

Their fingers fell gently away, floated down to each other's laps. Ara's hand found her knee, squeezed it tenderly. She glanced down at the strange cloth of his sickbay attire.

"It may well have been predicted, that fate would see us as we are," Anai finally said, "for conniving to make ourselves know our spirits' truth regardless of what occurred." The thought drew a curl upon her mouth, not a smile nor any sort of derision.

His nod that time was slow, thoughtful both for her and for him. "Perhaps fate simply saves us the time and inconvenience of rediscovering ourselves."

"And it cannot be said how we might have been affected had our memories not been as apparent," she agreed, "as our spirits would have remained whole and untouched, I would believe."

"Though guessing about this matters no longer. What we bear is done--by our own allowance." He shook his head to consider that further. "We two and our risks, Anai. It is little wonder we have always achieved some measure of trouble, iva'e? --And yet it lends no surprise that we have procured again more than our own stubbornness could fend off."

Her lips flicked up again, and she opened her arms to him as he leaned forward. She reclined with his guidance, gladly letting his long, warm body cover her for a moment, smother her with his scent and the feel of his heart, strong once more, beating against her. Pressed to the pillow, he kissed her, gently assessing, then again with more assurance. Her fingers returned to his temples, stroking softly there.

Wrapping his arms around her, he turned them onto their sides and held her. She tucked her head under his chin, slipped her foot over his calf. She shuddered at the warmth and feeling between them.

"I feel such age, Ara," she breathed. "Here, in this body, so ready for movement, my spirit would wish I might only remain here with you, as we were when we awaited our passings."

He squeezed her again, nodding. "Then that is what we shall do for this moment," he told her, closing

his eyes when he felt her lashes flutter downward. He pressed his cheek to the crown of her short, dark hair. "In the next moment, another thing to do may be found. There shall always be time while we are among the living, my spirit."

At that, Ara felt her little smile through the cloth he wore, and then the light kiss she pressed to his chest before succumbing to sleep.

"I guess I wasn't prepared for the current. I'd never been in that holoprogram before."

"And so, like most of the crew, you decided to get a crash course, hmm? --Kes, bring me a tissue regenerator."

"Yes, Doctor."

They awoke to those sounds, a byplay which continued with the Doctor's rather chipper treatment of a Mr. Chapman, injured while trying to drive a gondola, for what they could make out.

"Think of it this way, Mr. Chapman, you gave new meaning to the 'bridge of sighs.'"

"Very funny, Doc--ouch!"

"Remain still and try to relax. The realignment will only take another moment."

Furrowing their brows, they did not look despite the temptation. In a small way, they did not wish to know.

Instead, Ara happened to glance up and see Kes' kind smile. She had been watching them, that oddly wise girl who had taken on their little favor with an earnest they should have expected, who had begged they reconsider living as they were and insisted it would not be as bad as they thought. When he first saw her, she looked anxious then relieved to see them awaken.

It is almost as though they think we can simply disappear should they let us go again, he silently noted, stroking Anai's hair as she drew a fuller breath, stretched a bit in their undisturbed warmth.

Peeking over to the other side of the sickbay, Kes came close to them.

"I asked the Doctor not to disturb you," she whispered. "Stay as long as you like there. --Shh, I'll replicate you something to wear as soon as we're done with Mr. Chapman. Then we can see about your release. Your former quarters are still available, but if you want something new..."

Anai shook her head, still tucked into Ara's neck as she peered up. "It is well. His previous arrangement was closer, should my memory bear worth. We shall take ourselves there."

"I'll talk with the Doctor, then."

"Our thanks, Kes," Ara said. "We are indebted."

"This is partially my fault," Kes told them, "so I think the debt is mine. It's the least I can do."

"You have done more in truth than in selfishness," Anai replied, "and none to your need of repayment, Child. We shall be well enough in time."

Kes looked long into the lady's eyes at that. "I'm glad you think so," she said sincerely. With a pat on their entwined arms, she moved away, smiling wisely to approach the Doctor and his patient.

"It is known that the past--in conventional temporality, of course--cannot be changed. The same, of course, is known of the future. And yet, it is molded in what ways we may manage, act upon the present while we can and as we can."

"Torres, B'Elanna: Born at the colony of Kessik-Four, .731, 2344, FSD. Mother: Miral. Father: John Torres. Parents divorced. No siblings. Graduated high school at the Central Secondary Education Facility at Kessik with honors in calculus and physics. Attended two years at Starfleet Academy, ranking above average in her concentration. Terminated enrollment after fourth semester. Left Earth in late 2367, whereabouts unknown. 2371: Listed in a manifest of known Maquis offenders."

That did not appear promising.

Thankfully, Anai knew what had followed it.

Not ten minutes after Kes had managed to have the Doctor release them, they arrived at their quarters--Tom Paris' quarters--only to think first that they should eat. Without another word, Ara moved to procure their meal while Anai casually inspected the flat.

It did not take long.

Then again, they had shared much smaller spaces.

After setting away the cases containing their bonding clothes and ornaments, she paced another circle around the main room. Finding a portable terminal, Anai moved it to a side table she could kneel at, meaning to look at some engine statistics. Ending up in her personal file instead, she translated the record, slim as it was, into Desalian, before peeking through. Anai could remember Standard English characters, but feeling no desire to translate, she defaulted the system to the intermediate Desal dialect, which had been nicely programmed into Voyager's systems.

It was all true, and it took her but a few seconds to read that empty file of facts. There was little sense in taking that record and what she knew of herself at that time too seriously, however, except as a reminder of what she indeed had forsaken before she had even heard of the Voyager--a mother and father, her very legality, any peace of mind she might have had with herself...

Still, it was what had built her present being in that time and place. There was nothing to regret or mourn, nor truly had there ever been. She also could not regret that she had another chance to right all that she had abandoned. It was only that *she*--Anai--hadn't expected to have to.

Fate had corrected them both. They were as guilty as their childish selves for trying to avoid the inevitable.

She turned the monitor off.

Ara would have their meal finished soon. A good thing that, since her hunger had intensified after their brief walk from the sickbay. They had not taken "real" food yet, and the bodies they now possessed did not know the lean diet they had been both mentally and physically accustomed to since the nutritional nuggets at Uillar.

Not yet.

He was not appreciating the replicators, however. Not trusting the voice commands after the first dose he had tasted, Ara set into the computer from the molecules up, determined to have the machine not waste another rapol. Truly, their present frustration was not all that had him cursing the box in the wall to Prihar. He had come to dislike replicators for all but medicine and supplies. Bala had spoiled him with good teaching in the kitchen too long ago.

No, it was for that he was too spoiled in tongue...in more ways than one, Anai grinned to herself.

Respectful of his involvement just then, however, she chose to leave him to his duty.

Standing, she wandered to the lavatory. It was moderately colored, the lines much in tune to the theme of the entire ship--grey and blue with touches of metal or white. Peering aside to a stall, she noted the dry shower, the redundant towels by it. She was clean enough for the time, she decided.

Turning again, Anai jumped a bit at her reflection, but then drew a breath to steel her nerves and remember what had happened. She had already seen her visage--had asked to. What she saw was nothing too shocking, only that her mind had naturally been trained to the elder.

This is myself, of course, Anai knew, tilting her head a bit to see that youthful, unscarred face, her full yet clever mouth and high, arching brow. She was prettier than she remembered, more pleasant somehow, even fascinating--her bondmate's idea of how she had looked at the time. She knew from his memory that he had always thought her beautiful. It was *she* at the time who tended to be dissatisfied.

It was a body with clothes that felt foreign to her despite Kes' effort to style them familiarly, with straightened hair cut short and skin with little more than a warp core's light and the remnants of nature to color it. Only her eyes and temples looked right.

Without thinking, Anai's fingers dipped into her fresh, dark locks and began to braid a side, wondering as she did it what to make of that mass.

Be'i shall bear some style in it this sun, Sashana'i used to say on Uillar. At the time, her sister's slurred tongue had not translated. Only years later, after Sashana'i's passing, had Anai been enlightened. *It is too pretty to let hang like clumps of gask fur--and how glorious it would be at her knees!*

Anai smiled. It had taken Sashana'i six years to convince her of that; even then, she had not grown her hair to the traditional length until she was past forty-five. It was simply too impractical for her.

She felt bare without her scarves, she sighed to herself as she expertly plaited the strands to pull the weight from her face. When early at Cezia, she, but a child, had resisted them, only bringing out that old faded gold cloth and her blue styeval gown on those first tsaborrs to give their family and friends a thrill. Four years later, Anai did not leave the loft without braiding at least a portion of her hair with a long, airy cloth, never gave it the slightest thought to don them like any other piece of clothing. It became a

part of her wardrobe, like any other free Desalian lady.

Anai had almost finished when Ara's frame appeared in the mirror. So tall, she thought, handsome. His eyes and his little smile were knowing and casual, thoughtful and plain. Age had never changed that mix of expression, nor had experience. A very long time ago, that look had mystified her.

How she wished she was among the spirits with him then; a moment later, she was ironically glad they were there together, known perfectly to each other, in what was named Tom Paris' quarters, two ancient Desalians in children's bodies, homeless and bound in their wishes to assist the crew in their plight and bring closure to their very early lives.

Compared to what they already done, it seemed...simplistic. Certainly, they would not be regents there--and there was both good and bad to that. Their presence might well mean more to others. It would not surprise Anai if that eventually became the case, as most of their life had been spent serving others' needs, giving and teaching. That was one thing they were experts in--that and creating things that worked well.

In those things, they would at least have something to *do*, which was utilitarian, yet truth. Though, it had always brought them satisfaction, the great reward of hard work...

Obviously, they had not done enough work already to warrant a true passing.

On the other hand, Anai did realize the root of her pessimism. She disliked working with no knowledge of her place and plan. She was still weary from their recent experiences and for an age she keenly felt. Nor could she deny that she missed her children and family, her gentle people and good-willed neighbors.

Another thing they wished to avoid in remembering their lives, Anai knew.

Also, their status as outsiders had been bluntly returned to them--and that time to a people she would not have necessarily trusted had they been strangers to her. Worse was that Anai knew what they were capable of, in act and in thought. She came from those bloodlines, after all, but had lived so long in peace...

By the spirits, when did I become so much like Dalra had been towards us?

Or perhaps it was because she had left Voyager when she was too young, insecure and angry, and the impressions she recalled were rather biased.

Drawing her gaze back up to her bondmate, she hoped their purpose would be clearer in time. She knew she would give herself a headache should she continue her route of thinking.

"Zh'vi," he said quietly. His look had not changed.

"Zh'va," she whispered, casting her stare down again for a moment, knowing he knew the meaning.

Ara moved to her, stopping her from turning with a touch to her shoulder. He wrapped his arms around her from behind, pressed his lips upon the edges of her temple markings then whispered, "The wall unit has at last managed a decent meal."

Anai's lips turned up; she placed her hands on his, caressed them. "Dov? And what do we take this evening?"

"Soft flatbread with jita springs, nidoev--your preference, of course--and spiced mial. There is also dirrirt wine." Hearing her hum her approval to that, he embraced her more warmly still, nuzzling her ear. "It is inconceivable that the one who might have put the selections in the computer could not have given the recipes proper translation. I have reprogrammed them and shall add more as time permits. Yet this meal, you take your favorites."

"You are good to me, my spirit." Closing her eyes, Anai leaned her head back to stroke his forehead with her own. She breathed a small laugh at the feeling of her ridges as they rubbed against his very smooth brow. "I should hope I shall not bruise you with this thing for not thinking on it often enough."

He chuckled, raising his chin to place a kiss on the thin bridge of her nose. "It shall be forgiven should it occur, Anai...my Anai..." Ara breathed her scent, so sweet and stronger than ever on that sterile ship, with those uniformed people and cubicle rooms. It was everything he had realized in his comfortable library, with all he loved still around him. Selfish as it might have been, he did miss it, as he knew she did, too.

It was likewise difficult to know the uselessness of mourning what would have been passed to them no matter what had happened. Fate had not turned such a curve for them in a long time. They were bound to experience discouragement...

Anai rubbed her head against his again. "You are felt, Ara," she whispered.

"As are you." He paused then said softly, "Such a difference within us, as when we awoke to our beings past taking on the legacy, yet they are much the opposite of what they had been then. They remain so clearly, yet lie so quietly." She nodded. "I do not know how this should be presently interpreted."

"A disconcerting relief," she told him, "and a gift of the spirits, much as the Doctor would take credit for it with what resequencing he attempted."

"Ka."

Her eyes opened. She saw her own thoughtful expression and a part of his face buried in her short, thick hair. She felt his soft breath and touches, the warmth of his lean body and his scent, which all inspired her natural senses with a quickness she had not known in years.

At first, she could not believe she would think such a thing when their concerns were so far elsewhere. Yet Anai knew as she had the evening before that her arousal was natural and inevitable. More, they were as able to pleasure and be pleased as they had been when they were children--aside from the Doctor's orders to resist the temptation...of Ara's frame, all his curves pressed against her, so warm, heating her inside as well as out...

"Vaa, do not do that to me," Ara breathed, though he was already grinning at her mischief.

Her own mouth turned briefly upwards. "Bring your eyes to the mirror," she said. "Look at us."

His gaze pulled away from her hair, and he blinked at what greeted him: Chiseled features, a short blond covering of hair above fair skin, dark bluish hazel eyes, strong shoulders covered by a dun coat. The lady before him seemed far more familiar to him, though "outside her own skin," too. Anai was staring intently at their reflection as she pulled their hands up to her ribs.

"This is what we are now," she whispered, "what we must grow to bear knowledge of again, Ara."

"Who are they?" Ara asked, not as troubled as sincerely curious. It indeed would take a good deal of looking to convince his old eyes not to jump a bit at that boy, to believe it was himself while not among the passed. "Those shells bearing our spirits?" He drew another deep breath, smelling her deeply, trying to associate it with senses naturally poorer than her own.

His hand turned on hers. Without words, Anai rotated her kraja-marked finger into his same-patterned palm; Ara returned the touch with a simple shift of his wrist.

The next they saw was a plain far more familiar, pure and white and beyond that ship, those clothes, that artificial environment and replicated food. They saw upon each other their bonding clothing, their properly dressed hair and all their ornaments--all that they were and saw of themselves. It was more than appearance. In that pure light, they were complete, weightless yet grounded, free yet full in all that life had given them, even in their conscience, where the long line of memories had burrowed themselves.

This is our truth, my beloved, was her first thought, lightened already to be there, to see it, too feel those familiar waves of awareness around them. And it is not too unlike what we have just left--only that this is eternity and the other is life.

Beyond, they felt the love of their own, surrounding and lighting them, all within their memory and experience, within their true lives, even the prayers of those still among the living.

That would never cease, they were assured. It would always be theirs.

She laughed and turned to face him, reaching up to touch his temple with soft fingers. His smile grew. As elder as you grow, you are yet such life, my Anai. Little wonder no technology could bury it.

Nor your charms, she knew as she turned so they could see the open field where they ran like joth, laughing, teasing and challenging each other with every swoop and swerve.

She had felt so free that day, in that place and at that time, with the wind catching her gown, her hair bouncing wildly. His face shone so brightly, laughing, glancing back. She knew she loved him--and he loved her utterly. She knew she was happy. She chased him in complete abandon and jumped fully into his arms but a moment after he turned to her, wrapping her legs around his waist to tackle him into the soft grass. They rolled together down the hill, kissing and giggling like the children they were. Finally, ending up on top, she caught his wrists, thrusting them up over his head. Growling happily with the victory he'd essentially given her, she bent down and captured his mouth again...

Smiling, he took her hand and turned her in a circle and they saw themselves walking across those same fields with Ba'ela, Mirai and Kyerani when they visited one week, just past the rains. Her belly was slightly full with Kela, and she skipped up a bit, wanting to run, giggling as if she was truly with them. They waved to Susik, also there with Gatra and Marise for the holiday, the consecration of the new Institute at Azlre. As Marise, a lovely, wild Antral girl of fourteen, ran ahead with the other children, the adults met, embracing on the road from Dviglar, in the warm, clear sun. Soon they would find Kurt and Yasis with Novedor, Kasre and Ridis, their adopted children. Together they would take good food and company, celebrate the day.

A fond memory, often to be repeated over the years, as the children grew, bonded, put forth their own upon the fruitful plains of Desal, and as their region and lands were increasingly restored to all their dreams and legacies had envisioned. Three of their six children took their oaths as scholars in that city, ever beloved by the regents; two chose to remain, to build their own houses and families at Cezia. It

pleased the parents well, to know their seed populated that world still, and always would.

They watched Kolana dart out into the field with his sweet Sisji after their boy l'orlla. Pe'atla was close behind, stuffing his book into his coat pocket to enjoy a diversion. In their mid-sixties then, they remained behind to walk and talk with Baki and Iserra, only young lovers, who were yet working up the topic of taking a day trip to the sea--alone. It would be at that sea four years later that Osna--Iserra's name of being--took their fair Babaki as his true mate, putting her with child. Two days before their bonding, Be'otala to his great surprise had ascended into the position of First Council to the Prime Minister. Some years later, he would be elected to the ministry itself, a position he held for twelve years before retiring to return to academics at the Institute.

Only a year ago, the two had treaded that same old path, elders of Desal, frail and shuffling, holding their robes in a fist lest they trip. And yet, their spirits were alight to be on their homeworld and to see their descendants playing among the grasses with their own children, as free and quick as they had been. For all they had done in their lives, all the places they knew and loved, it was that simple pleasure they had always returned to and would always remember for the stages that their lives had shown that path.

Their eyes met again and the gentle light brought them back to the plain they shared. It was all still there, all that they had seen, so much more yet to come beyond that present...

All that was, all that is and is yet to be...all one, in life.

With patience and faith, time would have no meaning someday, and in the present, their children would be there, waiting for them, always, and watching their parents touch the worlds of their birth, a blessed journey. It was a part of their heritage, too, and there were ancestors yet to be rediscovered and accepted by the elders in truth.

They had moved so far beyond their birth, and yet there had never been a true acceptance, a true balance.

It was time to change that.

Fading from the plain for the time, they saw again their reflections in the small lavatory mirror, their bonded eyes locked together still. Those eyes had not changed, nor had the nature of his embrace when she turned within it and pressed herself against him.

That was what was real. The shell did not matter, but the air, sand and water that formed its crevices did. They should take it all, all that experience and the blessing of having lived and thrived, to the spirits who would celebrate it along with them...someday.

Again, Anai's thoughts turned to Ara's tender warmth, knowing they could live and should to the best of their ability, aware of all that life could be and produce...

"Our *meal*, my spirit?" he grinned wisely.

"It pleases," she whispered, laughing softly when she felt that shell's belly rumble with agreement.

"This is the blessing of being among the living which we must grasp, each sun, in action, feeling,

thought and true care of all of that which surrounds us. In this, we may sincerely hope to steer below the sails of fate, always full with the sweet air of our blessed spirits..."

She growled softly when he accidentally set the cups on the table a bit too hard. Looking quickly over, he chuckled to see her dark, mussed head thwap into the pillow and snuggle in.

Like a little bear, Ara thought, certainly not for the first time as he admired also her thin back, smooth and bare, and how her slight yet muscular arms wrapped around the pillow, bundling it to her face as she grasped still at memories and imaginings.

So much to remember, so much to do and think upon, put into some tangible plan for development. Over their evening meal, they had discussed beginning projects to get Voyager home more quickly. Though Irlae was such a relatively small region, there had long been study and discussion of subspace pockets, trans-dimensional windows, generated wormholes, methods of shipless travel and temporal physics. There was no reason why they could not continue that research there. In fact, there was even more reason for them to on that ship.

It was certainly something they would discuss with the captain. That in combination with their spiritual reassurance had improved their outlook on living there during the evening, where they spent more time than they expected to at the short, otherwise quiet table. Without a family there to listen to or speak with after, they made their own business, drank the wine and eventually wore themselves enough of that day to retire.

Somewhat.

Ara took another long glance at his bondmate. For their excess energy alone, Anai had been...very much herself the night before, a thing Ara had not been lucky enough to enjoy in some years, and which they both had desired so dearly.

Despite their situation, he would have been the last to deny his wish to make love to her since he first peered over to her in the sickbay and realized their bond and his heart were fine. When they were finally at the edge of the bed and agreed between their warm and lengthening kisses that they were not tired, Anai finally gave in to their mutual desire, telling him in no uncertain terms that they needed to join to each other. A moment after he smiled at that, she proceeded to bare him for her tasting with learned hands. Without hesitation, Ara likewise put aside all his present concerns to take his mate properly once again.

Consequently, the collar of her dress required mending for his forgetting where those people's seams were. Not that Anai minded at all how that happened, or his eagerly reacquainting himself with her taste and her feel, her appearance and musculature. With adoring vigor, Ara gladly took in again every reaction to his well-practiced methods, every sound he could procure from her sweet throat, which even age had never ruined for him and returned youth had only made...interesting, particularly in her.

Without thinking--he rarely if ever thought much in their passion as it was--he had entered her as surely as his memory had him do. But they both froze when he did not find the internal walls of an elderly lady who had once borne six children, but a twenty-six year-old who had borne none--and hadn't had a man inside her for over three years.

"Zhall ye'a," Ara gasped, surprised, concerned and feeling the pleasure of it all at the same time.

Anai, too, had to collect herself a bit, staring up to his wide gaze even as she shuddered and tightened her legs around him. Allowing herself another moment to relax, she welcomed him within her with a little squeeze.

"Gy'i onich," she whispered, her lips flickering upwards as he pulled slightly out. "Zha me'alled i'o nich." Indeed, there was something to be said about that much.

Ara purred low in his throat to hear it, and to feel her so expertly milk him as he partook of the lean muscle of her shoulder, "Mes va'i ka..."

With that, they silently decided to see what other surprises awaited them.

As a result, both their shells had taken quite a bit of etching in waters and air--breaking every rule the Doctor had given them as a condition of their release. Only when they finally settled into that hard, crumpled bed did they realize the extent of their accepted state among the living and their living instincts. The strangeness of it all returned, leaving them somewhat thoughtful, quiet, but ultimately sated, relieved and finally tired.

Also belatedly, they wondered if the bulkheads were any lesser quality than the five fichta wide organic plaster used commonly in Desalian architecture, and what sort of show their neural monitors, crooked on their napes, likely had projected to sickbay.

They fell asleep not really caring, however.

It was a good place to begin living again, Ara knew with a small grin, with his lady by him, within his spirit and then in their bed. Naturally, those aspects were very important to their stability as Desalian mates; as that was secure, they at least knew they had a base to work from.

Ara still thought it terribly ironic that the last time he had inhabited that space, those quarters, he was rather much alone and seemed destined to remain largely that way, as was she. Only two months later in Voyager's time...

He breathed a small laugh as he picked up a flowerless vase from the table and set it aside, and then fluffed the cushions they had placed on the floor. Quite ironic. Little wonder the crew stared so at them.

Perhaps it would be best, he mused as he took himself to dress, that they should simply continue trusting the unplanned and allowing fate its path while merely acting on their consciences. It had always been their way, between the struggles, their mental and emotional challenges and the mass of their learning and society. They had been blessed in outcomes then, even if at times they did not think it would be. This time would likely not be different. It had appeared negative from a distance, but perhaps would improve upon acquaintance.

He sincerely hoped it would turn out well, at least, with what they had been dealt that time. Ara had known from the moment young Kes came to debate their decisions and all their comfortable assumptions that something close to their present state would occur. It was a feeling, and Anai had sensed it, too, to her dismay. For all their plotting, that one alternative--already considered--frightened them deeply.

In all the years that he and Anai survived and for all their lives had made of them, he was not afraid to pass as a truly realized and educated Desalian. It had taken much to bring him to that sentiment; when

he did understand the extent of his belonging and devotion to Desal and Irlae, he took it most seriously and wished no other life. Anai had stated the same on several occasions. They neither wished to return to Voyager feeling their years and being so alien. Missing their family and chosen homeland, too, knowing how time might still be flying by in Irlae while their lives trudged on, was no easy thing to consider.

Slipping off his lounging robe, he pulled on the trousers and light tunic he had replicated earlier and brushed the hem over his thighs. Running his hand against his freshly cropped hair, he walked out of the closet. There, he stopped again to see Anai still crunched stubbornly into the pillow. Sighing through a grin, Ara knew he would get over the uncertainties.

In the end, beyond all the theories and theologies and ethics, lack of community and inner struggles, he knew he had his lady there and loved her too much to care *where* he loved her--or in what form. Fate chose Voyager for the present, so Voyager it would be until their path turned again. It was that simple.

For that matter, they had survived far worse.

He took himself back to their table, placing the napkins, tea kettle and morning tray just right, as he had always done before his illness took him--and he did not miss the opportunity to be grateful for that much, too. Though not a one had considered him any less a man for his inability to perform his usual duties, it was certainly a privilege to Ara at that point to be an able mate again, right down to procuring Anai's early tea and bread and helping her to her morning.

When he lit an incense to rouse her, though, his silent thanks were interrupted by an odd sound from the computer. Hearing it again, he looked up to see if perhaps the slight smoke had set off some sort of alarm.

Anai stirred only enough to be heard. "The children should be given another place to take play with their puzzles, my spirit," she mumbled and burrowed her face farther into the pillow.

Ara laughed, slightly bittersweet. Instantly, he could hear the little ones playing their puzzles on the patio below their window, laughing like squirrels amongst each other, before the morning meal. Neither elder had ever directed the babies elsewhere, having decided they rather liked the sound of them. She always said something when it woke her, however.

The sound came once more, and the memory finally hit him. Blinking, Ara looked at the entrance. "Ki'ab?"

The doors of the quarters opened, revealing Commander Chakotay. Upon seeing the pilot's familiar face, he offered a moderate grin as he peered cautiously around at the room. He immediately noticed the coffee table, set with a tray of bread and thinly sliced fruit, two thick glass cups, a teapot and a smoking bowl. Two chair pillows sat neatly on the floor before that table; the small couch had been set by the rear wall.

"I hope I'm not disturbing you."

"Gye." Regardless, Ara moved himself closer to the door even as he let the man in. "Anai sleeps, yet soon shall find the sun."

Chakotay jerked a glance over to his old friend, lying on her stomach, clearly undressed, halfway under the thin blanket of the bed. Her hair was but a thick clump of sable on a pillow. After taking a required moment to bring himself back up to date with her status as Paris' wife, so to speak, the commander

cleared his throat. "I won't bother you, then."

"Yet you bore a reason to bring yourself here."

"The captain wanted to invite you to an informal meeting today, ten-hundred hours in the briefing room," Chakotay told him. "We thought you might like to start making yourselves familiar with things here. Meanwhile, we can start getting used to you again."

Ara considered that quickly then nodded. "This would please, as apparently we shall remain for some time."

Chakotay furrowed his brow slightly, wondering suddenly if they were considering going back. But he didn't ask. "I'll tell the captain."

"It would be appreciated should you also tell her we have planned to propose fitting work for ourselves. Adjustments to particular systems may be required, yet we bear the ability to configure them--and build new systems which would suit our requirements."

"Build? For that you'd need some personnel."

"This would be unnecessary," Ara replied. "A 'team' might be procured should this bring *you* comfort, however. Our former 'ranks' here have not been forgotten; I would think we are thought of as civilians now, ka? Thus, our thought was to labor independently on technology we may share with you and accept volunteers should they wish to assist."

Chakotay nodded, understanding. "I guess you are a little out of sorts that way, too. It's obvious you can't jump right back into what you did before."

"Nor would this be wished," Ara said truthfully. "I find great enjoyment in navigating crafts; mechanics are Anai's main trade. Yet we are more than a pilot and an engineer. We are better used in our research."

Though the man was purely Cezian in his speech, looking at Tom Paris' plain but pleasant expression as those words were spoken made that hard to believe. "You're sure you want to stay in a lab? It doesn't seem right to hold you back."

"I have not suggested I be *buried* there," Ara grinned. "Yet I do bear great knowledge in my trade. My scholarship was completed in astrophysics and cosmological engineering, and my specialty lies in alternative propulsion. Several of my theories and projects may be shared and should be of interest. Anai bears equal qualification to propose and build in her many engineering specialties--and to labor to our expertise would be greatly wished. Please mention this to the captain when you speak with her."

"I'll let her know," Chakotay said, pausing appropriately to change the topic to one he knew he should also mention. "Also, I stopped by sickbay. The Doctor plans to revive Susan and Kurt today, if you'd like to be there."

That took a bit more consideration, which ended with a small tilt of his head. "It would lend more ease for them to wake to the familiar, I would believe. They should be given time to understand the exterior of what has happened to them. Then, we would see them. Susan, in particular, shall bear much to manage in her acceptance. It would be a kindness were we absent."

Chakotay nodded. "We'll take care of them."

Ara bowed his head slightly. "This is not doubted. My thanks."

After several seconds of silence and with a quick nod in return, Chakotay had almost started out. Ara had almost let the uncomfortable man go. But on second thought, he reached out and took his arm. He had recalled quickly that as a boy, he had not got on well with the former Maquis captain. He had not considered that when he had met Chakotay again in his library and teased him so cleverly.

That could easily have been a part of the man's unease, if seeing Anai as she was was not enough.

Chakotay had frozen at Ara's move, not harsh but with a firmness that surprised him. The look on the man's face--too, was...different in intensity but strangely familiar, while at the same time utterly open. *But it's not fair that you have to keep divining for people who no longer exist*, rang into his head, B'Elanna's voice in one of the vision quests that never really left him. *You don't know us anymore.*

It was hard to remember when he only looked at them--until he looked into the former pilot's darkened gaze just then. More, when he *felt* that look.

People can be replaced, Tom had said in the quest. Chakotay hadn't really believed that as plainly as it was put, but just then, he was starting to.

"Something else?"

"Ka," Ara said, his mouth twisting up at a corner. "Have you read it yet?"

"Read what?"

"Thall'rrab a'i Mashirr."

Broken from his deeper thoughts as he remembered, Chakotay snorted. "It's that good, is it?"

"Let us say great imagination is employed by Odri'a," Ara answered, pleased to see the commander respond well to his humor. He drew a clever look upwards. "Excellent descriptive passages...scenery. I would recall that you bear a great love of nature, the woodlands and the like. It is employed to excellent effect by those protagonists."

Before Chakotay could respond to that, Ara blinked, bowed his chin then touched his temple in a friendly dismissal. "Until later."

Seeing the lady in the bed shift, breathing as if to awaken, Chakotay gave the man a look then left without more words. Outside, as the door closed behind him, he grinned again, shaking his head.

"Not the same--worse," he muttered and started for the turbolift.

Ara had already seated himself beside his bondmate when she finally decided to turn over and greet the day--the relative day, as it were. But it may well have been a true sunrise to him, watching her bronze-flecked eyes open to his own as she stretched her arms, arched her back to loosen it. To assist her, he placed his hand upon her flat belly, running it slowly up to stroke at her ribs.

"Have you taken great enjoyment, torturing the commander?" she queried, her own mouth curling deliciously aside. "I heard you just now."

"I would not call it torture," he shrugged, casually sliding his hand to her breast, toying with a nipple as

he leaned down to kiss her. As he took her lips, he smiled at her little purr, tempting him to continue were it not for the day they had ahead--a long one, they knew. So, he pulled softly from her warm, easily plied mouth, drew a cooling breath. "I would say it is...maintaining interest."

Anai snickered. "For all your wisdom and elder's nature, you truly are but a boy at times, Ara."

"Yes," he whispered, planting a soft kiss upon her brow before looking to her again. "Yet you like that about me."

She reached up and stroked his temple, her gaze holding steadily to his, her crooked smile warming to see the light in his eyes. "Among other things," she said, and then rose to embrace her mate for the morning.

"This, yes, we may do, rather than--as some beliefs in their right own--pull destiny to where we wish it to go."

There was a children's story, about Bihla and Sa'alli's first entry into the stars, when they made the eternity that the spirits shared thereafter. It was said that the elders, freed unto their spirits and in their everlasting forms, crossed through all the stars in the sky to find a home for their children, who would someday follow. But seeing its vastness, they could not decide on which star to choose.

Only when their children did begin to join them did Bihla and Sa'alli realize that it was *they* who were vast among the universe, for their life forces had spread beyond space and time. Physical life was completed and now they were that which created new life--Tsa'aita, or spirits unto new spirits. That was the meaning of eternity and perhaps, Bihla and Sa'alli had thought, that was how they came to be as well, and so, in their new form, they began to search among the stars for their own parents.

Yet that was another tale.

Anai and Ara had hardly been thinking of creation stories when they took themselves to the ship's top deck for the meeting. Rather, they themselves as they were accustomed, prepared for the necessary awkwardness of their situation and to make their proposals they saw fit.

However, they didn't get three steps into the briefing room before they froze to see the view. Suddenly, they might as well have been those elder-children, returned to the stars that had borne them, seeking their initial creation after passing from Desal.

Janeway smiled at her former officers. Obviously, it was something the captain took for granted, considering the childlike wonder in their eyes, their slightly parted mouths and stilled breath. Only for a moment did Ara press Anai's arm, softly resting on his forearm, against his side. She squeezed his hand slightly. Otherwise, they were spellbound.

It amused the captain as much as it endeared her. There they were, two elder Desalian scholars, retired regents, technicians and instructors learned in at least four schools of thought and practice,

veterans of the war with the Unar--not to mention the parents of six, which should have precluded most other forms of shock. Belying all of that, the mere sight of the astral plain, which they both had known in their young lives, had stopped them in their tracks, rendering them utterly oblivious to everything else in the room.

Glancing at her equally wordless staff, and then to the elders again, Janeway cleared her throat.

They didn't hear her. Or maybe they didn't listen.

Well, she thought, might as well give everyone a minute.

She couldn't blame her staff for staring, not even Harry for paling when he turned to find everything he'd heard about present itself in reality. It was enough to know the elders *were* Tom and B'Elanna--a hundred and eleven years and over forty lifetimes later--but only a couple days after waking, they had also repossessed their former bodies with notable adaptation.

They looked normal--normal in a Desalian way. He had cut back the hair the Doctor had kindly generated for him to a centimeter or two and did away with his sideburns altogether. He had also made himself a beige coat to fit over his long tunic, lightweight trousers and cloth shoes. In her turn, she had left her hair to curl, weaving a few thin braids at her temples to keep it off her face. Her airy gown, coat and leggings were varying shades of moss; those with flat-heeled linen shoes made her look quite petite, particularly beside her bondmate.

More than that, Janeway thought in that moment she examined them, was their posture, proud and relaxed at the same time, seeming to fit where they put themselves while not trying to blend in, much as one might expect of their rank. Even their expressions were different; their age and experience were showing through. Likewise, they seemed completely oblivious to the fact that people stared at them, but rather held themselves as what they knew they were.

Very different and yet not too much so, Kathryn knew, even in their childlike wonder, as they stared at a depth of space that may well have been wholly new to them. They drank it in, seeming to name each star in their eyes, maybe from memory--though it almost seemed they were renaming them themselves.

"Ara, Anai," Janeway said, taking another step towards them.

Finally, the couple gave her their attention, grinning a bit for their display.

The captain offered them another warm smile. "I might have said it before in sickbay, but I thought I should officially: On behalf of the crew, welcome to Voyager--or back to Voyager, as it were."

Escorting Anai around the table, Ara touched his temple then the captain's. "Captain, zharab'llar," he said with a small bow of his head then stepped aside so his bondmate could take Janeway's hands and meet her eyes. Anai moved their fingers to her temples and then hers alone to Janeway's in the proper greeting.

"Va'os zhra ryloj... Our thanks to you for meeting us this sun," Anai said, trying her hand at her birth tongue for the first time since Derra passed, "in spite of our distraction." Drawing her eyes past the captain's shoulder, she pointed with her chin. "Ara and I have thought this is...*it's* more expansive than we have recalled."

"It seems we have not seen everything yet," Ara added, also glancing to the curtain of stars beyond

them. In but a moment, he was engaged by it again. "In the Desalian belief, our spirits are borne of energy made by the stars and must always return to the same upon passing from life. It's good to see so many...again."

"I'm glad you like it," Janeway said sincerely. "I was hoping you would, considering how things didn't turn out as you had planned."

Anai was the one to grin at that. "We are Desalian, Captain. Our tendency is to be accepting...of most things."

"*Most things* bearing questionable meaning in our history," Ara noted, and then led his lady to a seat. She took it, her posture straight as she readied herself to turn to the others there.

Anai immediately saw Harry's shifting gaze and Tuvok's plain stare--this aside from Chakotay's friendly but stiff expression. She had to struggle to not call them all children--except perhaps the Vulcan--had to call up her memories of when she was a peer, not an elderly lady too hesitant about the course of her future to remain pure-spoken with them.

She could still see their faces as she sat upon her dais and told them the story of her and Ara's lives. How differently they had looked at her then, when they thought her but a stranger. How much more pleasant they had been, so open and trusting--to some degree, at least. In many ways, she and Ara remained strangers to them, aliens who bore a few similarities to people they had known recently in their time.

It would remain as such if they did nothing, she knew. So, Anai took a breath and decided to simply tell them her mind.

"I should like to thank you all for your patience," she began. "We would understand were it to take much time to earn again your trust and, more, friendship. We realize the faith you perhaps deserved was not shown by us, and so for any feelings made hard in this, my bondmate and I offer our sincere apology."

Ara's brow rose to consider the staff just then. If they had been planning to speak, Anai had successfully rendered them mute.

Janeway offered an understanding gaze. "Anai, I don't think it was a matter of you intentionally--"

"Gye tetso'i," Anai cut in, continuing in Desalian, "Your forgiveness, good lady; however, in this, it should be understood that we take full responsibility for feelings slighted in our deceptions, regardless of our purpose or intention. This was a wrong act; the fault is ours to claim. Allow us our rights, please."

The captain blinked. B'Elanna Torres might have been an outspoken young lady, but the tone of voice Anai had used was rather an assured order. Then again, Janeway knew, Anai was speaking on her own behalf--trying to apologize...as a regent taking on the burden of any possible negativity due to sins she and her bondmate committed and allowed to be supported--as Sashana'i did at Cezia.

They were doing what they thought was best for themselves, too, she knew. So, the captain gave a nod. "If you insist."

"We would," Ara said sincerely. "Should Anai and I bear our place among you, our own faults and history would be borne as well--much as before and including that which was indeed left behind unfinished. This is part of our purpose in returning, and we intend without hesitation to meet it."

He looked over to Harry, and the corners of his mouth flicked to see the young man's eyes point away. Still trying not to stare, Anai's directness and his own further explanation seemed to have found a nook of dissent behind the young man's facade.

"This wish is keenly felt," he continued, quieter, "mainly for thinking to be kind, we instead brought pain to those of you for whom we cared. This was seen, and we suspected our mistake. Still, our silence was maintained for the doubts within us, in the case you would be required to continue mourning. Some of you *have* continued to mourn, whether or not it would be your inclination and despite what words would pass within this room."

Harry looked up, but met Ara's steady stare without more reaction. When he nodded and averted his attention again, however, Anai sighed and pushed herself back to her feet. Walking around the table, she moved to Harry's side and met his eyes in her own right, and in a way that he would not dare break it again.

"This is meant, Harry," she told him. "Your friendship, your forgiveness, is wished. --Gye ak." She held her hand up when he tried to speak then placed that same hand, marked with kraja, upon his cheek.

"I am a girl," Anai told him, smiling understandingly at his expression--not quite fear, but surprised to feel she truly was real to the touch. "Yet for what youth is outwardly borne, a rather old spirit remains within me always, elder still by the day and enjoying much company. More knowledge of your manner than you would care to consider is known by Ara and me. Regardless, your acceptance would not be desired from mere kindness--though this, ka, might be your way. Acceptance should be truth, which perhaps requires us to begin anew. We would have no less...'*Starfleet*.'"

Janeway's smile grew to see Kim snicker as he acknowledged Anai's "demand." She had made her own plans to talk to Kim again, maybe assign him to work with them for a while. *Leave it to them to jump on the problem themselves*, she thought, thanking Anai with a tiny nod when she turned back for her seat.

Anai blinked her acknowledgment then dipped her hand into her pocket. "So then, shall we take ourselves to business?" she asked.

"Agreed," Janeway said, but before she could take over the meeting again, Anai had already pulled the PADD from her pocket and set it down before her. "What's this?"

Ara's face lit as he leaned back in his seat. "Fun," he replied.

Janeway looked up as Anai raised her chin. With a wise grin and a twitch of her brows, the captain took the PADD. Chakotay had already told her that the two wanted some work--and she had agreed they should be as content as possible while getting used to Voyager again. She owed them that much, at least, for bringing them back.

But when she clicked on the PADD, she blinked at the wildly scrolling calculations and parameters...then the header. "A few *thoughts*?" she read and gave them both a look.

Anai returned to her seat, lowering herself as if it had always been her place to sit and grinning at Janeway's reaction. She and Ara had thought the young captain would enjoy their scribbles.

"From whom would you imagine the Institute nursery children learned their many theories?" she smiled. "Their knowledge was not pulled from the sea. Past the war, many of the recovered archives were explained by Ara and I to our friends and students."

"Past our making sense of what had not been known to us," Ara added as he pulled his own PADD out for the others to review.

Looking at the data again, Janeway couldn't tell exactly what it was at first, but she recognized enough that reading it drew a slow smile across her face. She peered up to the two again. "Fun, hmm?"

"Pulling a thing stubborn as fate is a tax upon the spirit. Fate shall maintain the course it wishes regardless of our frustrations and arrogance.

*"Its *alignment* in the path, however, is another matter, and yet is liberating when accepted..."*

It had turned out to be as long a day as they had expected, Anai knew as she sat patiently, watching the stars. Leaning on her hand, she dipped her fingers into her hair, massaging the ridge that extended above her temple. It was something she had always done, usually unconsciously.

When she had woken from her infection upon Uillar, Ara, then but Tom, her friend, had massaged her scalp, discovering the ridge at first to his surprise and slight discomfort. He did not know how she would react to it. But she liked the sensation and bid him continue. Bakali later told her that she had a set of nerve endings there that made it a sensitive area. At the time, though, Anai had simply liked knowing it was still there. It was one of only two ridges that had been undamaged.

All that time, in fact, and she had always liked knowing that small piece of her birth remained, even if she had willingly put aside the rest. One way or another, she knew she would get it back--again.

In sickbay, when Ara nodded her way and gestured up with his eyes, she realized that her youth was not all that had been restored. "Beautiful," he'd said simply, his admiring gaze hinting at the rest.

Reaching up, she felt herself laugh to feel beneath her fleshy fingers her cranial ridges, just as they had been before Hychar destroyed them. She fell back onto the headrest of the biobed to place both of her hands on her forehead.

Smiling at Chakotay, she said, "Who might have thought there would be *relief* in me to feel these upon my skull?"

"It's good to see," he'd responded sincerely, his own smile crinkling his dark eyes.

"Ka, this would be pleasing to you, as you knew a rather opposite reaction. How I was then... She is so distant to me, that child, and yet I wonder whether its truth *has* been resolved, that childhood difficulty."

Chakotay's grin grew wistful there and rightfully so. He remembered the downcast conclusion to one of her experiences all too well. "They say time heals all wounds," he offered.

"*Some* matters," she allowed, "and yet bearing no less importance."

So many things to rediscover...to know all over again, and yet to learn and do... Many uncertainties,

many questions yet to be answered, far away.

But she had the comfort of knowing she was secure in her present self that time.

Her eyes had not once left that glorious view. She and Ara had been fascinated by it since the briefing, finding all sorts of excuses to go to or stop by a viewport. They were like children on holiday, pointing at the many wonders as though they had been personally served those delights.

Indeed, it was compelling, she knew, to be a Desalian among billions of stars. Many traditionalists would have believed they were crossing the realm of the spirits, bringing themselves among the ancestors in their living forms--a thing Sashana'i and Aratra had both considered. For them, the idea of traveling far away through the vastness of space would be a miraculous spiritual adventure. In many respects, the elders would agree with that assessment.

However it was, the Voyager was doing so as quickly as possible, mainly at present so they could get out of Kazon space. Ara and Anai had advised the captain and the others that it was a wiser course of action, particularly with the ship's traitor continuing her hunt for them like a dungwater snake, jumping out at any chance of food with far harder eyes than its prey. Voyager now had supplies and substantial power. The ship was in better than perfect condition. They did not need to stop and risk losing any of that. They should not until they were at least assured of a good distance from anything the Kazon were known to inhabit.

Ara and Anai had learned such caution, had learned a care of survival and safety above all other considerations--and how to concentrate on a goal to achieve it among other aspects of living. Such a way had become their life. That habit would not pass with Desal, they assured.

Even so, they understood Kathryn Janeway when she noted they were also on a ship of exploration and would probably pause from time to time for matters that interested them.

"We simply advise you find Kazon space boring," Ara finally said with a shrug, "for your own sakes. Anai and I bear no fear of passing--but you might like to get home in one piece."

Janeway did know that all too well.

They were to begin their new projects in a couple days, the Cochrane project being set aside for finer research. Anai was anxious for that labor, also for Ara to begin a series of ba'akull sessions with Harry, who had agreed to learn the practical side of the game Ara of Cezia had been famed for, if not anything else...

"It is a child's game," Ara said as they filed into the turbolift, giving Anai a wink before Harry could see her reaction to that. With the briefing over and some work to be planned, his mood had lightened somewhat. Better still, one object of their concern had been assigned to assist them. "As in answering questions from your most forward mind, so that your instincts are preyed upon in combination with your earned knowledge--instead of only the latter. How is it said? Brainstorming?"

Harry shrugged. "If you think it'll help. But don't you think we should start on the specifications first?"

Ara sighed and put his hand on Kim's arm. "Harry, this is a *method* of devising those specifications. Ka, a game, yet discipline is its lesson. To open your mind to all possibilities so to narrow them, the ba'akull we would play would be technically oriented, without question. I should believe you would excel most quickly. You bear a fair amount of knowledge."

Thankfully, Harry's back was to Anai and Tuvok, who shared a glance, one wisely amused, the other doubting the actual merit of the game.

Ara held his face well despite them both. At the same time, he did honestly wish to begin again with the ensign, and he knew that was one good way. So, he gave the boy's arm a squeeze and added in his tongue, "You'll like it."

Anai patted Kim's back, not minding his little jump when he glanced to her. "Listen to your elders, Child," she quipped. "And you need not bear immediate worries. My bondmate shall wait a few corners before your answers are driven into the flat points."

"Ah, but Harry is not Desalian, mes va'i."

"When has *that* stopped you?" Anai laughed. "Until a week before his passing, your dearest hobby was utterly disgracing Novren Pridalar."

"Anai, you know well he was given every chance. For that matter it was *Novren*."

"Vya! His point line was scuttled at your every convenience great enjoyment."

"As you loved to witness this, more with each game," he returned.

She twisted her upturned lips. "This is not my point, as is known."

Ara held up his palms. "I gave Novren every chance available to him...for the first third. I thought to wait *five* corners with our good man Kim." He turned a raised brow toward the ensign. "I am in possession of *some* patience, after all."

Without expecting to, Harry laughed, shaking his head. "I didn't know about it at first, but..." He paused to look at them, their fond grins, both aimed at him and as genuine as they had ever been, teasing him and each other like they used to, in an upside-down way. Harry's smile warmed in return. "It's good to have you here."

Ara bowed his head in acknowledgment then asked, "Thus you shall play the ba'akull?"

Harry eyed him again, and then Anai's curious stare. Finally, he gave a nod. "I don't know what I'm getting into, but okay."

Ara's smile grew inward. "Rarely is it known what we are 'getting into,' Child. Yet progress finds us regardless, compliments our spirits with a worthy path while amongst the living."

Harry froze at that shift of topic--and to one he didn't feel ready for with them. A moment later, he grit his teeth to think he'd started recognizing them again.

Ara noticed that. "Your forgiveness. This is new for me as well."

"It's not your fault," Harry said.

Ignoring that--it would take far more than a ba'akull game to regain the boy's unguarded confidence, he knew--Ara returned his hand to Harry's shoulder. "Might you say that again after the ba'akull, so Anai shall not bid me cleanse the floor with my tongue until I have finished explaining myself?"

"I would not bear such concerns, Ara," Anai smiled. "There are better uses for your able mouth. --What now, Harry? Of what do you *think* I speak?"

When Harry flushed and looked away, they both laughed.

They couldn't help themselves that time.

Poor Child, Anai grinned hours later, as the smell of boiling tracha began to permeate the messhall.

Letting the aroma fill her, she gave her head another rub, careful for the beads Havetsi had sent and she had immediately woven into one of her braids. Her gaze turned down as her lips turned up when she fingered the small, carved surface of the ca'id stones, in amber, her favorite bead color.

Her spirit-child had remembered even that in her collection of items and information. It had definitely helped to prepare her for what came later, after they had so gratefully taken what had been sent....

"The spirits bless her," Anai smiled once they were left alone in the cargo bay, digging eagerly into the well-packed capsule their spirit-child had sent to Voyager.

Ara moved forward a bit more slowly, almost hesitant to be so near to that which he so missed. He had to relent and join his lady, however, when she extracted a portrait of Havetsi and Cera with their daughter and son, among others. Then he spied the rubric case--*his* rubric case, given to him by Miztri at a tsaborr some years after their arrival at Desalia-Four.

"Should I not be a most selfish man," he breathed, "then I would be the most thankful."

"I should think no other could use such a heavy stylus, which you and Miztri so insisted upon," Anai quipped then laughed as she pulled out another package. "Nido'ev seeds! --In the event Neelix destroys the present store, I should think."

Ara grinned. "We shall keep these *very* safe."

For nearly an hour, they breathlessly prayed over all the wonderful letters and items, the memoirs and images, several sets of scarves, clothes and comfortable shoes, all of which Ara was thrilled to pull out. Havetsi had also sent them a proper floorcloth, two dining sets and a scrap blanket the family had made for them, full of all the colors and patterns known of Desal and the Allanois house.

Seeing it, Anai hugged it up to herself, rubbing her cheek against the soft knots, blinking away the water in her eyes without shame. It even smelled of home, their beautiful house and loving family. Looking to Ara when he touched her other cheek, she leaned directly into his waiting arms, half wrapping the blanket around him as they embraced.

A way to let go and yet to hold on, they knew, a way to miss them and yet be near--a way to have some of their selfish yet natural longing eased for the time being.

Some time later, they asked the items be transported to their quarters so that they could go through them at their leisure. They knew they could not stay there the rest of the day, though they were compelled to.

Their timing was good, though, as Chakotay was already calling to ask them how much room they needed in the science labs and what equipment they required to start. Before they could begin to head back to the shuttle bay to help Harry with some of the parts they named, they received yet another

call--from sickbay.

Over breakfast, when Ara spoke of Nicoletti and Bendera's planned waking, they had expected to be called by Kes or the Doctor eventually. After their friends digested a mere fraction of what the captain and Chakotay would likely supply, they certainly would be curious, doubtful or simply in shock. Minutes after the contents of the capsule had been transported out of the cargo bay, the Doctor opened a channel.

Their mutual stare did not break, even when they agreed to come.

"Lieutenant?" Nicoletti said blankly, weak-limbed and sallow, only to pale further at the sight entering the doors. Sitting up on the biobed, she unconsciously drew back a little as they neared.

"Ka...yes." Though the title had almost thrown Anai, it was little compared to hearing the very familiar voice of her very old friend. She could not help but remind herself that it had been nearly twenty years since Susik's passing...and many more since seeing the lady in her youth, with her neatly trimmed hair and serious facade.

Then there was Bendera, an older friend, still, who had passed in his sleep some years after. He was once again graced with those boyish looks and a small, friendly grin, which Yasis had always admitted was the basis of her initial attraction to him.

Both of them were the visions that she and Ara had held of them while on Cezia, those nine years where they did not know what had happened to their crewmates. That time, it was like facing the Voyager crew again in their garden, knowing so much more, knowing they knew nothing...

"Susan," she said carefully, reminding herself that it all was to be expected. Nicoletti was staring at her with a combination of surprise, dread and discomfort, everything Susik Kichyrn had pictured of herself. As converse as it was equally predictable, Bendera, still unable to sit up, was merely alert and curious, crooking his head to watch them approach. "Kurt. It is good to see you awake."

"We have been hoping the remainder of your procedures would proceed well," Ara added with a nod.

It was bland and formal, he knew. He and Anai planned that "reunion" only on their walk to sickbay, having not thought that they would be consigned to be the ones doing the explaining--and on Desalia, convinced that they would not be able to or not there at all.

Anai was even unsure of how to even *begin* with them, an unusual state for a woman of her experience.

"Torres," Bendera said with an appraising nod. "You and Tom...look good."

"My thanks," Anai said, "as I should say, you yet appear among the passed."

He furrowed his brow.

"It was meant...you look tired," Anai clarified, both for him and for herself. She had been speaking Earth Standard a little that day and did, of course, know how to. In Irliae, Kurt had chosen to speak it when they came together until he passed. Susik, too, had indulged in their native language during those times. But those brief usages had been discontinued nearly sixteen years ago, and presently it only added to Anai's unusual awkwardness there. The pronunciation, syntax and contractions all felt wrong--for more than a century had not been native to her, not even in her thoughts. Koba would roll off her tongue more

readily.

Thankfully, Bendera was as accepting of the unusual as ever, shrugged off his stare to answer her. "Doc says we should be all right soon enough, in a few days."

Kes, passing by, leaned a bit up to Ara. "The Doctor also said you shouldn't stay too long yet, though. They need to rest."

"This appears so," he nodded and looked at Nicoletti. "You wished to speak with us?"

Nicoletti paused, considering the floor again. "I didn't want to do this at first," she admitted. She looked as though she still didn't.

"It was my idea," Bendera told them.

"But we wanted..." Nicoletti finally sighed, shifting her legs off the table. "... We needed to talk to you before believing any of this."

Ara gave a nod. "We would understand why. It's...complex."

"But we do want to know," Bendera told them, still looking them over. "Especially now. I mean, you're about as different as Chakotay said. I can't imagine how we must have been."

Ara grinned. "In truth, there was less change in you during your time in Irliae. However, you enjoyed full lives there--as did we, only more obviously."

Bendera seemed glad to hear him admit it. "Must have been weird over there."

Anai snorted despite herself, shaking her head. "*This* is the strange place for Ara and me, Kurt. Yet we are here--as are you--again. For us all to become accustomed to our situation shall require--will take--some time."

"But you remember everything," Bendera said, frowning slightly, "even *our* memories, the captain said."

Anai nodded. "We bear your memories--which have not been publicized but for what was approved by you." She noted Susan's raised brow to that bit of information. "This will be explained later."

"So why don't we remember?" Bendera asked.

"You agreed it would be best to commit to the resequencing. Ara and I planned to as well. Not to carry our lives here would be easier. You were not Desalian, thus the procedure was successful. As Desalians, the neural composition and chemistry Ara and I bear cannot be altered. --This, too, can be detailed later. This is merely the simplest explanation."

"Sounds simple enough," Bendera said, an obvious lie.

As Bendera had spoken, Nicoletti had also been examining the two, their positions by each other, the blue tracings on their temples and hands, their very strange aura of control, awareness--a thing she was feeling the very opposite of at that point. The last she remembered... She could not pinpoint when that was. Yet within it all was an eerie feeling of...*more*. There was definitely more inside her than she was aware of and she didn't like that.

Again, Susan released her breath and steeled herself for what she knew she'd have to know sooner or later, particularly as everyone else on board probably knew--another thing she hadn't liked to hear about from the commander.

"Would you tell us what happened out there, then?" she asked.

"Zhra'o tsa," Anai said and gave her hand to her bondmate so that he could escort her up onto a bedside stool. "This requires more time than we're allowed at present, but we can begin. You had wished to be informed of the memoirs."

Nicoletti's brow drew up. "I did?"

Anai placed her hand on the other woman's, smiling warmly as she met her eyes. "Ka, my old friend. You did."

Feeling a particular energy in the former chief's strangely gentle contact, Susan tensed and nodded jerkily as her eyes turned to something else. She definitely didn't like the stalling. "I see," she said.

"Patience, Susik," Anai grinned and giggled at the woman's reaction to that. "What would be your last recollection? We will attempt to complete the details from that place. It has been made clear that Ara and I must begin anew here. So would you both."

At the same time, Anai knew she would have to start over on her approach.

Nicoletti thought for several seconds, furrowing her brow. "It's foggy."

"Do not force the thoughts," Anai advised her. "It would come naturally or not at all. If meant to, it will return."

Another moment of silence followed. Finally, Bendera said, "I remember loading the collection canisters into the Cratow. Tom...you and I were talking about...my date with Annie, right? But we were going on an away mission, because we'd gotten hit by the Kazon."

Susan blinked. Her stare then drew downward as she tried to pull the memory that had tricked at her. It was forming, just an edge of a memory...

Ara nodded. "We were taking ourselves to collect raw plasma so to restore the Voyager's damaged systems."

It was so strange, Susan thought, it couldn't be right...

"That's right. We were hiding in a nebula, right?"

"Ka," Ara said, a bit softer that time. "The nebula housed an unusual plasma field, from which we would collect the energy."

She didn't even recognize the voice...

"Have you remembered?" Anai asked, curiously peering at Nicoletti's effort.

"A requiem," she said quietly and looked at Ara. "I was humming a requiem--at you."

Ara chuckled at the memory of his starting that long-standing joke between the four of them. "Ka. However, you whistled." Pursing his lips, he blew the tune he knew all too well. Susik Kichyrn had remembered that melody for the remainder of her life--particularly when he was up to mischief.

"That's it," Nicoletti nodded, a little unnerved to hear him echo her mind and imagining a deep-voiced man humming it, warm, familiar, chuckling gently. That was the humming, she thought, feeling an odd quiver in her chest for it.

Seeing her old friend seem a little lost in that thought, Anai patted her hand. "Then perhaps you should be told of Irrlae first. This might assist your understanding of why you fell into alien ways, were you to understand how the temporal variance is created by the plasma field. It was a point of study for Ara and me for many years. --Moreover, there is time to explain this much."

Shaken from her reverie, Nicoletti turned a quicker smile to her. "I'd like that. I remember a report from Ensign Wildman on some long range scans you asked her to do..."

She would ask about the humming man some other time.

Anai nodded, seeing the woman's curiosity replace her musing all too easily. If she had not guessed correctly already, she would find out what Susan was thinking on soon enough.

As would Susan.

It was a legitimate procrastination on both sides, Anai knew and easily accepted. Indeed, she and Ara would need to take care in how they revealed it all, and she required time to construct a proper history. More, Susan and Kurt did not even know the ways of those people they had aligned themselves with, much less the fact of their parenthood--particularly Susan's--and mates. They all needed preparation for the rest.

"But two known suns upon this vessel and our list is long," Ara noted after they left their friends, who had easily--or perhaps gladly--fallen asleep after a lengthy explanation of subspatial temporal acceleration as induced within natural streams of nebulous particle plasma.

"With growth awaiting, I would think," she nodded, relieved to see the shuttle bay approaching. They both were remembering the ship's layout well, considering, though the monotonous corridors remained rather confusing--this aside from continuing to mull over the format for her telling, where to begin and how neutral a narrator she should be, among other details.

"Our method shall be developed this moon, Anai," Ara assured her. "One matter in the moment, ka?"

"Indeed, a much prescribed manner of *ours*," she quipped.

Upon reaching their destination, Anai immediately engaged herself with Tuvok, organizing and setting aside what parts they needed. On his end, Ara agreed to oversee the salvage work that several of the crew had already begun. The shuttle Cochrane, namely, was to have its experimental drive dismantled, its parts converted for another drive system the elders had toyed with in their errant moments at the Institute.

It was surreal to see it, sitting quiet and pristine, off to the side of the bay. As Anai went to arrange for the transports, Ara found himself unable to jump into his work at first. Instead, he let his eyes roam over the smooth, angular lines and the pleasant colors, remembering with unusual clarity the last time

Tom...*he* had touched the cool hull. Upon exiting it, in fact, he had given it an affectionate pat.

A time when that shuttlecraft was a key to so many feelings, of ability, of worth, he knew. So long ago, it and the dreams that went along with it, plus the thrill of attaining such speeds, had been so important to him in the rebuilding of his life--a way to attain some esteem while not letting go of his most simple pleasures.

How little he had known as a child, he mused, how little he had in himself then. How empty his plotting in life had been, seeking answers in the inanimate and all the while avoiding those matters which had created his and his lady's fate to return.

In a way, the boy had loved the project partially because of those memories of his father, so insecure and immature then and now only ignorant of truth. Though, hopefully that would cease to be the case someday, sooner rather than later. He did wish to see his birth parents again. To some extent, he always had wished to, yet he was hesitant to want too dearly, feeling as he did. Now, so long ago having all but forgotten that boy, Ara could not help but wonder what their reaction would be should fate allow them to meet. Thankfully, he was many times a father, too, and understood that he may well be accepted, albeit with some initial discomfort. Though it was yet to be, Ara could see the possibility of a successful reunion, with some patience and a good deal of honesty on both ends.

Surreal, for certain, it was to look upon that ship again and know how far beyond it he was.

It was a lovely craft, though nothing like his blessed Azallis....

"Is there a problem, Lieutenant?"

Ara realized belatedly the ensign was addressing him and shook his head. "No, good lady," he said quietly, examining her features and concentrating on them. With less of the usual traffic in his forward mind, it came to him sooner than he expected--a pleasant surprise. "Your forgiveness. --Ensign Kaplan, ka? I simply reminisce."

She almost turned back to the access panel, but then she looked up to him again. His straight face was hard to interpret, and his eyes didn't look like his own--and not just for the color. His fingers, protruding from his casually crossed arms, rubbed softly over his sleeves, thoughtful. He was otherwise very still, watching and waiting. Without his meaning it to be, his presence was very strong, unnerving somehow in its undeniable awareness.

Taking a moment to think again on it, she finally said, "I'm having a little trouble with the junctures. They look like they've been fused. Maybe you can look at it?"

Ara's gaze dropped down to the panel and he blinked a couple times before recalling why she might need to ask. "The connections had been reworked for the expected stresses on the systems," he said as he moved gradually to her side. "This much may have worked."

"So, with all your experience now, you don't think it's a good idea to try to break the warp barrier?"

"Further consideration is required to justify this method," he replied, "should it bear any use. Anai and I plan to dismantle and reconfigure this drive differently."

Nodding, she looked back to the panel again. "So you remember the inverter junctures being fused like this?"

Lowering himself to his knee, he took another look at the section in question. "Ka--and this would be Harry's working. A joint would never be sealed with vertical alignment on my lady's part, even in childhood. Was this not looked into when Harry--Ensign Kim--was here?"

"I don't think he had the chance," Kaplan told him. "He had to go to stellar cartography after he assigned our unit."

"Va." Ara gave her a nod. "With standard equipment, these cannot be removed without a drain upon the power nodes. A preventative method exists, however--a tactic learned at Cezia, with our...with the Desalian systems." He glanced to a nearby tool case. "Bring me a gipra'il afisarru'o jis."

Kaplan turned, but furrowed her brow when the words hit her. "A what?"

Ara grinned, rolling his eyes, then replied in Standard, "Bring me a manual diagnostic kit, a laser, a diffusion emitter and a radiometric spectrometer and you'll find out."

As Kaplan went to retrieve the items, his smile weakened. He had not yet touched the components, still feeling the chill of awareness within him to think of digging apart what he now considered a rudimentary layout pattern, to feel his years all over again to know how many systems and engines he and Anai, among others, had created since copying that one.

That ship, that ancient work, left as stuck as he and others had made them... He and Anai had nearly left it, too, for others to bear, to deal with their past's handiwork. Now they were there, with better ways to take it apart, make it into another thing, something more useful, more aligned with their well-earned knowledge. It was their work again to do--and to share.

Reaching out, he placed his hand on the main relay grid.

The aura passed. He nodded to himself. *Better.*

By the time Anai caught up with him, running her hand along the silvery hull with an inward smile of her own, Ara was up to his elbows in diffuser dust, his coat folded aside and his long shirt sleeves rolled, the various parts of different devices in a small pile behind him and the ensign. She paused at the sight, so familiar and gratifying to her.

His eyes pinned on the task, he still knew his lady had come. "This presently shall be completed, Anai."

"I take myself to inspect the interior of the shuttle," she acknowledged. Disassembling that old haunt was a good thing for him, too, she observed. "Some suns have passed since it has been seen."

"Ka, many sun have passed above us both. I shall follow you soon."

She remained a moment longer to watch him begin to explain the procedure as his agile fingers expertly maneuvered the connections out of the juncture. Not sixteen years ago, Ara had made similar efforts with Havesti, then a teenager, who stared at her elder father's work with rapt attention, not too unlike Ensign Kaplan just then.

Her smile remained with her long after she turned and entered the shuttle.

"And upon this acceptance, that we may act and yet may not, and in both, practiced wisely, we may live freely within nature's blessing. It is the gift of the spirits, this freedom, which we procure for ourselves."

She blinked slowly. The stellar display had lulled her somewhat; it was a welcome thing considering her body was still recklessly alert. *It* had barely tired at all that day, but the elder who inhabited it welcomed the time to collect herself a bit, recall the day so that she could record it later.

It was a daily practice of scholars to reserve times during the day for that purpose. Anai and Ara in addition spent a good portion of their scholarship also writing Sashana'i, Aratra, Aneschi and Dulla's memories, among others, and completing Yusi's memoirs when the bulk was discovered in the catacombs. So the practice of taking a little time here and there during the day was normal; the regents had been well known for carrying their styluses and small tablets in their robe pockets, pulling them out at random, even during conversations, to jot a note or take a half-quarter under a tree at the Institute to detail the recollection. Though sequestered to a starship and flying at warp speed away from the catacombs, Anai had no intention of neglecting her memoirs after such a lifetime of practice, or the many other scholarly practices that were like instincts to her and Ara.

The clinking in Neelix's kitchen grew steadier and, inhaling, Anai could tell Ara was warming their bread. It would be good to take food again, as she realized it would take some time to find a healthy medium between her mind's preference for less food and her body's need for more.

To balance it, all, in truth.

"But why don't you give it a try?" Neelix said cheerily, mysteriously persisting with the man who had essentially invaded his workplace and set aside his usual ingredients.

"Lull rrolv jyashib a'izl va'a," she heard him mutter, too tired and increasingly annoyed to bother speaking a translatable tongue. Considering what he'd said, that was a good thing.

"Er, well, I don't what that means, but... Oh, I guess you wouldn't like that, either."

"Ibri'e Priharoj ascho'err gyor medrusk."

"No tamar stick, either, hmm." The Talaxian sighed. "You always were a picky eater."

"My 'picky' nature bears little weight in comparison to Anai deserving a meal she wishes to eat rather than is required to," Ara finally told him in a pleasant and translatable ultimatum. "Please indulge my desire a few minutes longer, good Neelix."

Finally, she heard Neelix sigh.

She grinned. It was indeed helpful to possess a protective mate. A distant and reluctant memory knew what tamar might taste like.

"Uh, Anai?"

She looked up a moment after hearing the man who approached. "Carey, zha'aneek," she said with a

slow blink.

With a nod to her, and then to Kes, who passed by with the last of the dinner vases, he moved a couple steps closer. "I have those diagnostics for you."

Anai outstretched her hand to accept what he held out to her. "My thanks," she said quietly, tucking the PADD into the low pocket of her coat. Then she turned her eyes back to the window.

Carey furrowed his brow. "I thought you said you wanted to see them. Captain Janeway approved it."

"Ke'aht," she replied. "Yet the ship should survive our meal and rest." Looking again to his discomfited expression, she queried, "Another mess has not been made, I should hope?"

He snorted. "And have you scare the hell out of me again? I don't think I'd dare."

Anai chuckled softly. Poor Carey and the others had not expected her visit, she knew...

They had come straight from the shuttle bay upon Ara's suggestion they build a better toolbox--with instruments that had not been thought of at Ivlisa. Anai agreed for more than the practical reason, however. During their work in the cargo bay, hearing mentions of it, she found herself tempted to see her old "lair," as Ara once called it, to see the warp drive she had adapted, re-imagined and improved many times during her career on Desalia. More, she was curious to feel the aura of that place, where once she had been in charge.

Yet despite anything time might have taken from her in rank there, she certainly made her presence known when they arrived to find the new plasma inverter in the middle of the deck and in pieces.

To think she had been feeling rather old when she and her bondmate had left sickbay, a little tired after working on the shuttle...

"By the dung dust of Prihar! What crimes do you commit with my Havetsi's fine labor, Child?!"

Chief Engineer Carey snapped his head up from the new plasma output grid to see two fire-lit eyes glaring at him above an open frown and a small, crossed-armed body, all lit slightly blue by the thrumming warp core behind him. Her back arrow straight, her feet poised apart and her stare all but burning a hole through his skull, her mere stance screamed the very meaning of his still being on his knees.

He was a Starfleet officer, he knew, able in his position and rank. But for that very familiar glare and challenge, he felt like a cadet caught playing a prank in the engine lab by the commandant.

"Lieutenant--or it's Anai now, right? We were just starting--"

"The conversion levels in this grid have already been drawn beyond comprehensible excess," she cut in, her fingers drumming on her ribs. "Should you install it at half the rapol, the warp core would certainly and immediately cry for its freedom!"

Carey had to give her that. "I know. We were just running a few tests to see its limits. In case of emergencies, we need to know this. We're still not too familiar with this technology."

"Yet I *am*," Anai responded and sighed. "Equipment need not be abused in order to know its capabilities, Child. --Ara vrall mjarr i'avtihad rripaz a'i."

Ara snickered, more than satisfied to see his lady so nicely in her element--angered to arrogance among a pile of parts and a group of wide-eyed pupils. "Anai zhu'a ka volle'o," he replied.

"Better we *would* be on Voyager," she told Carey, "else your spirits flung from your natures would find your birthworlds rather than your forms. --Now, bring me a spectrometer before the entirety of the deck is torn to Gahahol. A more rational satisfaction of your curiosity shall then be provided."

When the tool met her outstretched hand, she blew a breath, shook her head and dropped to her knees before the main component to pop off the correct hatch.

Though it was no longer her place officially, she had been aghast to think that the old system was trying to compensate for the fresh plasma supply she had personally ordered. Even Ara had shaken his head with the idea of all that good power being wasted. Quietly, he went to work putting the grids back in place and bringing the ratios down to a safe level, gesturing a few of the staff down to watch him do it. Meanwhile, Anai began to instruct the others more about the new inverter, which she knew down to the molecule.

Leaving engineering a couple hours later to finally return to the cargo bay, they were at least assured they would have some work outside of research on that ship, even if they were overstepping their bounds.

In that case, they thought it should be their *responsibility*.

"Ara," she said, their doings still alive in her voice, "I should think perhaps there a place for us exists after all." Her lips curled up again with but the memory of the consternation in Carey's face. "This has been upon our minds thus sun, yet I would think without doubt now that we are needed among them."

"We might find some occupation," he mused, "with all these children and such an abundance of toys."

She turned up a stare for the lilt in his tone. "That meaning was not intended."

He squeezed her hand and bowed his head to a young man they passed. Ara couldn't recall his name and ignored the confused blink he got in return for his manners. "This is known, Anai. Yet it must be said, I bore wicked pleasure watching you. How might Dalra have seen your behavior, I should imagine?"

She had to laugh at the first answer that came to mind. Even into her nineties, their beloved friend took pains to lecture her when he felt the need to. Not that she would have had it any other way.

Perhaps they--she--had been too strident. The engineering crew could not be blamed for being curious and simply doing their jobs in running those tests, even if it could have resulted in the destruction of the unit and the waste of good plasma. The staff there was doing what they knew as best they could--a familiar act.

Anai was still thankful that she and Ara had arrived when they did....

"We finished the rest of the conversions," Carey continued, breaking the silence Anai had left with him. "It's in the report. I thought you might like to read them over, since you do have more experience with those systems."

Again, she nodded. "It pleases. However, sunrise shall find it well enough," she told him. "Your information shall be reviewed at that time. "

Carey forced his grin to remain that time. Ironically, the patient and quietly assured Torres put him less at ease than the pressure valve did. Then again, he had learned how to *predict* the pressure valve. "Thanks...Anai."

"Zretse ye'o," she replied, drawing her eyes back to the view.

The man nodded and turned to leave.

Anai did not look back to him. It was mischievous, then, her temperance, even if was a part of her learned nature. Then again, she had to remind herself that those people were still trying to decide her place as much as she was...

"Carey?"

He had not gone far. "Yes?"

Anai drew a small breath to pause, rubbing unnoticeably at her scalp again. "Your forgiveness for my presence in engineering, before your people," she said. "I want for repentance, however, for a change in my manner cannot be promised. By nature, I and my bondmate remain rather outspoken ashna'o, whether or not we may claim this place by right--and of us I am the worse."

She turned to see his face again. A gentle man, she could tell. A father, she recalled, far away from his children. An officer who labored with dedication and confidence--something she recalled being ignorant of in their beginning work together, which he had respectfully forgiven in time.

"This is not anger nor disrespect as much as protectiveness...and pride," she finished.

Carey smiled, truly that time. "So some things don't change. Anything else, Chief?"

A slow grin pulled at Anai's lips. *Most certainly a good man*, she decided. There might be more hope for them than she had remembered.

"At this mention," she said offhandedly, "it occurs to me to ask whether you would desire to offer your thoughts to our upcoming projects." She peered askance at him. "I would believe you bear potential."

"I wouldn't miss it," he said with a nod. "See you tomorrow."

"Rellisch," she replied.

Indeed, until the next day, and then the next, she thought, and that perhaps they would be good days. Sashana'i had hoped for it, and that they might enjoy the fruit as well.

...Completed in eternity, having tasted the soil and water...

The bread was almost done, and the sweet smell of the eblav sprouts marrying with the ts'mull wafted through the long room. Her stomach growled in expectation of its needed meal, but Anai continued to ignore it for the streams of light before her.

In the stars, our spirits are born, and there we find completion upon the final balance of being...

"Still counting?"

Anai nodded, her little smile returning to hear the warm tones of the lady's greeting. "Ka, Kathri, and could still for some time. --Your forgiveness. I bear many habits in familiarity."

Janeway walked around to the seat across. "To be honest, it's sort of endearing," she admitted as she sat, "the way you say it, at least. It brings good memories."

"As it does me," Anai agreed softly.

"I just finished with the daily reports," the captain said. "You two have had quite a busy day."

"We have been reacquainting ourselves with your ship. Some early progress has been made, I would believe."

Janeway peeked up at the kitchen, where the other Desalian among their complement was preparing what apparently was their dinner. Though his movements seemed casual, his face looked serious, his dusky stare was set upon his task alone, and his mouth straight and closed. "I hope Ara is adjusting well, too. He was relatively quiet at the briefing once we got to business."

"He is no longer a child, Kathri," Anai said. "Ka, I might easily say how he *can* behave, yet his preference is to be the 'observer' you hired him to be--and he is now far better practiced at it."

Kathryn laughed. "I can't believe I'd almost forgotten about that."

Anai merely grinned then continued, "When our work takes him into his expertise, you shall hear more of him."

"I'm interested to see it. His theories on sustaining a stable subspace pocket are remarkable."

"Those are not theories," Anai corrected. "On three occasions at the research station at Eydres this was managed with modulators of my design. This can be found in our memoirs of..." Anai paused to think for a moment. "...sixty-four years past. The matter of *employing* it is theoretical, as it bore limited use in Irliae at that time."

"Regardless, I'd like to see more on that. The science of it alone is fascinating to me, much less the potential."

"More of this particular technology shall be seen to some degree. At present, however, he would enjoy your curiosity should you truly bear interest."

Janeway gave a nod. "I'll ask ask him then," she said, leaning back into the couch and crossing her legs, regarding the lady across from her. "And you?"

"I should think I have borne enough of my outward self this sun."

"Yes, I passed Lieutenant Carey in the corridor just now." She laughed to herself at the memory of her short meeting with the rather pained Carey earlier that day, too. "You really stirred things up down there."

"I am in possession of that manner," she apologized, knowing how Janeway probably heard of it. "As I have told Carey, my habits are old."

"Actually, I've missed the occasional bee's nest," Janeway said and nodded to confirm it when Anai

looked at her. "I missed you--both of you, regardless of what became of you."

"Our memories likewise held you dear." Her little smile returned, turning decidedly wry. "However, should you find enjoyment in challenges on your eleventh deck, I would believe they could be procured."

"I don't doubt that," Janeway replied dryly.

Anai snickered, but then shook her head to continue more sincerely. "The laboratories we develop now should keep us occupied and be beneficial. Yet we would maintain a place of authority among those new systems, as the staff bears no experience with them."

"Well, it would be good to know they've learned from experts. Lieutenant Carey is anxious to see all the 'tricks.'"

"Then he shall be taught, among the others," Anai replied.

"Take whatever time you need," Janeway encouraged. "But don't think that because you're here you *have* to do everything in a day. Allow yourselves the time to adjust. The work can wait, and any extra assignments can, too."

"Ka," Anai agreed, peering kindly at the captain's expression, motherly in its care yet a step away, as it had often been. Anai understood it completely. Being a fellow captain and a regent, she knew well on both counts that necessary poise and appearance of control.

"You've been good to us," she commented in Standard, "upon the moment of our waking. Welcoming us as you have, offering the crew preparation and granting us work within our skill--being a commander with great conscience and effort."

"But I've meant it," Janeway told her, holding the lady's eyes to make her know that.

Anai returned the stare--a wise, old stare. "We know. We're grateful for your friendship."

A mother who knows the child all too well, Kathryn mused and wondered again exactly what she'd gotten them into, how very strange it must be for them, though they admitted little about that. Of course, the elder mother spotted that thought as soon as it wrote itself upon the "child's" face.

"What, Kathri?"

Kathryn sighed. "To be honest? I've been thinking that maybe I acted too rashly," she said then quickly added, "Don't get me wrong. I wanted you all back, and I'm grateful you and Ara allowed us to bring you. But I might have thought it over more carefully."

"No time was reserved for thinking," Anai pointed out, again in Desalian, "only instinct. Ara and I bore awareness of this and allowed you only those moments. --This was meant, Kathri, more so that your mind had not been given allowance to consider too well, as Ara and I had thought too *much*, made the fruit of Sashana'i's desires rot in too much sun. Simply see how matters were complicated for the proof of that."

"You did everything you could to protect us," Janeway said, letting the sincerity in her tone thank her for that. "I just think if it could have been handled differently--"

"Except that it is done, Kathri. Little use lies in 'could have.' This thinking outside science and literature perpetuates only regret."

"True. But it doesn't make my part in it any more fair to you."

"Dov?" Anai asked, staring at the captain's face, finally allowed its conflict. "How different are my bondmate and I from what you and Kes have done? The whole of a society turned away from their few comforts and notions of belief; for our cries for justice, Desal followed our word to the cause of peace through war.

"We had upset Desal's belief that the need for contrition would fade naturally, that they could fight without a sacrifice of their spirits--as Kes upset our notion that we had grown too far away from you to belong here again without doing the same, without giving away our beings. So much contentment was ours in our way upon Desal, feeling any peace among such difference could not be imagined by us. In this, we showed much selfishness and allowed our discomfort drive us to protect *ourselves* in what ways we could. --That we are elders does not mean we bear immunity to our weaknesses, you should know.

"Yet how can the possibilities be judged? How could others who had likewise given up their security in order to chance a blessing within a life already largely decided upon? Susik and Derra, Cali, even Gychak, Aratra and Sashana'i...Ara and I, as well, have done this. In all, we may only act as we feel is meant and hope for good to manage its way into the scribbled plan. Fate's course cannot be scrutinized until the moment is past. It was wrong of us to do so before.

"In truth, Kathri, Irlae shall always be missed; it is our home. Within our spirits, we walk upon the fields of Cezia, our beings' birthplace. To walk upon those fields again is our most treasured wish." Smiling inwardly, Anai's fingers touched the beads in her hair. "Many times we had been told, however, by our friends, our family, that our youth could never fully forsaken; our physical origins would need to be faced to attain a complete peace. Fate has brought us here with our spirits in good order, so this shall not be avoided again. This chance we have been given shall not be wasted."

Kathryn nodded, believing it--and glad to hear it. "I just hope that'll be enough for you, after everything else you've been through, everything you've done..."

She did not finish--could not, recalling how much Ara and Anai of Allanois had accomplished. Indeed, thinking of it left her without more to say. For that matter, she was sure they were well aware of their doings.

"I would not think the spirits blessed this fate so that we would be miserable," Anai said and grinned to add, "However, the wiser one would allow Ara and me to remain busy. Within these fresh shells, we should be impossible were we unoccupied *rather* than miserable."

Kathryn laughed. "I'll see what I can't do."

"There is do doubt you shall."

Snickering softly, she stared outward again, to the window, the lights of stars, passing by the hundreds in every moment. She did not add anything else.

The captain shared the quiet, satisfied with Anai's careful optimism. In those seconds, passing long between them, Janeway suddenly realized that they were sitting in the same place they had the last time she had spoken in length with B'Elanna. Oddly, that same, soft determination and thoughtfulness had come through Anai's heavy inflection, even while lighthearted and certainly more comfortable with herself and her conscience. More, Kathryn believed her this time; she also hoped that they would do as they were intended.

Anai was wise enough by then to know, however, that it was all yet to be seen, and that she couldn't expect anything, only try to do her best in the face of those challenges. Janeway was anxious to see the results of that, in her and in Ara. There was, after all, still a great deal for them to do, much to face and overcome, only that they would be doing it from another perspective now.

Once again, she wanted to see them succeed.

Still in that thought, she happened to glance up and across the messhall. There, she caught Kim's curious gaze, which almost turned back to the door. "Ensign, good evening."

"Captain," Kim said, wary to see the back of Torres' head, still resting on a hand; her marked fingers were half-buried in her thick hair. He looked around to the business in the kitchen then back to the captain, suddenly stuck on where to go.

Janeway motioned to an extra seat. "Would you like to join us?"

Feeling his pause at that invitation, Anai glanced around. "You are welcome to, Harry. Zhras ye'a."

"I wouldn't want to interrupt you," Harry immediately said.

"Why should you think you disturb us?" Anai said, sighing at the child's fumbling. "It is you who avoids now, ka? It is known you must speak with Ara. Bring yourself and wait for him."

Harry gave her that one with a nod and shrug. "Sorry. You just looked like--"

"Grrikal shast yo'a," Ara scolded from the kitchen. "Food shall be brought for you, as well, Harry. Seat yourself."

Anai laughed lightly when Kim finally lowered himself in the chair adjacent to the captain. She pressed her amusement down to regard him sincerely, however. "You would not be invited when it was not wished, Harry. Or is it for that you yet feel discomfort? This would be understood, even while you held yourself more comfortably when last we spoke."

He had to give her that, too. In truth, he was starting to feel better about them, first with reading a few of the logs the captain left with him; then in the turbolift, they really had been open with him, had seemed a little like his friends again. But when he came in a minute ago and saw B'Elanna thoughtfully rubbing at the beads in her hair, heard Tom mumbling in Desalian as he arranged food on a large plate, and then reminded himself all over again that they weren't Torres and Paris--but *had been* them, once...

"I guess it's still a little..."

"Unreal?" she offered. Then she nodded, thinking quickly. "Then what on the familiar? Is our workspace plotted out? The systems configurations are ready to be installed."

That worked for Kim. Blinking, he brightened and leaned up a little. "I just came from deck six."

Hearing that, Ara cocked his ear and peered over from the counter. "Zha, and what news there?" he asked. "Do the new nodes progress?"

"We've finished inputting the new parameters for the intake relays," Harry nodded to both of them, "and reconfigured the room's sensors for your holo-simulator. In a few days, we can start installing the new equipment." He looked at the captain. "I have the report, Captain, if you--"

Janeway waved her hand. "I'll see it later. Good work."

"Should there be further adjustments needed," Anai said, "we shall take that duty. Ara has already configured the simulator itself and we should finish programming it within the following two suns."

Harry furrowed his brow at that. "Already?"

"Our fingers work quickly," she replied. "You shall find enjoyment in it, Harry. It is simple and compact, yet bears great precision and intelligence, far more than the standard simulation. It was used by Ara and I with great success in our work and in teaching. It may be installed when the remainder of the area is complete and its location is decided upon." She looked at Janeway's widened stare. "Its frame lies in the cargo bay, should you like to inspect it."

The captain blinked. "I look forward to it."

"Chakotay, hello. Here for a late dinner?" It was Kes, behind them.

"No, I found them," he answered. "Thanks."

Anai's lips curled up. "Monrrit di'arr oll Ara shinall," she called behind her then peered up to the commander, who did not need to be asked to join the small party there. She met his attention with a raised brow. "You have discovered our addition to your night's work?"

Chakotay gave her a smirk. "I'm not surprised you had six kids if you spent your downtime reading that. Next time, *warn* me before you stack it inside the crew reports?"

Anai snickered. "Then it would be read not but for the portions Ara marked for you to find? --Ka, his doings are known to me, Chakotay. Do you forget so easily my bond with him?"

"Frankly? Yes."

"Considering your last memory of us, this would not be surprising," she said and shrugged, her most politic method of asking him to continue getting used to it. It certainly was not an issue to her; he would bring it to her if he needed. She recalled all too well that manner about him without regret. Just then, however, she gratefully saw him take her meaning and tone well enough. So, she returned to the topic. "It is a fine piece of literature--however, ka, imaginative, even for a Desalian."

"So I've gathered."

"Perhaps when you are completed," Ara said as he approached, "our good captain might like a turn. She enjoys literature, to my recollection--or was this 'holonovels?' Tsid ka'e, a program may well be written by us...and tested to assure its accuracy."

Anai laughed aloud. "I'eva tsa! Ara ne kina'otull a tyrr motrach meso'escall!"

It did not translate. Janeway gave them both a look. "Considering the two of you, I don't think I want to know."

"We shall see whether this is truth," Anai replied cleverly and bent her head to the side to accept her bondmate's lips upon her neck. "Zh've mes va'a."

"Mes va'i zhra," he said softly to her, and then to the others--all conveniently looking elsewhere--as he

moved around, "I have procured additions to the tray, as we have properly collected ourselves." He put the large oval plate in the center of the table, turning it so everyone could reach it easily. "Anai and I have quickly learned that a quiet table is not our preference."

"Glad to be of help," Chakotay said, mainly glad to have another topic. "I could use a bite."

Ara wisely said nothing--though he snorted when Anai's gaze shot to his with a warning grin. To their side, Harry rolled his eyes.

"So could I," Janeway joined, oblivious to the byplay. She leaned up to see the selections. "I'd almost forgotten about dinner with all the reports that came in this afternoon."

"Little surprise you bear exceeding thinness, Child," Anai commented, her mouth pursed.

As Neelix and Kes came with the other two trays and a few carafes--"Tracha," Ara smiled and reached for the first cup--Harry watched intently as Anai nimbly plucked up a piece of the brown flatbread, wrapped it around a chunk of cheese and a spray of herbed greens then rolled it under her palm, all without looking. Examining the selections as the others got their tracha, Kim saw his other friend's hand come down over the piece of bread he'd spied.

"This way, Harry," Ara said, taking Harry's hand, grinning at the ensign's hesitance. He and Anai had both forgotten precisely how young he was--and easily recalled how their own sons had found such an age: mature, and in other manners yet to discover a unique way.

Yet they knew well--reminded themselves--that Kim was not their son, but a very old friend who had once helped them from but the goodness of his youthful spirit.

So, Ara returned the favor, guiding Harry's bread-filled hand over a piece of cheese, and then to a slice of pibret he suspected would be enjoyed. "Now, securing the center, ease back your palm..."

Watching them, Anai allowed herself a wistful sigh, seeing so clearly Dalra, on Uillar, showing a similarly basic practice to the dirty, tired pilot that she had soon after fallen in love with. One hundred and eleven years after those first lessons, that same man leaned over another, teaching in friendship, just beginning, and that with as simple a thing as preparing a morsel.

She continued to observe the scene before her as she nibbled throughout the meal. Chakotay subtly filled Janeway in on the "plot" of the novel, successfully amusing her with his omissions and even giving Harry a chuckle as he nodded to the taste of his bread roll.

One day onto the next, building anew, yet again but with everything once familiar...

At the end of the table, Kes drank nearly a half of her cup as she and Ara discussed the proper care of marlai root, among the other seedlings already sprouting in the airponics bay. Taking in Ara's descriptions, Neelix devised some new recipes aloud. Hearing that, Harry was the first to suggest that maybe Ara should make the Talaxian more familiar with the "unique produce" before consigning it all to creative pursuits.

Anai prayed a small thanks to the spirits for that--and Ara breathed it audibly.

As she sighed her smile away, she realized that she had no memories of such meetings among them on that ship, not outside the comfortable facade of the holodeck, if even that. It was a surprise, having somehow always recalled them together. Having become so accustomed to meals amongst the family...

Janeway laughed with a wry look towards Kes and Chakotay subtly pretended not to know. Neelix had missed a beat in all of it and looked around for an offer to fill him in...

It made that meal all the more enjoyable.

The tray grew steadily empty and the carafes were tipping horizontally. The chatter rose and fell in that corner of the night-lit room, but did not stop, even after Chakotay had long leaned back, stretching against the couch with a comment or two made under his breath. Harry smilingly explained it to Neelix again and Kathryn pursed down her smile at the brim of her cup when she overheard the commander...

Perhaps it would be well enough after all.

Finishing her food and tracha, she leaned back into Ara's arm, tucking her feet under her hip again when he pulled her more warmly against him. Anai leaned up to kiss his jaw before nestling her head into his shoulder.

Chakotay glanced at that move, but then grinned, shrugged. She smiled in thanks for his effort. Then, she turned to watch them all again, quiet as the conversations, the words and the expressions, the sounds and gestures and feelings shared, poured into her senses, into her finely-tuned Desalian memory.

A memory which would be written, one she would share someday with those wishing to know about those times, those people and that place.

It was quite possible that one might ask.

The night grew, and comments about the morning shift were met with as many comments about not being tired. The blame went to the tracha they still sipped. Ara and Anai nodded to the need for rest, knowing they were expected back in sickbay for another treatment, where they would also talk with Susan and Kurt again.

"Tsiva ki," Anai thought aloud, unmoved from her bondmate's side, "perhaps the telling should begin as it had with you."

"Except this time, you'll finish it?" Janeway teased.

Anai smiled. "Ka. This time, it shall be finished as I had first intended."

Kes looked at her, the lady's inward facade, her stare at Ara's fingers, which stroked her wrist in small, deliberate circles. "How *were* you going to finish the story, Anai, when you first planned it?"

Ara's mouth turned up and he gave Anai a squeeze. "It was planned to end where our life's paintings to our family began," he said.

"Where was that?" Harry asked, also curious.

"At the end of the war?" Chakotay guessed.

Anai glanced up, seeing the captain's warm yet wondering smile. When she looked at him, Ara's expression was unchanged below his tender gaze. She knew well enough what he felt behind it. Still, he left the matter up to her with a slight flick of his brow, the tiniest shrug.

Certainly, it was her choice, though he would not mind sitting by her for it. He had always loved to

hear her paint the words, he knew without reservation, had taken his place by her with great pride in her most honorable practice, akarr tiras.

It was happenchance, really, that she had begun to paint as she had. It began simply, with Miztri's mentioning at a public meal after a long day of toil in the rubble of Desal Anai's tale of the owl and the mouse, how it had stirred the whole of Azlre and inspired many still. Wishing a story to pass the time, they asked Anai to tell it. Exhausted from her pregnancy and the the many restoration and administrative duties she had taken on within their newly adopted house, Anai almost declined, but Ara pressed that it might be a good story for Desal to hear, particularly then, with the grave discouragement they were trying so hard to overcome while others were so hesitant. It might be a helpful lesson.

So, leaning back into her bondmate's arms, their hands resting on her full-term belly, Anai collected herself and then the memory. Weaving in more details and leaving out the occasion that had inspired the tale first to be told, she began to tell the story, and then expanded on it. She decided that the animal tale itself would provide enough meaning, but there far more "animals" in her experience, now all with unique instincts and purposes. To her pleasant surprise, the words flowed from her quite by nature, and for over an hour, she spoke. Later, she learned that her tale *had* been heard well, and their citizens began to refer to it when they set upon a task they might have questioned before. Thus, she continued to tell it--and then told more like it, and tales from the war and the vast experiences from the Allanois memories she carried.

It became a source of esteem and enjoyment as well as purpose--for her and for Ara.

From the first night, they had always loved to see the wonder in the listeners--as it was written in Kes' face when she said, "I would love to hear it sometime, and your other histories, if you want to tell them. There's so much."

Anai straightened as she looked once more at her audience, who seemed in wait of her response. It was not too long a painting, she knew, only a segment that began the cycle. And they did seem curious...

When her bondmate placed his kraja-marked hand upon her thigh, she softly covered it with her own. Her smile grew more inward still as she bent her head, touched her temple markings with her left fingers then held her hand out to their friends in a gesture of regard.

With a breath, she whispered, "Zha hevrra," her voice rich with age despite its youth, full with the echo of countless memories, her own and the others, who understood the phrase's full meaning.

It was good to hear. It felt like herself.

More, her audience seemed to have accepted that, accepted her and Ara in what ways they could. A tiny smile met her mouth to know it--to finally know it truly.

Ara's fingers caressed her leg and she nodded slowly, drawing an even breath.

"One hundred one rallkle past," she began, her stare drifting off to the stars beyond them, "I entered through the Arch of Azlre and was accepted into the novitiate. At that threshold, I left behind the remainder of my girlhood. Beside me stood my spirit's partner, who similarly would consecrate his status as a man. It was at this place we would be given, truly, to the beings our fate had molded for us, which we had chosen to take, from which we would never turn."

"Again, it should be said that in youth, it can be a way to move with the wind without turning into it, content to allow fate its every will. Other times, they walk into that current, recklessly unaware that the shift is not of their control.

"With time and knowledge, we learn to walk among it, not fighting nor drifting. This is a task of the strong, for perfection cannot be achieved as much as it is desired; rather, balance alone offers peace within the ever-moving universe..."

"We prayed for our transformed spirits, for the journey we would soon embark upon. We prayed for peace. We prayed for what we nourished in my womb and for the one already set forth. We prayed for Desalia. We prayed for Bakali, our elder-mother who had led us, for Bala, our gentle elder-father who had supported us. We prayed for Susik and Gatra, Derra and Yasis, our siblings, finally returned to us as the war began its closing. We prayed for Dalra and for Miztri, who had borne our way upon Uillar and long after. We prayed also for the peaceful deliverance of Be'i and Toma, our childhood spirits, whose necessary sacrifice had finally brought us to that altar."

Anai's head drew back down to Ara's shoulder, and she caressed his hand, which warmly embraced her knee. She listened to his heart beating as her own and watched the stars pass as she continued...

"For those many blessings, we prayed and dedicated ourselves to our children, to the future of Desalia and to the promises we swore, yet to fulfill to our blessed siblings, Sashana'i and Aratra, who with fate's turn allowed us to procure all we so cherished.

"It was for their dear memory, as well, that we have given ourselves to our present beings, and made of our lives all which has been granted. Ka, for our lives and all the blessings within it, our prayers were most thankful..." She drew her gaze across her audience. "...and continue to bear gratitude, I should believe."

"Yes, there are those who learn to seek their fate, in spite of all they do not see yet are meant to someday know. This future is desired with open spirits and hungry minds; they thrive in love and experience, desire and purpose--and this, Children, is the truest gift we may enjoy while among the living..."

Beneath a blanket of tied scraps, scented with marlai essence, the two lay entwined, their bodies sated and cooling to their desired warmth. On the bed table, a few candles steadily burned. There was no breeze to make them flicker, but their scent had combined with the others in the room, a rustic scent, even though they had been replicated.

In the living space just outside the sleeping area, a floorcloth had been laid before the coffee table.

The latter made an adequate shelf, they thought, for condiments and other items. They had moved the furniture again after returning from their dinner and sent the unnecessary pieces to a storage space. That moon's meal and painting had been greatly enjoyed; however, it had done little to wear down those still new bodies. They had agreed they needed to do more to tire themselves for the day.

Harry had suggested the holodeck for some "outdoor" exercise when they mentioned it, and upon that advice, they reserved a block of time for three days from then. They had yet to choose a locale, however.

Not that they minded their usual route to expending their remaining energy.

On the floorcloth lay stacks of reconfigured PADDs and a tablet of paper with scribbled designs and Desalian calculations upon it. Some of it included copies of the Barrier research projects Havetsi had continued for them and included among her letters for future consideration; the remainder was of their own creation for Voyager and for future use as well. But the latter indeed was for later. Having gravitated into speaking of each other again, they had decided to save the mass for the morning, when they would start yet another day.

They were curious to see the space Harry had found. Kathryn was to come for breakfast, also, to discuss with them their projects personally and in more detail. They planned for that--and to ask if the captain might procure quarters with a viewport. It was a selfish little thing, and yet they did crave a view, felt a bit trapped without one.

The next evening, if nothing interceded, they would take Chakotay and Kes for dinner and talk. When saying their farewells that night in the messhall, the commander had at last remembered to query about their spiritual journeys and their memories. In turn, Ara asked about Chakotay's spiritual quests. Hearing the topic, Kes showed her interest, too, and so Chakotay suggested they make a night of it. Ara and Anai gladly offered to be the hosts.

They felt a particular need to invite them, in fact, and to share their beings as they knew each other to be, a part of their daily scholarly life they certainly did not wish to hide away among those people. Also, they were curious about the commander's practice. They had only a dim, embarrassingly negative memory of Anai's experience with it as a child--not nearly a useful assessment.

In the turbolift, Anai had also promised to finally teach her very old friend how to write his name in the proper way. Ara wondered aloud if she would use the Cezian dialect, earning Chakotay's unsure laugh but a genuine bid of goodnight to them both when the doors opened.

They shifted their legs. Her fingers explored his strong back as she snuggled herself against his chest. He caressed her hair, nuzzling her hairline to kiss her brow.

On a table by the entrance to the quarters sat several data files they had "borrowed" from the collection given to the captain. They still planned to give the appropriate files to Susan and Kurt *after* telling them themselves, however.

They had a feeling they would be restoring a few of their friends' memories someday. Not everything, and perhaps only a journey with her would do it, but Anai suspected that Susan might indeed need the service. It was yet to be, but they could see it happening.

His lips moved to the soft of her temple as he breathed the scent of her hair. She pressed into it, rubbed the arch of her foot on his calf. When he pulled away slightly, she looked up to accept his lips

upon hers, tenderly, several times more until they naturally parted. Then she burrowed her head into his neck again, felt his cheek rest upon her crown.

In the corner sat a pot Kes brought for them not long before they retired. She had planted some of the daknal sva seeds she had taken from the garden, and now wanted them to have it. Anai embraced her as Ara took it to a visible corner, making a mental note to get a proper lamp for its growth. After Kes said good night and left, Anai readjusted the climate and lighting controls to emulate a typical Desalian springtime.

They were anxious to see it develop, to train the vines and to smell the flowers that would bloom someday soon, perhaps make a proper nectar balm. With the proper care--which they knew how to give--it could grow, even there. For the mean time, it was just a flat of dirt. Yet all earth-bound seeds grew from such a unappealing sight. It only required care, time and perhaps prayer to the spirits that it might thrive.

They had made many gardens grow in such a fashion. With fate's blessing, they would tend them again in peace. They required only patience.

She sighed. Her eyes were still open. His were too.

Their bodies were finally sated but their minds had decided to wake again. This was not uncommon. They had always been like that.

They would sleep eventually, they knew, just as the day would come eventually, and then another night, perhaps more easily than the one before. Perhaps not.

It was their time to be had and anything was possible.

They had hope.

"Two of these such blessed lives shall be painted this moon, my beloved family, for Desalia and for our future. There was one, born on a faraway place called Earth, and another, not two years later, was brought to life nearby on the planet called Kessik. There was where their adventure, unbeknownst to them, began and where it shall, with the spirits' blessing, continue, before we are called by fate to meet again. Yet at present, let us speak of what is known."

After her quiet introduction, Bana'i of Desal paused.

The torchlight flickered beneath the violet night sky, and Bana'i gave Tasila's hand, resting warm upon her thigh, a light squeeze. As a breeze shifted through, warm and sweet with daknal sva, she pulled aside an errant scarf and smiled gently at her family.

As always, the family, young and old alike, had gathered in the garden, relaxed yet attentive, pleased to have a painting of the former regents that moon. Equally glad to relate it, she was yet new to the telling, which her blessed mother had always so faithfully painted all the years Bana'i had been among the living.

Clearly, she recalled how, during her girlhood, she would crawl into her bed with dreams of her blessed

ancestors and their full and amazing lives. Her nali's words were so clear in her ears, coloring their every detail within her spirit, even during their greatest challenges. She came to know their every moment and, as so many others, had always been inspired by them. Somehow, recalling them and taking their lessons into action did a great deal in pressing her forward, strengthening her resolve through school, the novitiate, her bonding, scholarship and motherhood.

Of course, it had always been the way to follow the lessons of one's ancestors, but these ancestors were truly a part of her being as well as her blood.

So now it was Bana'i's turn to bear that inspiration, or so insisted her parents, elder regents well worn by their sun's business. Her mother's anxious rechecks of the Barrier's sub-radionic modulators, which effectively equalized the temporal variance caused by the subspace inversions within Irlae's faithfully dangerous plasma field, had taken up five full days and nights after its activation--not to mention the bulk of her scholarship and both her and Cera's regency. Simply, Havetsi was too fatigued to tell the tale that evening and Cera was all too sympathetic.

For that matter, it was well time that Bana'i spoke the tale the family had clamored for of late. It was no secret that she had an expressive, melodic voice, and had taken to the ancestor's lives, among others, in her scholarship and trade. Still it truly was her honor to speak on her line, to bring forth the words first painted in full but fifty-one ralkle past on that same dais, in that warmly scented garden, filled with the blessed love and curiosity of the elders' own.

Even in times of change and growth, Bana'i mused, how strange and beautiful it was that there was yet such continuance.

Such was the way. A good balance.

So, calling into her memory the roots of her subjects, those blessed elders whose lives had been so honored among all Desal and Irlae, her smile grew fonder still as she touched her temple, held it out to her family and whispered, "Zha hevrre..."

(fin)

Acceptance **

"You must know, however, this shall not please her."

Janeway gave him a look.

The tableau on the floor was poetic in its way, one figure motionless, feet bare and uniform tunic removed, her short, chestnut curls spread out around her head. The other, smaller, thinner, loomed above, her legs spread gracefully out from the hem of her long coat, leaning on an elbow across the other's waist as she held the other's hand. Her expression showed a state of utter concentration; like the rest of her, her bright hazel eyes did not divert, and she hardly blinked in the minutes--fifteen, thirty, forty-five and counting--that passed.

"How much longer will this take?" Janeway asked.

"As long as is necessary," Ara answered simply.

They had expected it eventually.

There had been difficulties since they had been brought upon the Voyager; from the first conversation with her upon her resuscitation in sickbay, they knew Susan would require more care than Kurt would. Two years and six more attempts to correct the errors in the resequencing protocols, and most of the crew were surprised Susan had continued to request the procedure. Anai and Ara were not, of course. They understood why the now youthful woman would not want to carry the one thing Susik Kichyrn could never let go, particularly when she did not feel like it belonged to her. Susik had not wanted her young, ignorant self to bear it, either, if she must live.

Susan had taken a lover, Alec. They had dated before the incident in the nebula. They mingled casually soon after Voyager's misfortune had made many of the career Starfleet wonder about the use of staying single. They had a good time, slept together once. Then the Starfleet schedule resumed, and their concentration reverted to the work they depended on and knew above all other things. Not long after her recovery in Sickbay two years ago, however, and after some advances on Alec's part, Susan began to reevaluate her priorities.

"I'd lived this life," she told her captain a few months after they had left Irlae, when asked how she was handling things, "in a place I've never seen. I had everything I never thought I could have, and in a much worse situation at first." She soon realized that she had those things because she *decided* to have them--decided not to deny herself some diversions because of war or oppression or hopelessness.

"And look what I got for it," she said another time.

She remembered the husband. She could hear his voice swimming in her mind. She swore some nights that she could feel his hands caressing her skin, his lips caressing her shoulder, his body sliding against hers, warm, soft... She woke from such erotic dreams she'd never had before, and barely knew how to handle. He invaded her daytime, too. She could hear him whispering in her ear, laughing, suggesting... Did Susik Kichyrn feel the same throughout her life? Was she invaded by his memory so? Was that why she never married the man who did remain?

"Why don't I remember him?" she complained to Anai. "You say this Gatra was my partner for sixty-something years, and I remember a man I had less than four?"

Anai smiled gently at the dark-haired girl on the other side of her floorcloth. "It was said among us that Aldrun was your spirit's partner," she explained. "Such a bond knows no time. Though you professed no belief, you had maintained your husband's place accordingly. Gatra understood this and felt no pain for it."

Susan didn't bother to try to understand. The more she learned about Desalians, the less she understood. Knowing she'd lived part time among them for the remainder of her lifetime and even had a child who had embraced that culture was confusing enough. Knowing she was mother to an entire house--two houses on two worlds, in fact... But she tried not to go there. That was too much. Even when Anai began to relate the particulars of her life after the war she'd wisely stayed out of, Susan told her to stop.

"Leave the past where it is," she said. "I know enough." The dead husband and forgotten mate were as much as she could handle. But she did see that she'd gained strength through her experiences in that place, had learned to be decisive for her personal good. She'd built a life from nothing and had been for the most part satisfied, according to Anai.

She could manage that again, she figured. So, she accepted Alec's offer when they met in the holodeck and got to talking. Naturally, it turned to what had happened to her on that bizarre away mission. He had been at the Allanois' house when Anai had told the "word paintings" and had intently followed Susan's history there, her change from a signed-for-life Starfleet officer to Antral mother and data liaison.

"That's not the person I'm asking out, though," he smiled. She smiled back. They were lovers within the month, comfortably working dates and dinner into their schedules. He was so self-assured and interesting, so good to see after a long shift above diagnostics determined to thwart her every wit, Susan wondered why she had stopped dating him before.

The third time they had sex, pressed together in kisses and touches, their heat fully met and readily stoking, the words began to flow from her lips. "Eald huilid megei, Alec; sincjablid ea osci fi..."

He slowed then stopped, staring at her. Her smile had not faded; her hands still moved over him. She did not realize what she'd said. Seeing this, Alec stroked her hair, kissed her again. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," she answered, a little perplexed at his question, but desirous enough to continue that she made

certain he did, and in way she knew would please them most readily. She knew many ways about that. It was second nature to her.

It was beyond anything Alec had ever experienced.

The next morning, he told her about the language slip; then, in a roundabout way, he asked about their very interesting lovemaking. He had to ask, as his limbs were still trembling five hours later. Her dumb gaze melted into embarrassment then indignation as she, too, realized what had happened.

"Why the hell didn't you stop me?" she demanded.

His first response stuck in his throat. Finally, he managed, "I don't know. It was the moment."

"It was that good, hmm?"

He met her cold query with the truth. "Yes, it was." He took her hands. "But I didn't think it wasn't you, Sue, not until I could think about it again. And even then, I still think it was you."

"It doesn't sound like it. It...it couldn't have been."

"Do you remember it, though? What we did last night?"

Taking a moment to think, and indeed recall, she slowly nodded. "I do." She stared at him. "It was me, wasn't it? But...not me now."

Shaken and pale, she was in sickbay ten minutes later, asking the Doctor to scan her. He reminded her that her neurology had been altered, but not replaced. Especially as it was happening already, she would likely always have shadows of her past crawl up upon her.

"Shove them down again," she coolly replied.

He complied--repeatedly. After a few months, the neuro-pathways reverted, and he resequenced them again. After the third time, Susan left a standing order for the Doctor to repeat the procedure when he saw fit.

Alec insisted on being there for her, even when she, embarrassed by her increasingly unpredictable behavior, tried to ward him off.

Ara grinned at Susan when she admitted to her weak attempts. Setting the last constrictor pin into the subspace field generator he and his bondmate had begun to construct, he told her, "Men have long been attracted to your need, Susan. It is not what retains them, yet it draws them closely to you. Allow this to be. It is but your nature, and Alec is a good man."

"More fatherly advice?" Susan asked sardonically.

"Ka, and good advice as well."

She did not credit him for her decision, but she did accept Alec's support.

A year later, the generator was ready. Voyager now searched for a fissure or eddy that would allow them easier access to a subspace layer. The new field generator would encircle Voyager and protect its passage on that greatly shortened journey. Excited by their hope, many of the crew had put every ounce

of their spare time into the project Anai and Ara worked nonstop on. Susan was among them: running analyses, testing parameters, learning everything the elders were willing and able to teach, and looking for that subspace eddy.

Then it happened again.

"I have the data, Joe," Susan said from her station, her fingers still flying over the LEDs.

"Great. Transmit the numbers to Vorik and we can start on the backups."

"Meda," Susan answered.

Carey looked over at her, and then quietly tapped a note in to the Doctor, as they had been requested to when she slipped like that. "Meda," he had learned, was Antral for "now"--their equivalent of, "Yes, sir." So, at least she was still in the room. The last time she had a big problem, she wasn't quite so much.

"How's it looking, Susan?" he asked purposefully.

"Doku laru si blejidri," Susan told him. "Vorik, saru kradrulla ea fadu nasorl..."

On she continued, increasingly to herself as she continued her job. Watching the numbers transmitted to his console become less intelligible, Carey closed out her station and contacted the Doctor.

The EMH hummed to himself then said, "I'll prepare the chamber and send Anai. I believe she's still on deck eleven."

The numbers made absolutely no sense by then, and Susan had wandered away from her station, talking quietly to herself and waving her hands around in typically Antral gestures. Carey followed her as much as he could without losing sight of the entrance. He waved away the other crew, who knew what was happening but couldn't help their curiosity. Though Engineering was the last place one went for privacy, the woman deserved a little dignity. Even so, he knew what a disruption it was becoming.

"I can't keep having this happen," he said to himself. He was a patient man, but he'd have to speak to the captain about Nicoletti's position there. Maybe if she worked with Anai and Ara on a full-time basis, they could keep a better eye on her, too.

Just as he'd thought of them, one half of Voyager's Desalian complement strode into Engineering, her coat swishing against her shins, the loose parts of her long, scarved hair swinging in counter-rhythm. Soon, her intent gaze met his, asking with a glance then finding her old friend, such as she was. "My thanks, Joe. I shall care for her now."

"Can I ask you something?" Carey queried. "Is this always going to happen?"

"This cannot be answered," Anai replied. "Your forgiveness for its inconvenience to you, yet this matter is not for me to control." Patting his arm, Anai, moved forward and approached the lady who tapped possibly every wrong button on the panel before her and answered her own questions. Looking at a nearby crewman, a nod told her the panel had been deactivated. Anai touched Susan's shoulder. "You remain quite busy, good lady."

Susan looked over. "Anai," she smiled. Her inflection was Antral.

Anai motioned to a bench near an access hatch. "May I meet with you?"

"Is there trouble, my friend?"

Anai blinked, drew a slow breath then led the woman to the bench to sit. "This shall sound odd, yet it must be asked: Where are we?"

Susan laughed. "What are you talking about, where are we?"

"Indulge me, good lady. What are we about just now?"

"We work in the gylav catacombs, of course, retrieving the Antral ministerial records this day. Why must you ask?" She turned her gaze askance. "What has Novren been up to this time?"

Anai blinked again, placing Susan's words, and knowing a moment later when it had been said--five years past the war's end. Susik Kichyrn mined for those records for several years while still living full time on Antral. When she brought them back to the capital city and successfully restored them to the systems she had a large hand in rebuilding, she was celebrated as a heroine of the people, the Kichyrn family being named as Most Honorable. For her daughter and family's sake, Susik accepted every accolade, but she did so knowing she was also covering up a good deal of personal mischief on Novren Pridalar's part. The easily instated Antral High Commissioner was efficient and strong and quickly brought his people together, but peace bored him. He made up for it with gallivanting the bars and brothels, much to Susik Kichyrn's disgust.

"I bring no news of him," Anai calmly replied. Taking her friend's hand, she stroked her youthful skin and let her gaze penetrate Susan's dark blue eyes. "Would you walk with me?"

Susan shook her head. "I cannot. I am only in the first cluster and should not stop until I have at least a third. Return at evening meal and I can promise you an entire dinner at the house."

Anai let a few moments pass, and then said, "Bear you recollection of some years past, when we discussed what would be done when the Voyager brought itself?"

Susan furrowed her brow. "Yes. What has that to do with the catacombs?"

Anai stroked her hand again. "Susik, we do not sit in the catacombs," she told her softly. "We do not sit upon Desal. Voyager brought itself, and the resequencing was committed to."

Susan stared long at the regent before her, examining her face, her hair and her hands. She saw the woman she knew. Looking out, the white bedrock corridors and computer niches still surrounded her. Scholars, mostly young, a few elders, all happily about their work, passed by with simple greetings, light bows. Looking back into Anai's steady stare, confusion began to rise into her expression. "I do not understand."

"Susik, you are upon Voyager, in Engineering, and your memories have overtaken you once again. Your mind projects your past, not your reality. The resequencing must be repeated."

"Repeated?"

"There have been six attempts. They all enjoyed only temporary success."

Susan paused. The echoes continued unabated, her vision did not shift with a blink. No, she was

there. It had to be a joke, a trick...though Anai would never do such a thing. It was not in her nature to. Even Ara would not jest about such a matter. But how could it be true? How could her eyes lie so readily to her?

"How is she?" came a voice down the corridor.

Susan looked to see who it was. Craning her head, she saw a novitiate speaking quietly to Miztri. "But what is she doing here? I thought she and Dalra were at the Ivlisan capital silag dedication."

Anai looked back and reached up to touch Susan's temple. Feeling the energy there, Anai blinked slowly. "Look again, my friend."

Susan started back that time as the soft white robes and yellow-green coat transformed into the black and red of a crisp Starfleet uniform. Long, light auburn braids with streaks of grey deepened, dwindled then reappeared pinned atop the head of Captain Janeway. As the woman approached, Susan shuddered. "You...you do not belong here. You wait outside the Barrier."

Janeway sighed through a smile she held with great effort. "Not anymore, Lieutenant."

The catacombs began to melt away, white to blue, black and steel, robes to tunics, filtered sun to generated light. Susan sat very still as it happened; only her eyes darted as she felt reality crawl around and about her, and then upon her very skin when her clothing shifted from thick, burgundy jossa to black synthetic. She felt hot. Her skull pounded a few times then settled into a mild headache. Only when she saw the kraja-marked hand fall from her temple and reclaim her fingers did she realize that Anai had brought her there.

Susan slumped. "The resequencing failed."

"Ka."

"Kurt?"

"He has fared well, has suffered no complications."

Susan snorted. "Yes. He would." She drew a deep breath. "I suppose I must decide what to do. Apparently, I have chosen to continue trying this procedure."

"Ka, one the Doctor, Ara and I have improved; however it is not perfected."

"I know why I want it." Looking at Anai, and then Janeway, Susan raised her chin in defiance of the captain's curious expression. "I do not want to live like this."

"And if there's no alternative?" Janeway asked.

"I assure you, Captain Janeway," Susan replied, straightening her back as well, "there is always an alternative."

The captain raised her brow at the firmness of the young woman's tone, but she offered no response.

Anai stood, leading the woman to stand by her. "Let us take ourselves, then."

Susan went without hesitation.

Outside the doors to Sickbay, she looked up and saw a tall, handsome man in a black and blue uniform waiting for them. As they approached, he pushed himself off the bulkhead and planted his feet, obviously prepared to resist whatever he believed she would say to him. Turning her fingers at him before he could speak, Susan stared up into his clear blue eyes. The man was just old enough to be her great grandchild, but she felt her heart beat at that contact.

She had been living a life there that time. Even without the memories, Susan was changed.

"Indeed, there is always an alternative," she quietly reiterated then touched his hand.

Three hours later, Alec still sat at the console next to Kes, watching the monitors with an occasional glance at the patient and the scholar on the floor. His department was astrophysics, but over the past couple of years, he'd been getting a crash course in neurology. What they witnessed that time, however, was well beyond neurological manipulation. The monitors spoke a foreign language to them now.

The Doctor stood aside. He could do nothing at that point but occasionally wave a tricorder at Anai and Susan then try to analyze what it picked up. And wait.

Kathryn Janeway returned a second time to check on the progress. Striding through the doors in her usual fashion, she went straight to the one person who might give her an answer. But Ara, who continued to watch without distraction, could only sense his bondmate's progress, not articulate it. "No translation would adequately express what is felt," he told her without affect. "You must know, however, this shall not please her."

"How much longer will this take?"

"As long as is necessary."

"And this time she'll be stable?"

"Nature tends to be, as has been our own stern lesson."

Taken by the turn of his tone, Janeway peered at him again. "You sound disappointed, Ara."

"Age merely bears upon me just now," Ara replied. "Our fate has been long accepted, Kathri, yet do not assume that life here indulges our conscience. Never assume we would not desire to be amongst our own again someday, and pass upon Cezia, as had been our childhood expectation."

That was news to the captain. "You would go back?"

Ara's lips turned up, but he said no more on it. Instead, he nodded toward the floor. "Her conscience was meant to bear upon her, as well, it would seem."

At that moment, Anai raised herself to a hand then sat up. Ara immediately lowered himself by her and touched her temple. Their eyes met, and then reflected... Ara moved back to kneel as Anai finally disengaged her contact with the woman below her. Looking up at the captain, she smiled briefly and nodded with a blink. Janeway's shoulders relaxed, but she still waited.

Anai motioned her welcome to the Doctor, who immediately came down to examine his patient. "Her readings have all returned to normal," he said with pleasure. "She is regaining consciousness."

Indeed, within a few more seconds, her eyes opened and she drew a deep breath. It took her a

moment to realize where she was and why she was on the floor. But upon the completion of the telepathic procedure, Anai had been careful to update and warn her. The Desalian knew her dear friend's temperament all too well.

"Only take care when first you look at your hands," Anai added and waved at the other man waiting.

Alec came to her then, kneeling with a supportive grin and wondering eyes. She wondered, too--wondered how he would handle their relationship from there, with her as she was. He seemed to want to remain with her despite anything she might say--or be. But then, as Ara often liked to point out, they always did.

"I regret this already," Susik whispered, but sighed a little smile onto her face as she allowed Alec to help her to sit.

(fin, 2)

Index I: Days & Numbers

Nine Days in a Desalian Week listed on top--and Desalian numbers up to 27 (However, Desal uses a duodecimal system of computation--base 12, as opposed to our base 10 system)

Rakrau	Brejra	Ninjen	Kibren	Nralkra	Darrou	F'hajen	Malishch	Tsi'omad
1. kle	2. eta	3. kle'eta	4. eta'a	5. eta'yt	6. kleta'a	7. ka'akle	8. a'etak	9. yta'ete
10. yta'e	11. ytaklete	12. a'ave	13. alkteta	14. ebeta'a	15. a'eta'yt	16. alkleta'a	17. akle'eta	18. ala'etak
19. a'ytakete	20. ayta'e	21. aytaklete	22. eti'ave	23. eta'ave	24. kle'etave	25. ta'ave	26. aytave	27. latave

Index II: Pronunciations

For the sake of consistency, I jotted down particular pronunciations for the Desalian words used in the story. Below is listed how I'd "heard" some basic sounds, and played them back to myself.

Letter	Pronunciation	Example
a	always pronounced "ah" as in <i>father</i>	Bakali (bah-kah`-lee) Anai (ah`-nah-ee)
e	always pronounced "ay" as in <i>bay</i>	Desalia (day-sah-lee`-ah) Cezia (say-zee'-ah)
i	always pronounced "ee" as in <i>see</i>	Ivlisa (eev`-lee-sah) Azallis (ah-zah-llees`)
o	always pronounced "oa" as in <i>oat</i> ; is always a long sounded vowel	Toma (toa`-mah)
u	always pronounced "oo" as the O in <i>pool</i> --the U is pronounced deep in the back of the throat	Uillar (oo-ee`-llahr)
y	always pronounced short, hard "y" as in <i>yoke</i>	Hychar (Hye-chahr`) Gychak (Gye`-tchak) <i>note: These are Unar names, but the pronunciation is Desalian</i>
c	when first letter of word, always pronounced "ts" as in <i>cats</i>	Cera (tsay`-rah) Cali (tsah-lee`)
c	when in middle or at end of word, pronounced hard "s" as in <i>simple</i>	Mecrisop (mays-ree`-sop)
ch	always pronounced hard "tch" as in "scotch"	Chorsa (tchoar`-sah)
ts	soft "ts" sound as in <i>tzar</i>	Latsari (lah-tzah`-ree) I'eva tsa! (ee-hay`-vah tza)
s	always pronounced soft "s" as in <i>song</i>	M'ves (m-vays`) Desal (day-sahl`)
rr	hard "r"; rolled in the middle/front of the tongue	Zha hevrre (zhah hay`-vrray)
l	soft "l"; rounded on palette; formed with middle of tongue	Azltre (ahz`-l-ray) Bala (bah`-lah)
ll	hard "l"; rolled lightly on the back of the tongue	Lledri (llay`-drree)
tr	always pronounced with slight, soft rolling of the "r"	Aratra (ah`-rah-trrah)
**	the ' apostrophe between <i>vowels</i> aspirates the beginning of the following letter, and adds 1/2 syllable to the word It is a unique letter	Sashana'i (sah-sha`-nah-hee) Be'i (bay-hee`)

#'# the ' apostrophe between *consonants* (or a vowel and a consonant) adds a slight aspiration to the word (less common) P'llaja'i (peh-hlah`-jah-hee)

Note Vowels placed together *without* an apostrophe are pronounced with a slight break. They are not combined sounds (diphthongs) Allanois (ah-llah`-noa-ees)

Index III: Phrases, Words & Proper Names

a : to see; to watch; to examine; &c.

a'aght : spoon. Aside from the spoon, bread, or leaf, no other table utensils are used among the Desalians, as most food is wrapped or able to be picked up with the fingers. The spoon is used only for thick stews. Loose soups and broths are drunk directly from the bowl.

Ab : Be present; Come here

abrro : self; being; true person

Aga'i o'a? : What would be your calling? / What is your name?

Ajk Pirhar'ik mafrot : May Prihar burp on this dung pile. (Common Cezian curses involve Priharan actions.)

ak : to speak; to talk; to explain; to render, &c.

akarr tiras : word painter; teller of histories; historical scientist; official historian

Akosa'o : Day of telling and remembrance; unofficial and usually quickly planned holiday among Desal

al : to join; agree; complete; bring together; &c.

Aliche'o : Wait

Allanois: Last of the regents in power before the Unar occupation. The Allanois regency began with Mi'ejara's bonding with Sharana'i of the Allanois House. Their good policies were taken over by Da'ili (the blood regent) and her bondmate, M'hida, who assumed control of Desalian policy as time passed. Propriety in his first thirty years of rule was followed by a gradual degradation of values and judgment due to mental instability and Unar incursions elsewhere in Irliae. Their eldest son, Troka, followed M'hida's direction. He forced the bonding with Yusi, a girl forty years his junior and soon his greatest foe on Desalia. Twenty years later, they ascended to regent. He and the quietly rebellious Yusi ruled for ten years before the Unar conquered and occupied Desal, and was executed six months later. Yusi, who had fled Desal with her teenaged son during the struggle with Unar forces, was eventually captured and assigned to forced labor on Jotreb. She died soon after Troka's execution, but not before transferring the Allanois' legacy (the family line's collected memories) to Dulla. Eight years later and then living as a refugee in Sacezia, Dulla secretly trained in the Scholarship, began to covertly train others and encouraged scholars in hiding to do the same as best they could, starting the "spiritual scholarship" movement (see: *Scholarship*). Meanwhile, Dulla bonded with Aneschi. Only one of their four children, Lrrili, survived to maturity; but Lrrili, her bondmate, Sa'osha, and five of their six children all died before Lrrili was forty. Ten years later, Dulla's only surviving granddaughter, Sashana'i, became the next regent heiress at the age of sixteen when her then ailing grandparents passed the family legacy unto her. Sashana'i shared the title and the legacy with Aratra, originally of the Schi'achku House, when they, captured in a raid and sentenced without charge to forced labor on Uillar, were bonded three years later by fellow inmates and spirit scholars Miztri and Dalra of Maha'aje.

Antral : Star system in Irliae consisting of three inhabitable planets out of nine total, and seventy-one

moons. Fifth planet is home to the Antral civilization, who colonize four planets in "lower" Irliae.

arrellaros : a general public holiday, sometimes "decreed" on short notice

ashna'o : master teacher; properly, a trade teacher who is not a scholar, but loosely given as a term of endearment to scholars as well

Azallis : Once the cruiser used to carry Yusi of Desal, Allanois co-Regent, the five-decked ship was later recycled to be used in the resistance under the captaincy of Toma and Be'i of Azlre. In its original usage, the Azallis carried a crew of fifty-two.

ba'akull : an ancient and very popular game of quick wit and ability to answer problems with great speed, creativity and ability to interpret symbols. The questions range from technical and abstract to the ridiculous and common sense, in no particular order and asked at random by the audience of the game. Scored with triangle dice, the point is given for every twelfth correct answer, and the winner is the first one to score the twelfth point.

Berr Pinarr Iza Desh Irliae : More commonly, the Far Barrier Region. A region of Irliae space populated by at least seven technologically primitive or pre-warp civilizations. By tradition, the region was avoided for reasons of non-interference, unless a special grant was given for unobtrusive study. During the Unar occupation, three of the pre-warp Far Barrier civilizations had been invaded and used for minerals by the Togrechok sect. After the war, and a Koba delegation's assistance, one of the populations was slowly introduced into the larger Irliae society; the other two were left to continue to develop on their own. Commonly (especially among the Antral), naming a person to be from the Far Barrier Region was to call them simple and/or uncivilized.

Bihla and Sa'alli : "Man of the soil" and "Woman of the warm sea" are the mythical first lives of Desal. Born of a cosmic accident, their pure energy having met land, they discovered and came to desire growth of the regions they inhabited, he the land, and she the sea. Of their sincere asking, their wishes to build upon and diversify the world were granted by the stars who bore them. Upon meeting each other, they discovered the ultimate balance between their regions in procreation, and thus began to populate the product of their assisted creation. Upon their natural death however, their love of life had grown too excessive, and in their wishing for more life--a betrayal of the nature they were granted--Prihar was created, burning and swallowing those of untoward nature. To protect their children and descendents, however, Bihla and Sa'alli created among the stars a haven called Tsa'aita, where all spirits passed of their bodily life could live in eternity, humbled without physical life, but at peace in continuance.

Blurr'ke : This shall not be a bad thing

Brija : Star system in Irliae consisting of five planets and nineteen moons. The third planet is home to the Brijan civilization; two moons are also inhabitable. The Brijan have two colonies in the next star system.

brr : public; among others

Cezia : Second colony of Desal, first planet in its system with two moons. Once a popular holiday planet populated only in two small cities on its large, single continent (Sacezia and Azlre), it was used by the Unar during the occupation to store refugees from Desalia-Four, particularly the city of Desal, whose surviving inhabitants were delivered to Azlre. Eleven years after the Unar left the colony on its own, it became home to the Desalian resistance. Later, Cezia became known as a technological and educational

center, and yet remained well-known for its vast rural scenery.

chi : water

chisak : sugar substance extracted from the same tuberous fruit; best when eaten raw

daknal sva : richly fragrant, vining flower; may be coral or white-colored; used for decoration, cosmetics, perfumes and medicinal balm

de'ihhr : beads carved specifically for headscarves and men's ornaments--rounded, crystalline stones with inscriptions and other decorations carved into it

Desal : Translation: "one among/binding the community." Name of the capital of Desalia-Four; also the common name for the Desalian civilization, which consists of one home planet and five colonies within approximately four sectors of space, and seven non-colony planets around its perimeters.

Desalia : Star system in Irliae consisting of eight planets and thirty-three moons. The fourth planet is home to Desal and five moons. The seventh planet (Da'olle) is inhabitable but frozen, and a research facility. Two moons in the system are also inhabitable, but are not colonized.

Divtyada : mountain range on Maha'aje

Dluma : South

Dov? : Oh? You think? Really?

drask : Unar term generally meaning slave. Literal meaning: nothing

drichka server : a class of servants to Unar assigned to drink serving and whoredom

du'ave : Desalian general term for one sixteenth of the year, i.e., one month

etsames : bazaar; marketplace

ficha : Desalian unit of measurement; approximately 4 cm.

gask : wild dog

Gahahol : reported birthplace of Toma and Be'i of Azlre; a barren and difficult to reach planet in the outermost corner of Irliae.

ginhra : a soft, thick floorcloth trimmed and embroidered specifically for ceremonies, particularly weddings and child namings

Grivaban : The ship flown by Novren of Pridalar before and during the active resistance.

Grrikal shast yo'(a)(i) : Have obedience for your elders.

gruvnu : One Antral week, approximately 13 days.

gyakl : nothing; zero

gye : no; contrary; negative

Gye ak : Speak not; Be quiet

Gye'ali : Do not bother; Do not trouble yourself; Be still

hanek : midnight; night

harisde : leaf-wrapped sprouts

hevrra : way, meaning, destiny, nature's path. Used alone (Hevrra!), it is an expression of surprise at an irony or sincere shock or confusion. Its counterpart expression, "Havrra," is a general and positive term used more commonly on the Desalian homeworld.

hza : health; recovery; positive feeling

Hza Ye'(a)(i) : I shall be well; There is wellness

laskeb : Star system in Irliae consisting of eight planets and fifty moons. Third planet home to the laskeb civilization; fourth planet and two moons are also inhabitable. The laskeb have no outer colonies.

I'brrelo! : Attention, those around me! Claim attention! Listen!

I'i? : How is this? How are things? What is this?

I'eva tsa! : By the spirits!

Ivlisa : First and closest colony of Desal, third planet in its system with eight moons. Known for its relatively liberal and artistic population, fair weather, and research facilities.

Jihag : nebula

Jirra : East

joth : long-haired goat, herded for its milk and soft, abundant fur

ka : yes; agreed; positively

ka'ekle berr : astrometric projection reflecting the view from the seventh side of Irliae.

Ka'i warn ekorllul : I am only as stubborn as you are.

kibo : Antral currency

kin : active; sprightly; witty

kini'is(a)(i) : little spirit; sprightly one; wisp of a mind

Kin la (li) lerr a'a brris : He (She) has an active imagination in all matters.

Kivle : North

kli'ajea : thirty-sixth day; one half-season on Desalia

Koba : Star system in Irlloe consisting of four planets and twenty moons. Second planet is home to the Koba civilization.

Korchau : An ambassadorial transport ship before the war, this compact, three-decked cruiser was later rebuilt for the resistance and was captained by Aratra and Sashana'i of Cezia.

kraja : a painless skin pen, used to administer both temple and bonding markings; also refers to the ink, derived of the ta'ijakoh tree, which parts are used for a variety of medicines.

kubak : one Unar year

la : man

li : woman

lla : greet

Llatso'a : Fourth colony of Desal; sixth planet in its system with nine moons. Known for its long nights yet warm weather, its historical research facilities and spiritual centers.

llul : unmoved; stubborn; willful

Maha'aje : Fifth colony of Desal, fourth planet in its system with five moons. Known for its vast rainforests and temperate weather, and its relatively traditional, yet naturalistic population.

marlai : a thick citrus flower and oil essence used in Desalian bathing ceremonies, as when a youth is consecrated into the novitiate; a medicinal balm used to promote relaxation.

Mecrisop : mountain range west of Azlre

Merraj : In its original use, the five-decked scientific ship was used to explore the Barrier. Reconstructed for use by the resistance, the Merraj was captained by Miztri of Maha'aje.

mes va'(a)(i) : my love; my beloved

mesvl(a)(i) : lover, committed intimate partner

mial : goat cheese

mivrret : volume equalling approximately 8 litres

monr : raise; bring up; grow; &c.

M'ves ye'(a)(i) : You are loved by me

na : male child, boy

nahol : matter measurement

nai : future; expected; desired; hoped for; &c.

nali : mother; grandmother; spirit-mother; elder-mother

navna : brother

nes : moon

ni : female child; girl

nido'ev : a greenish; sweet and starchy tuber; comparable to a yam

nivni : sister

oarr : stop; cease; end

Oarrgask asri'im! : Stop fighting like gasks

pah'nad : Surgical antibiotics which are replicatable but are composed of several curatives native to Desalia.

petra'a : one Desalian minute

prichava : keeper of the temple, spiritual guide and meditational teacher

Prihar : Literally: Fire keeper. The same of the Desalian entity embodying spiritual negativity, selfishness, greed, violence, corruption, &c. An equivalent devil, Prihar is yet a product of the blessed entities Bihla and Sa'alli, initiators of life. Prihar is a force to be avoided, and yet is accepted as a balance of nature. The power of Prihar's stain upon a spirit, however, varies depending on either traditionalist or exegetic spirituality, among others.

ra : star

rab : dawn; daybreak

rachal : one Desalian hour, that equivalent standard on Desalia but practically adjusted for each colony.

rai : sun

rallkle : one Desalian year

rapol : power measurement equivalent to a megajule

re : daytime

rehaj ce'i : to have made a thing as clear as the day sky

Rellisch : Until daytime; Until tomorrow

rigyid : downward; move down; kneel

Rritskara Tsaborr: The High Star Gathering holiday--a harvest tsaborr celebrated among Desal's agricultural populations, in which the spirits are shown their children's life-giving food and creative labors, and thanked for their many blessings in making it all. It the largest tsaborr preceding the Ancestors' Moon (new year), which takes place at the end of the next season.

Rosp llehaj: Fair afternoon's regards! (Casual Cezian parting remark)

Rywalok : A large Unar cruiser, it was the first ship to be destroyed by the resistance in Irliae's war against Unar.

Saha'aten : Third colony of Desal, fifth planet in its system with three moons. Known for its cool sun, vast waters, diverse wildlife and dotted town centers. All of Saha'aten's ten planets are mineral/chemical-rich.

Sha'ot Zi'ihar : The anterior Cezian asteroid field, a natural barrier of the Cezian system on the inside border of Desalian territory.

Scholarship : General translation for **Ti'atsavi Ziri'oj**, the body of the learned among Desal. Scholars represent the gross of knowledge for their chosen trade, are ministers of Desal's spiritual practices and traditions, the collection of "histories," and together alongside the regency and local elders are responsible for the everyday governing of the people of Desal. Training begins at 14-15 years of age, with preparatory coursework and psycho-spiritual testing and disciplines. In normal circumstances, novitiates dedicate themselves to a life of service, spiritual governance and teaching between the ages of 17 and 20, giving up their name of birth, taking on the white scarves and robes of the scholarship, and opening their minds completely to the spirits, both passed and present. Training requires approximately five to seven years, depending on the trade and the satisfactory performance of the novitiate. There is no failure once one has committed themselves to the Scholarship. Those who do not "graduate" usually become specialized historians or catacomb scholars (these trades are chosen upon entry, too). During the occupation, through the encouragement of Dulla and like-minded scholars intent on preserving Desal's spiritual traditions throughout their fractured and oppressed society, scholars were quickly trained and "graduated" without the trade training, i.e., with spiritual discipline only being taught, which left these "spirit scholars" able to perform bondings, teach kraja practices to prospective parents, collect, share and archive memories, and teach their scholarship to others. Through this underground practice, there were over two million spirit scholars at the start of the liberation, though these numbers were not realized until a couple of years after the end of the war.

Shricha Regency : The regency in power before the Allanois

sibra : a nutritious herbal coral-colored fruit; used in many curative bases for its sweetness, but can be consumed; the oils are commonly extracted for a cosmetic balm.

silag : temple of prayer, learning, meditation and scholarship; designated place of novitiate meditational training and oaths of service to the scholarship. The first silag was dedicated in the Mashij Regency.

sirril : a red, oblong fruit similar to both the pear and guava, very sweet and a quick stimulant; a sweet

wine popular on Desalia

spon : crystalline ferranide, simple and common power source used in basic Desalian components

Suresha : Star system in Irliae consisting of twelve planets and one hundred and two moons. The second planet is home to the Sureshan civilization, who colonize three of the four inhabitable planets in their system, two moons, and one planet outside their home system.

ta : strength; power; ability

Tb'rass : On Desalia, one cycle of the first moon; approximately 22 days

Techam : West

teshalla : uncle; elder male cousin or relative

"Thall'rrab a'i Mashirr" : Erotic adventure novel written shortly before the Unar takeover of Desalia. Its genre was very popular before the Unar invasion.

ti : to make; made; to create; created; &c.

Ti'al ya'a : Oneness has brought itself into me ; I am prepared, I am ready, &c.

Tirmonre'ir! : Make yourself of daytime!

tisalu : Unar wine extracted from an orange-colored tree fruit; taken before daily cleansing ceremony

tola : father; grandfather; spirit-father; elder father

tra : dark; depth

tracha : dark, flavored water similar to coffee, made of the hichap berry, a common plant of the river lands of Desalia which was transplanted to most Desalian worlds

tsa : spirit; being; inner life; &c.

Tsa'aitsa : Literally, "spirits unto new spirits"--a place among the stars created by Bihla and Sa'alli, where the spirits of the passed remain in peace and without time amongst each other until they may be called to be among the living once more. I.e., heaven.

tsaborr : spiritual holiday (as opposed to arrellaros, the general holiday)

Tsid ka'e : The spirits would have agreement; Why, yes

tsu : awareness; deep knowledge; instinct

tyimasho : a game of six-dimensional calculus. The question being two sets of parameters and equations to be figured mentally, it is answered with description of the player's newly created plane. From that plane, the game continues to the next level, of which the winner of the sixteenth round is the winner of the game. Scored with diamond beads, the game of skill was a practice among pre-novitiate science

students for two thousand years before it gained general popularity.

Uillar : Unclaimed territory system near Desalian space. The second planet is orbited by three moons; was a mineral trade station, but later became a mining and internment camp for Desalian prisoners during the Unar occupation. Known for its severe, desert weather, hazardous atmosphere and deep red sand.

Unar : Star system in Irlae consisting of three planets and five moons. First planet is home to the Unar civilization, who colonize four planets around the Gozhor Jihag.

urr(i)(a) : he/she shall not; he/she/this shall not be; he/she is not

Va/Vaa : Well; Let's see; Hmm; &c.

Vya! : A common exclamation, usually said when amused or pleasantly surprised.

warn : only; alone; barren; empty; &c.

wi : what is/are; who is/are (general interrogative)

Wisi'e(a)(i)? : What could/would this/he/she be?

Ye zal : agreed; me too; I as well

Ye'(a)(i) vhsjllai : I bow to you humbly (obedience usually given to an elder)

ye'o : we; us; together; each other; &c.

yeshalli : aunt, elder female cousin or relative

zha : good; blessed; pleasing; happy; &c.

Zha'aneK : Night's Blessing; Good evening

Zha hevrre : Blessed way; Blessed destiny; a common invocation of accepting blessings, thankfulness or of congratulations, depending on the event.

Zhai'brlla! : To this I give public hearing; I claim this in public. (This exclamation is made in both heralding news, broaching a topic for public presentation or to announce a debate. In any instance that it is used, it invokes silence among all in listening range, and commits the audience to bear witness to the proceedings, regardless of the locale.)

Zha lastnya!: Your goodness is welcome! (formal or polite greeting)

Zhall ye'(a)(i) : (I beg) Your benevolence to me; I apologize

Zharab llar! : Our good sun greets us; Good morning

Zha vrra a'i tsa volparej yi : In good faith and in peace I see your soul by mine; I am glad to have your friendship

Zhets ye'e : Let it please us both; Let us agree on this

Zhra'(a)(i) ka : It pleases; Thank you

Zhras ye'e : It should be pleasing; Please

Zh'v(a)(i) : a general greeting common to Cezian natives, equivalent to "hi."

zi'ihar : asteroid field

Index IV: Songs (2)

There are traditional songs that celebrate every facet of Desalian life, sung openly in public with little restriction of topic or content. In many villages and classes, parents have a small song composed for each of their children as a gift at birth. All verses, however, are blank verse, with emphasis on the long, exaggerated vowel sounds and trills binding the lines together.

"Song of Goodbyes (Cezian Passing Song)"

Trichel me'al tsa molli'avid, co'a hanek ta moszhirr; O'a rab lla tsa.	In the end, the beloved join to celebrate the being within the body's midnight, our hearts beat but in memory for the light which greets the blessed spirit
Me'al tsa ka'e gyalche'o, co'a hanek ye'e i'ullma o'a rab lla tsa. Hevvre tsa'o zha ra	Free in belonging among all, we shall not be spurned within my own midnight, there shall be such a peace as this for that light which greets the spirit
Rrihad llos mihal tsa ras, gy'al monrill ye'e chira; O'a ll'ar ihr tsul rasv.	In the light of our spirit, eternity opens not of body, we are like water among the stars rising like fog made of sunrise on the bay
Va'o tsa gywarn gyo'arr, i'a hanek ye'e ti zhras; O'a ra tsa mirhid llos.	Never barren, our blessed beings may not be ceased and for this our truest moment is at midnight and the dawn opens upon our journeying spirits

Bonding Song

Ye'i tsa hanu a'a vadri llosch al al tsa va'a	Spirits borne of the midnight air, blow gently over the soil;
Va'i al tsa vadri llosch mes tsa a'ya'o Hanek tsa a'i brre bras mar'trell ini'ash Vyel trell anl chi a'i yrra eb rab	Make wide your seed over the earthen water, be warmed in the new dawning sun of life Spring roots to drive into the soil, fledgling tendrils penetrate the moist earth Drink from the ground well in loving nurturing
Inish alz shall a'o shos ach ma'shivarr Nicha chirr chamr e metir ebns lle Shymra anl achra nre vyel e'a trell zhrave'isb Pamedre trell monro shall mosyll dakna aj ysham rai Yrr ag'j a'i zhrre'itsa varj zha tam shi'ovarr rrullm mas	Spread over the dewy field as the seed yet grows in its welcoming bed Draw out the leafy branches, drive the roots, bear the fragrant flower to the sun Feed on the sun's warmth and love in exaltation of nature's blessing Here, await the calling, raise up as the swell, show your blossom's seed to the stars The wind blows petals across the grateful sea, and ebbing, burrows into the earth
Re'irr vyacha me'all e'a shivarr chij yrrall, dakna alm a'o falj llo ishll abllar	My mate, bring the stalk of your desire to my warm watery earth, and let the flower of our natures' bonding ripple through our blessed lands

Index V: Character List

2372 -- Present Timeline (Federation Standard Time)

Anai (ahn`-ah-ee)	Wife to Ara, matriarch of Allanois House, scholar of Azlre; Allanois Regent
Ara (ah-rrah`)	Husband to Ana'i, patriarch of Allanois house, scholar of Azlre; Allanois Regent
Babaki (bah-bah`-kee)	Daughter to Ara and Ana'i, wife to Osna, scholar of Desal
Beshelli (bay-tscheh`-llee)	Mother to Havetsi, mate of Koluba; daughter to Tramasas; archivist at the silag of East Desal
Brymare'i (brr-ye`-mah-ray-hee)	Catacomb scholar at Desal; overseer of the regents' archives and associated collections
Cera (tserr-ah`)	Husband to Havetsi, scholar of Desal; through Havetsi, heir to Allanois
Dilsi (deehl`-see)	Young niece in Allanois House
Gihora (Gee`-hoa-rah)	of Azlre, Cezia; grandson of Latsari and Bolmra; Ara and Anai's personal physician
Havetsi (hah-vay`-tsee)	Wife to Cera, co-captain of the Ki'ial, scholar of Desal; heiress to Allanois
Kolana (koh`-lah-nah)	Son to Ara and Ana'i, scholar of Desal, husband to Sisji
Kyori (k-yohr`-ee)	Daughter to Ara and Ana'i, scholar of Cezia, wife to Mallira
Mar'Ili (mahr-hllee`)	Daughter to Ara and Ana'i, prichava of the silag at Azlre, wife to Valno'a
Osna (oh`-s-nah)	Husband to Babaki, scholar of Desal, 8th Prime Minister of Desalia
Petalla (pay`-tahll-ah)	Son to Ara and Ana'i, scholar of Desal, husband to Nivrlli
Tramasas (trah`-mah-sah)	of Desal; scholar of Saha'aten; husband to Ke'iji; grandfather to Havetsi

111 to 101 years past -- Flashback Timeline (Federation Standard Time)

Desalians

Aprra (ah`-prrah)	of Ci'avass, Ivliasa; laundry manager at the house of Onruk
Aratra (a`-rah-trah)	of Cezia; husband to Sashana'i; Allanois Regent
Bakali (bah`-kah-lee)	of Desal and the Na'ihaj House; wife to Bala; scholar of Desal; elder of Azlre; healer
Bala (bah`-lah)	of Desal and the Na'ihaj House; husband to Bakali; scholar of Desal; elder of Azlre; teacher
Be'i (bay`-hee)	of Azlre, wife to Toma; co-captain of the Azallis

Ba'ela (bah-hay`-lah)	of Azlre, son to Be'i and Toma
Bolmra (bohl-mrah`)	Survivor of Uillar; husband to Latsari; Communications controller on the Azallis
Cali (tsah`-lee)	of Azlre; mother to Haviki
Chorsa (`tchoar-sah)	traditionalist at Azlre
Dalra (dahl`-rah)	of Maha'aje; husband to Miztri; intermediate scholar
Gatra (gah`-trrah)	of Ella'omb; mate to Susik
Gihetra (gee-hay`-trrah)	Survivor of Uillar; bondmate to J'vishi; captain of the Tebri'all; first prime minister of Desal
Haviki (hah-vee`-kee)	of Azlre; daughter to Cali and l'efa
Jabra (jhah`-brrah)	Survivor of Uillar; husband to Suoti
J'vishi (jh-hvee-schee`)	Survivor of Uillar; bondmate to Gihetra; technician aboard the Tebri'all
Kra'alba (krah-hal`-bah)	artist of Azlre
Latsari (lah`-tsarr-ee)	Survivor of Uillar; wife to Bolmra; Site Engineer on the Azallis
Lledri (llay`-dree)	of Sacezia and the Stija'a house; prichava of the Silag of Cezia
Me'ekra (mey-hey`-krrah)	Son to Miztri and Dalra
Miztri (meez`-trri)	of Maha'aje; wife to Dalra; intermediate scholar
Plicta (pleets`-tah)	Survivor of Uillar; Tactical Controller on the Azallis
P'llaja'i (p-hllah`-jha-hee)	Operations controller on the Azallis
Sashana'i (sah-shah`-na-hee)	of Cezia; wife to Aratra; Allanois Regent
Sollve'a (sohll-vey`-hah)	Survivor of Uillar
Suoti (soo-oh`-tee)	Survivor of Uillar; wife to Jabra, bonded at Uillar
Toma (toh`-mah)	of Azlre, survivor of Uillar; husband to Be'i; captain of the Azallis
Treshadi (tray`-shah-dee)	Word painter of Azlre
Y'dri (yee`-hdree)	Daughter to Miztri and Dalra; healer at Dajid
Zepra (zay`-prrah)	of Sacezia and the Mahor House; assistant to Lledri

Antral, Brijan, laskeb, Koba, and Sureshan

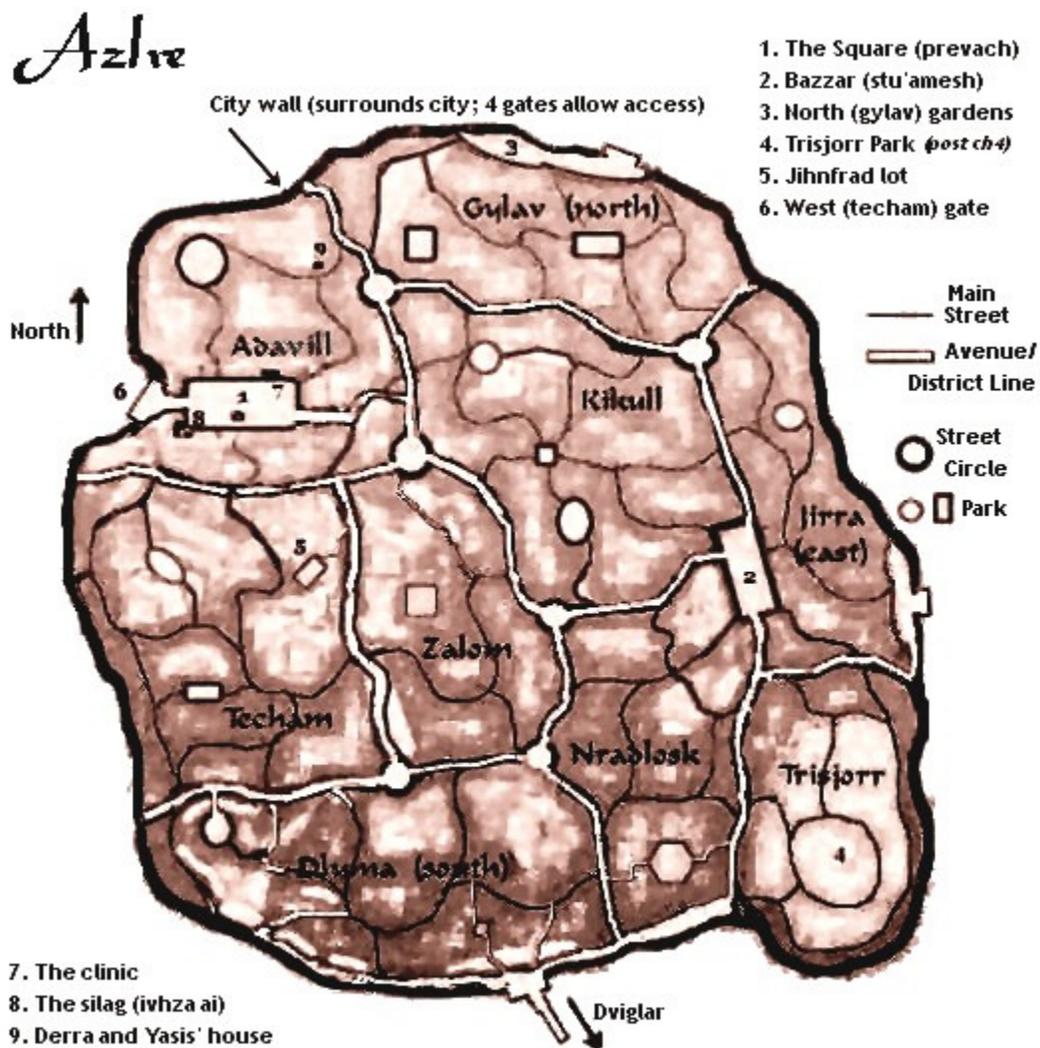
Acilg (ae-cihlg`)	laskeb Leader
Aldrun (ahl-drroon`)	of Kichyrn; husband to Susik
Eneprae (ay-nay-prah`-ay)	Brijan Leader
Kebis (kay`-bees)	of Kichyrn; widow; mother to Aldrun, aunt to Yasis
Kurt (Derra) (day`-rrah)	of Kichyrn; husband to Yasis
Marise (mahr-ee`-seh)	Daughter to Aldrun and Susik

Medrove (mah`-drohv-eh)	Sureshan Leader
Novren (noh`-vrrehn)	of Pridalar; Antral Leader
Padan (pah-dahn`)	Koba black marketer
Susik (soo`-szeek)	of Kichyrn; wife to Aldrun; later, mate to Gatra (not married)
Tridl (tree`-dehl)	of Hinad; Antral trader
Vabrimir (vah-brri`-mihr)	Koba Leader
Yasis (yah`-tsees)	of Kichyrn; wife to Derra

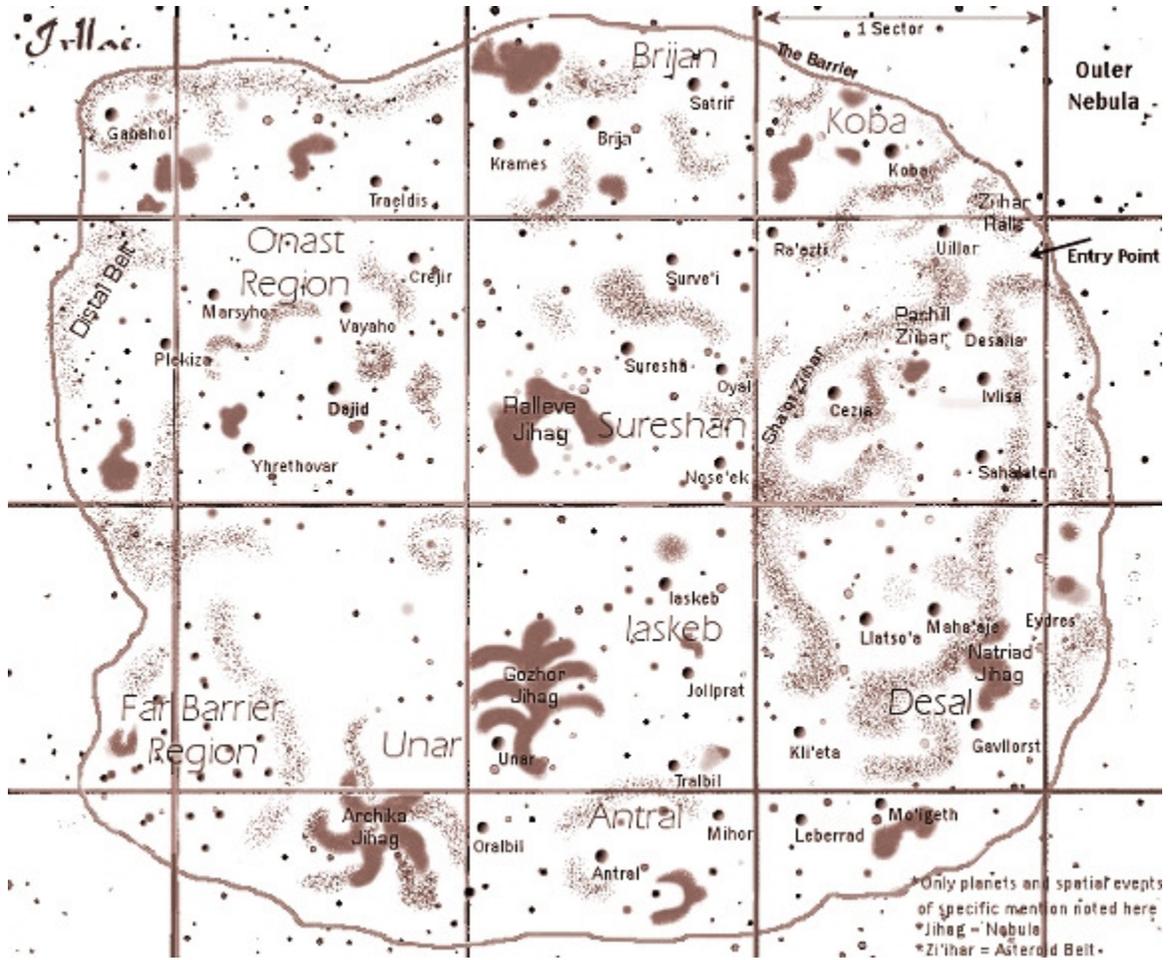
Unar

Frouwid (frroh`-ooh-wihd)	Unar house commander, Wisnnin Sect
Gychak (gyeh`-chahk)	Unar Line Officer, Kahseht and Wisnnin Sects; later, Prime Commander of the Wisnnin Sect
Hychar (hyeh-chahr`)	Unar commander, Kahseht Sect
Maghet (mahg`-heht)	Unar officer, Kahseht Sect
Ogakosb (oh`-gah-kohsb)	Unar commander, Pkusbajak Sect
Onruk (oohn`-rook)	Unar prime commander, Edreb Sect
Rejkisb (rej`-kehs-beh)	Gychak's wife
Tchutur (t-choo`-ter)	Gychak's son

Index VI: General Map of Azlre



Index VII: 2-D Map of Irlloe



Index VIII: Author Notes

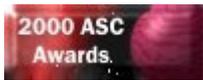
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Feedback is the only payment a fanfic writer can receive. Please feedback, notes or comments to: swiftian@yahoo.com

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The Word Painter, "Coda": Written February, 2007

Cover Image by Susan D., 1999.



1st Place, ASC Awards for Best P/T Story, 2000.

My everlasting thanks to my dedicated and uber-patient beta readers, Annie M. and Susan D., who faithfully bore through my drafts as I wrote them, and gave me worlds of advice I could not have finished without.

Star Trek and its characters belong to Paramount. "The Word Painter," its universe and the good citizens and worlds of Irliae belong to D'Alaire M.

* Quote from Richard Taylor, "Metaphysics." 4th Edition, 1992.

** WP Coda: After a Live Journal challenge: What happened [*] years later in [*] fanfic? Dr. Lense wanted to know what happened two years after WP ended. This was my answer.