



You know.

In the safety of the cell, the guard assured enough that the force fields were fine and therefore ran his diagnostics, Tom pulled the small square piece from his pocket. He might as well have been a galaxy away, but his conscience was clean. He'd done what he could, sacrificed everything he had left.

It'd be okay, he convinced himself. He'd done the right thing at the right time and got the message through to the other Maquis cell ship before Starfleet could catch up. She would probably hate him the rest of her life, but it seemed she had effectively shut him out for the time being anyway.

He didn't want to believe she had shut him out for good.

But thinking what she probably knew by then, he believed those doors, only slightly opened as they were, on his side as well, would never be opened to him again. Fine. The Liberty would be rescued, they'd be safe; she was safe, she was alive. He'd done what he could.

He studied her face, as if he never had. The soft lines of her brow, the tiny smirk on her full mouth, a mouth that had parted to his own, the way her hair curled over her temple, a cowlick he had passed with his fingers and he strew his fingers through her hair, burying it in its thickness. Her eyes, raven-like, strong, hurt, full of so many things, a vast amount he would never know, but longed to, especially then, when he knew she was unreachable.

The guard was at the forcefield--Tom suddenly noticed--phaser in hand. He realized quickly. "It's just a picture," he said. "Your scans would've picked up anything dangerous, right?"

He held up the square card and turned it for the guard to see, blank-faced, and was glad the man didn't ask to examine it. Left to himself again, Tom's eyes turned back to B'Elanna's.

Only that morning they had beamed aboard the Liberty, and in their captain's presence she had treated him like any other volunteer, praising everyone's effort on their job well done. There was shelter enough for twenty, if they packed it a little. Another trip, and they could build a depot. Chakotay was generous in his praise, even to him, and then she had walked quickly away, off to business, off to work. Tom didn't blame her that, knowing how she was, how she felt.

Even later, when Tom met her, she had evaded him, shot him a stare of desperate warning. Their time to themselves was over. Tom had let that go with the hope they'd get time away again.

And on the bridge, while he quibbled with their captain, Tom had changed his tune, though not too much, when he asked some information of her. Tom revealed nothing, but knew she would know his tone. Thought she would.

But her eyes were glass hard when she glanced his way.

Tom yet still hoped she hadn't changed with the locale, that somewhere beneath those dark

eyes she hadn't denied him from existence. She knew. Somehow, she couldn't deny him, had not denied the time they had together. She was scared; it was still new to her and too recently revived in him. He still hoped.

That was before the attack: before he saw B'Elanna sprawled out on the floor then halfway pulled onto the captain's knees, unmoving, bleeding.

Tom knew he was their only chance, her only chance. He'd left the Liberty with the intent on going back to her, tending to her and to hell with Chakotay's feelings about relationships. He'd even settle things with the captain to make it easier--on her peace of mind if for anything. He would get that time away and make her know his intentions. And after, he would make the most of his time on the Liberty. No more evasions and deceptions to keep people away from him, no more self-sabotage: It cost him too much to live fighting at every angle.

If B'Elanna Torres could open herself to him and see him, accept him, then he could try, too. What he'd done there was all so clear to him as he cruised away in search of the rescue team, planning his route back to her. He'd brought what trouble he had in the Maquis on himself. But he could correct all that. He knew he could. He wanted to.

But that wasn't meant to be. He knew it the instant the USS Bradbury opened a channel to him, demanded his purpose and closed in fast. Faced with the choice, a sickening decision, he knew he would rather her think him a traitor, hate him for the remainder of his life as yet another that had used her, than not to have thoughts at all. So, he jerked the shuttle around and flew like hell away from her, taking the Bradbury with him.

He could live with her despising him, he decided, staring down at her visage. But the blank, unfeeling stare she'd shot him just before the attack would haunt him even more than that, and he couldn't pinpoint why.

Worse, Tom had a correct feeling he'd have a long time to have the look invade his memory. A very long time...

He followed her through the woods with the phaser, ready to mill some more wood. She was so intent on whatever popped into her crazy head in that lake. Her hair was still dripping from that near drowning and she was off on some personal mission Tom didn't understand, for the time being. He was sure he could pry it out of her eventually, as he had the other information, about her mother her father... *Why did I press her about that? What's with me on this woman?*

But he was curious to know what was in Mexico that would drive her from the water with... *Her father. We'd been talking about her father, and she didn't know why he left. A name like Torres, it sounded logical.* Also, Tom knew how being near death puts thoughts in one's mind; he that one all too well. But he didn't bother asking while she was in the heat of the idea. It would have been useless. He simply stuck behind her, keeping an eye on her for his own peace of mind.

B'Elanna could feel Paris' eyes on her back--and probably points downward, knowing him. Then she regretted the thought. He had after all, saved her life. She could afford the man at least a *little* respect for that.

She awoke to a dim moonlight under the shadow of the shelter they'd managed to throw together--and very well, she thought. Seska and Yuri were sound asleep, and she wondered why she wasn't.

The letters she planned to send weighed heavily on her mind. She was anxious to do it, to get those letters through, to see what would come of it...

Tom was gone.

She'd noticed only as her eyes, pointed skyward, had drifted around and noted the open sleeping sack. But as soon as she'd noted her absence, she'd shrugged it off as a midnight quick trip and soon returned to her own thoughts, what she wanted to say, what she was going to say.

What am I going to say? 'Hi Dad? Sorry I was too gutless to face you before, but now... Now I'm a renegade but I'm sorry anyway?'

She sighed deeply. She would have to think that one out carefully. Then she wondered if she should send him a log or just text. *Text is safer--for the Maquis...and for me.*

Then she started thinking up encryptions. Calculations spun and centered in her mind with a strange sort of ease, much more ease than the reason for the codes afforded...

Tom still wasn't back. And she heard no sound in the woods.

What in the hell am I going to tell him? How can I tell him the truth? How do I word that,

when I can't even word it to myself?

She growled a little as she sat up, stilling to hear only the air. *Where is that Cretan?* she wondered, pushing aside her blankets, but not too sorry for the distraction he was giving her that time.

She grabbed her jacket and flung it over her shoulders before setting out on the path they'd cleared after dinner, when the sun had finally started to cool.

As much as she'd expected to find him, for some strange reason she didn't expect to see him at the lake. But there he sat, his knees tucked up and his arms around his legs, resting his chin on that makeshift perch as he stared out at the water.

Even at her distance, she thought his stare ghostly, dead somehow, sad somehow, hurt. And suddenly she felt like she was invading his privacy.

Hell, he'd invaded mine smoothly enough, next crossed her mind and so she moved across the sand. Coming up behind him, she sat unannounced and looked directly at him.

When he turned to meet that gaze, she saw the water in his eyes. Her jaw fell slightly; she blinked. "I'm sorry," came from her lips before she could think to keep quiet.

He grinned slightly, without cheer, turned to face the water again. "Don't worry about it. Just sitting on my pile of self-pity for a while. Nothing to be concerned about."

B'Elanna felt her jaw tighten a bit. *Why does he have to throw people off like that? --Of course, I could ask myself the same thing.*

"You must really think I'm an ass," he said lightly, albeit quietly.

"You act like one sometimes," she told him.

"Have you ever tried to figure out why? I don't even know why I really do, why I feel I have to. But have you?"

"No, not really."

Tom nodded and turned again to appraise the woman beside him; his grin flickered as she tried to hide her shrinking from that examination. "You really don't know, do you?"

"Why you act like a pig?"

"No. That you're beautiful. Seriously. I'm just saying what I see. And you seem to cringe every time a man takes a good look at you."

"I don't cringe."

Tom ignored that. "Do you think we're all after a piece of ass?"

B'Elanna's eyes narrowed. "Considering your history..."

He didn't fill in the blank for her. "The fact that, yes, I've slept with a lot of women I didn't give a damn about has nothing to do with how you react to the men around you--except Chakotay. Frankly, I'm shocked he doesn't see you as anything more than a little sister. At

first, I thought he was either blind or stupid. But he's just brotherly. Logical enough, I guess." Before she could form a response, Tom added, "He's a good man."

B'Elanna's mouth shut, for a moment. "Then why do you constantly contradict him?"

"I don't know," he whispered, shaking his head. He sighed. "I don't know anything anymore, B'Elanna...Torres. I forgot you told me to call you Torres. Sorry." He ground his teeth a bit, put his head back on his knees. Then he blinked. "Maybe it does have something to do with the other, actually. We're both... Never mind. It's not important." Returning his gaze to the water, he didn't speak again for nearly a minute. Then, "You probably need your sleep, Torres."

"You could too," she told him.

"I'll survive. I don't sleep much lately. Goodnight."

"B'Elanna."

He looked at her.

"You can call me B'Elanna," she said, shrugged. "I guess you earned it, having saved my life." She grinned and added lightly, "But don't think that's going to get you anywhere else, Paris."

Again, his grin was slight, but there was a bit more mirth there that time, she thought.

"Goodnight, B'Elanna."

Tom was already working--on breakfast--when she awoke again.

His eyes were a little dark, but he seemed jaunty enough as he stirred up some coffee and rations, for which he apologized before they were even done. He eyed Yuri, mourning the destruction of his recorder, and offered to try and fix it. He had a few parts in his bag, a few PADDs, one of which didn't work as well as it should.

He was even friendly--well, cordial, at least--with Seska when he offered her a cup of coffee.

It was almost strange to B'Elanna. He seemed...normal.

He seemed to work even harder that day, setting up the second structure with a verve that impressed her, knowing he was unrested, seeing the sweat pour off of his fair skin in the blazing heat. And surely enough, he excused himself to the lake several times to cool down, as did the others.

She stayed behind many of those times, busying her mind still with her letters and how to send them. The flush of her revelation had worn down a little, but she was still intent on her mission. The flush dying down only served to clear her mind, at least on the 'how' part of it.

By nightfall, the second structure was completed.

By nearly midnight, she saw he was gone again.

She was there and Tom knew it. Somehow he could feel her dark eyes on him, see her

small body standing at the edge of the woods, arms crossed, as always, wondering if she should approach or not. He didn't know whether to feel glad or regret that she had chosen to sit by him again. She had no idea how difficult she was making things for him.

He kept working on the recorder he'd been tinkering with to keep himself busy during his restless night. Yuri had knocked the memory coils out of synch when he dropped it down a nearby rock face, it seemed. Nothing too serious.

"So, Tom, here we are again," she said, staring the side of his head, wondering how he worked with only the light of his instruments and the moonlight.

"Why are you here again?" he asked, only curious, twisting another bolt into place, aligning it with another instrument. "I thought you were exhausted."

"I don't know," she said noncommittally. "Maybe because I wonder where you are when I wake up and see you gone."

"But you know where I am, you did tonight anyway."

"Just making sure."

"That I don't take off? I'm not going anywhere, B'Elanna." And he knew when he said it the utter truth of that statement, faithfully averting his stare to the reflection of the waxing moon on the quiet water. Before she came, he'd been nearly hypnotized by it when he stopped his work a while to rest his swollen eyes.

Somehow, the truth of his words struck her too. And she suddenly recalled what she knew about him, that kid with so much promise, from such a good family. She could only imagine what it must be like in his eyes, growing up as he had... And she was reminded of herself, too.

How strange it is that we end up as we do. Not too many years ago I was dreaming of doing such great things, only to find out it was just that--dreaming. Am I so convinced that this life is all that glorious? Does he try to convince himself? No. He knows it isn't.

"Your message," Tom said suddenly, though not breaking the soft, still air. "You're trying to get in touch with your father, right?"

She didn't remember telling him that. But she did nod and decide to elaborate a little. "I left a lot of things up in the air. I want to take care of that."

"I can give you a few encryption patterns so you can steer around Starfleet tracking them back, if you like. I used to know them all, and they worked for me."

She stared at him anew. Then, she knew she hadn't mentioned the recipient of her message and wasn't too surprised he'd offered his help. She wished this side of him was more common than not. She wondered why he hid that side she viewed there, quiet and enigmatic, but entirely comfortable to her.

Probably the same reason I do.

"Thank you, Tom. I'd like that."

"I'll tap them down later on. I have a spare PADD in my bag."

He smiled down to the recorder as he started again to put it back together. It felt good to help, he realized, good to help her. B'Elanna. So different, but like him, too. That was what it was, he figured. *Two kids driven down by their own devices.* He'd looked up her record soon after they met, saw there almost precisely what he'd expected to see.

He felt a touch on his hand and turned to see her smiling at him, slightly, yet more pleasant than he'd even seen her.

"It means a lot to me," she told him softly, but surely.

His hand tensed under her fingers. Quickly, she pulled them away, buried her former expression. And he cursed himself, seeing how she hardened at what she was then calling a mistake.

"It's not you, B'Elanna," he said, knowing what she must have thought. He sighed through a grin, deciding on truth. "You make it hard for me. I don't know why, but you do."

She drew down her brow. "What do you mean?"

"If I didn't have any self control, you'd have punched my lights out by now."

Her eyes widened.

"But I don't want you to think that about me," he continued. "And I don't really feel like repeating the mistakes I've already made."

"What?" she smirked, "Sleeping with women you don't care about?"

"I wouldn't do that to you. I like you too much." He looked over at her cautious stare and shrugged. "I know we called a truce, but I'll still think of you as a friend. And as a friend, I'll look out for you--which includes keeping myself in line and respecting your distance. I know that need."

He watched her nod, probably not knowing what to say, and he nodded back. The faceplate reset, Tom snapped the power chip into the recorder, turned it around. "Mind if I give it a test run?" he asked pointing it towards her.

She shrunk at the thought. "Oh no, Tom, not looking like this."

"You look great--and this probably won't work anyway." He fiddled with the reflection plate a little, shrugged. "But I'd like to have a picture I can recognize with certainty. That makes you a perfect model."

She straightened at that, a little surprised at the offhanded compliment. "What do you mean by that?"

He pushed the button, capturing her equally offhanded smile. "Perfect. --And don't worry; I'll erase the memory core before I give it back to Yuri. It's just a test, right? But just in case."

She saw the product of his stubbornness slide into the chamber at the base of the small recorder. "Let's see it."

Tom grinned at her. "You promise you won't take it away? I'd like to have it."

B'Elanna sighed quickly. "You're impossible. --Yes. I promise you can keep it. So let's see."

Tom took out the small portrait and leaned closer to her so they could share the view. Pulling a small fingerlamp from his pocket, shining it down, he smiled. "Perfect," he said, glancing to her. Even in that light, he could tell she was flushing with embarrassment. She obviously didn't like pictures of herself, either. "It works perfectly, B'Elanna."

She rolled her eyes.

He said nothing more. Pocketing the little square, he seemed satisfied enough to sit in silence. That time, he didn't dismiss her. After many minutes, after being allowed again to her own thoughts as they looked silently out on the still water, she ended up excusing herself, knowing well she needed her rest and was a little jumpy.

Again, Tom bid her goodnight and fought the urge to watch her go.

Walking briskly back to the camp, working off her nerves, she smiled to think about it, then shook her head at it.

When he knew she was gone, he pulled out her portrait.

A full day later, she was wandering up on the lake again, but didn't see him on the shore. Cursing the weird reaction--disappointment--she still obeyed the urge to seek him out, starting with the lake.

He truly was infuriating, she decided, for inciting her curiosity as he had, for letting her peek into his soul without letting her in and for testing the waters of her own without her permission.

At least he didn't question her when the others were around. No, when the others were around he was usually joking, silly or off to cool himself down. He wore the same mask she'd known when they arrived... Then she wondered why he didn't with her.

Does this screwed up man actually give a damn about me, or is he stringing me along? I'll bet I'm harder bait than he's known...

Yet, even as she thought it, she couldn't really believe it--as much as she wanted to dismiss him so easily. She'd seen his little reactions, the tears in his eyes, the twitch of his hand, the words he clamped between locked jaws. There was more and she knew it.

She just didn't want that kind of distraction in her life.

But she couldn't help but be intrigued by it.

And strangely, she had an idea why he confided in her, though she could not have put it into words if she tried.

His eyes were wet again. She stopped when she saw that.

He was sitting on the grass over a rise on the other side of the lake, not crying, but nearly to it. His face was pale in the moonlight, oddly old for a man but in his mid-twenties, haunted. Mask gone.

Tom had looked up though she hadn't made a sound.

Why is she here again?

Her arms were crossed and she, again, seemed taken back by what she saw. Despite it, she approached, not sitting, but looking closely at him. Staring up to her, Tom took in her features, almost numbly, like examining the brushstrokes of a fine painting, so closely that the picture itself was lost to view. There was much to see in that, in her and too many strokes frighteningly familiar.

"What is it?" she whispered.

Tom shook his head. "Just... You ever feel so alone that it hurts inside, but you can't do a damn thing about it?"

She didn't answer.

"Sometimes I let myself think about it. For a long time, I didn't, didn't think about anything. Or at least I made myself believe I could. But it's there, anyway."

"Why are you asking me this?"

"I have no idea."

B'Elanna knelt down beside him, tried to catch his eyes. "I think you do."

"I probably couldn't put it in words."

"Try," she commanded gently, "because you're really confusing me, Tom. I don't know what to think about you most of the time, and I don't like that. Usually I can pass people off as one thing or the other, but you make that really difficult."

"Why would you want to pass people off like that?"

"You're evading my question."

Tom sighed shortly and paused afterwards, trying to find the words. "Because... I think I understand you better than you think, and that's not really a good thing." He grinned painfully. "We really are determined, aren't we, B'Elanna? To get away from things that might hurt us. It's easy, isn't it?"

She stared at him, stared hard into his eyes as they slowly focused on hers again, boring into her with the truth she knew all too well, had realized only two days before. *He knows*, came a wild thought, which might have dizzied her if it hadn't frozen upon impact. *This screwed up man gives a damn because he really does know.*

"Yes," she breathed, still reeling. "Yes, it is."

"You see? It's not such a good thing, is it?"

He watched her face change at that, her eyes point down to a point he couldn't make out. But something of a contradiction had played behind them, he could tell.

"Maybe..." she offered, "maybe it's not all that bad."

He gave her that one. "Maybe."

The loneliness that was so palpable but unmoving, or unmoved. Feeling trapped though knowing you could do something, just wouldn't, for fear. Fear of what? Of it all turning back somehow, or eventually useless. Or just an unwillingness to try for the love of safety in an unreal world, in fantasy, where nothing can hurt if not permitted. Lonely by choice for avoidance of pain.

Tom knows. He let me know he knew.... No one had ever known...

And she knew they had at least one thing in common. Yet she had decided, decided three days before, when the water re-bore her, and then when she realized she was not alone, *I'm sick of fantasies. They've gotten me nowhere. Going nowhere.*

But acting otherwise was foreign to her. She knew that too.

This stayed with B'Elanna through the next day, in that awful heat, as she watched Tom and Yuri set down the last of the flat timbers and climb down from the wall, soaked with sweat. As usual, Tom was lambasting the sore sun with a strain of sarcasm that seemed unending. It was as annoying as before, and a couple times she let him know it. He shrugged and silenced, but only for a while.

In the corner of her eye, she watched Tom disappear, knowing exactly where he was headed and glad he was. He looked terrible. Yuri set off to help Seska with their next load, thinner sections for the roofs, later to be reinforced. Alone, she could concentrate on checking the safety of the structure they'd erected.

Even so, her thoughts were still plastered on the train that Tom had left with her. She wondered why she wasn't damning him for it.

He knows. And it wasn't as embarrassing as it was unnerving, as much as it made her all the more curious, and the idea that'd unwillingly crept into her imagination at a time she spat upon him, told him they could not be friends, days, weeks ago, returned to her.

That same idea, an image that picked at her but that she crushed, the images they brought, the life that inspired in her pulse, didn't meet the same assault as her eyes drifted away from her tricorder in that unbearable heat. She looked at the path on which Tom had disappeared, and wanted to know more.

Even so, she didn't know why. She didn't care.

That night, she didn't bother going to sleep.

They'd all laid down, sighed off their day and turned over in their own sleeping positions. After some time, B'Elanna turned onto her side to find Tom looking at her.

It wasn't his usual appraising stare. It was a more knowing one, and more pleasant, as a gentle smile touched his lips. He glanced past her to the others, and then back to her to whisper, "Aren't you tired?"

She shook her head a little.

Tom watched, open-eyed, and he felt a quiver in his heart when she also glanced back at the other two, quickly asleep, then pushed her coverings aside. Crawling over to kneel beside him, she reached inside his sleeping sack to blindly find his hand.

"Let's go," she whispered.

He stared at her for a moment, but complied.

Letting go of his hand, she pulled one of her blankets into an arm and started walking, Tom not far behind. Once safely out of their camp, he looked down at her. "What, B'Elanna?"

She didn't answer, but a glance his way told him she wanted something.

They walked beyond the lake to the knoll she'd found him on the night before and spread out the blanket. She looked not a little nervous when she turned back to face him, and steadied herself with a breath. "Friends, right?" she said.

He instantly knew where she was going. "B'Elanna...I--"

She moved forward and placed her fingers on his mouth. "I don't want to be alone," she told him. "For one night at least, I want what goes through my head to be real. I want to be with you... If you don't want to, just say it."

Tom grinned, taking the hand that touched his face. "You know I do. But I don't want you to think I'd take advantage of you."

"You won't be. You're my friend, right? Besides, this is my idea." She stepped a bit closer still, touching her body to his. She could feel his reaction to her offer already and shivered, wondering if it was such a good idea or not. But she had decided to act that time, stop thinking and start doing--even if her choice, she knew, wasn't the impossible one she'd dreamt up, or the passing encounters that had done nothing to hold her. At worst, this would be another. But Tom had piqued her, shown himself to her, knew...

She was determined to see it through, especially as she had started it. Still, *What put *this* into my head? ...He did.*

Tom felt the warmth of her small body, could even smell her, and couldn't deny anymore what that woman was doing to him, had done to him. He tried to push it away, because he knew exactly how much he wanted it, wanted her. And at the same time, he couldn't believe that B'Elanna, who'd found the most distaste with him, when he had not flirted with her nearly as vigorously as he had some of the other women, would be the one approaching him. He had decided on friendship.

But she wanted more. She wanted not to be lonely for a while and with a friend. *It's a lousy excuse on my part*, Tom thought, even as he touched the soft round of her cheek, caressing under her eye, to her temple. His thumb traced the line of her lower lip, and her eyelids became a little heavy; she took a quick breath.

"Are you sure this is right?" he whispered. "Me, of all people?" He had to ask.

Her eyes were unbroken in his. "You know."

She wanted not to be alone, if only for a while. *And so do I*, Tom had to admit, among other things.

Bending, he kissed her, his fingers still on her cheek, moving softly to her neck. Parting a moment to take a small breath, he kissed her again, opening her lips with his own to taste her. Suddenly, his whole body was alive and ready, and that quickness shocked him into

deepening their kiss, maybe too quickly. Perhaps it was sobriety, or that he did care for that woman, the first in years he had truly given a damn about--even if he hadn't a clue why. *Because she knows, maybe, understands me.* For whatever reason, he wanted to be with that woman in his arms, and he knew it wasn't just for release, and less for distraction.

Realizing this, he drew a breath and opened their contact further, taking her around the waist to hold her close. Yet, when her hands flew to his shirt, he stopped her. "Shh, B'Elanna. Not so fast. I don't want it to be *that* casual."

She blinked, but said nothing, dropped her hands. Strangely compliant, she followed him down to the blanket she'd laid out, knelt as he did, facing him, expectant.

At that moment, meeting her wide, dark stare, Tom knew even more, but said nothing, even as his mind reeled against what they were doing. Still, he also knew, *She wants this. She wants this with me. She wants to be together with something, somebody. She set all this out, planned this as if from a book of what she expected.* He smiled gently at her, knowing that. *And I want her. She knows that.*

"B'Elanna," he breathed, touching her again, drifting his touch around her collar. She was still as a deer, as if at any moment she might bolt and run. "Are you certain about this?"

Another moment, she was still, and then she relaxed a little. "Yes."

Nodding slowly, he parted her shirt. "Let me, please?"

She closed her eyes, wondering at his gentleness, feeling her body react to his deliberate undressing. His warm, dry hands glided over her skin as he eased her shirt down from her arms, then threaded her arms in the circle of his fingers as he directed her arms over her head. Her undershirt followed that path soon after, and then the downwards path again as he slid away her brassiere.

He touched her breasts, softly, and she drew a quick breath, her eyes opening to his. *He's so tender,* she thought in amazement, not having expected it at all, not having expected what that sort of treatment would elicit.

Yet she didn't move, kept his gaze solidly in hers, for fear of looking elsewhere, almost in a numb, otherworldly sort of reality, and wondering if it was actually happening, though she knew well it was. It was indeed a numb reality, but one in which she felt everything, more than she had ever felt, and remained powerless to stop it. She suddenly realized as fact she did not want it to stop.

Tom did not need to avert his gaze, even as he moved his hands to stroke her nipples with his thumbs, watching her tremble, her breath quicken, raggedly trying to catch up with her heart, which he could feel beating like a rabbit's under his fingers.

On the contrary, he wanted to see it all.

And he wanted nothing more than to take that beautiful woman down and cover her with his body, put himself inside of her, feel her around him. But he was determined to take it slowly, in case she changed her mind, but more that she would know that it meant something to him, that he wanted her to feel and remember everything, and that he did too.

He wanted to feel everything. He had not in a long time. What he was doing, no matter what their reasons, meant something to him.

Her hands had come to rest at her sides, and Tom lifted them lightly, by her fingertips, on the closure of his shirt, where she had begun before. He kissed her softly, shifting closer to her. "Gently, B'Elanna," was all he said, so quietly she may not have heard. But she did.

In the same manner as he had done, B'Elanna opened his shirt, pushing it slowly down his arms, feeling the muscles of his arms, the heat of his skin. Then she raised his arms, and then his undershirt, over his head. Her fingers floated down to his bared chest, and she pressed there, feeling his quickened heart, traced his hardened nipples. She then felt his fingers, tracing again the line of her lips, parting them as he leant to her again.

They kissed again, slowly, fully, and Tom's arms wrapped around her, pulling her up on her knees and pressing her breasts against his chest. She felt the strength of his fingers: They kneaded her back, making flaccid every muscle they touched, bringing alive her nerves, raising goosebumps.

He shifted again, and her nipples grazed against his chest hair, making her shiver again. So many feelings, and she arched to feel that last one again, and softly so, as he had done.

She wanted this man.

He was loosening her trousers, peeling the remainder of her clothing away from her, pressing his lips to hers with intentional care then parting again.

His eyes had darkened, and she felt his desire radiate into her. He truly wanted her and she knew it. She dropped a hand and he caught it, guided it to where he knew she wanted to go. His eyes still told her the obvious, he moved her hand over his erection, watched her mouth fall open slightly as she realized the extent...

When she paused, he guided her hand to the closure of his trousers to let her do the rest. Soon, her hands were on his waist, and then as far as she could reach, on his hips, pushing his barriers away, drove lightning through him, and he had to remind himself, *Slowly*.

Reaching around her again, he lowered her onto the blanket she'd laid out, finally determined to give her what she expected, and more. By her reaction, he could tell she'd expected it quickly over, perhaps for experience. But that was the only thing he still refused, even if his body hated him for it.

Easing away the remainder of her clothing, and doing the same for himself, he turned back, still kneeling, to take her fully into his memory. Her arms lay on either side, hands resting near her ears, fingers twitching. She almost seemed to be in a trance, though following him intently. Her legs were slightly apart, bent knees in the air, not knowing where to go. Tom eased them down as he lay beside her, and moving his fingers up her thigh as she lowered them to the ground.

Covering her mouth again, he swallowed her heavy gasp as his touches went to work between her legs. She arched and reeled, almost unconsciously opening her legs, rolling a little towards him. Her once dormant hand grabbed his arm, insurance that he would not stop.

He dipped his finger deeply into her, wetting it, feeling her muscles contract around it, then pulled back up. Tom took her with his gaze again, but hers was driven upwards, her neck arched, mouth closing to swallow, and a trembling breath as it opened again. He gently circled her clitoris, once, twice, watching her. A third time and a low, primal moan grew from deep in her throat and filled his ears. He purred, equally low, liking what he saw and heard.

As if disturbed, she darted her gaze to Tom, but he knew all she would see was a small smile, and likely his equal arousal. He moved the arm he had propped himself on to her, to caress her temple and hopefully keep her gaze locked with his as he caressed her softer flesh below, slipping in, and circling, still so softly it excited her doubly so. *She likes it like this.* So, in that rhythm, he sped slightly, watching B'Elanna take it all in, her eyes close again, feeling her fingers squeeze his arm, hearing her shaky breath grind into tiny cries.

No man has done this to her, Tom suddenly realized, and watched her a moment more before bending to run his tongue around her erect nipple, lengthening her cry into a peal before she muffled herself. Then she was whimpering, trying desperately to be quiet.

No man has made her feel this much, been like this with her, he knew, and felt all the sudden a sort of responsibility to the woman under his care. He wanted her to feel it all that time.

He knew she had never let it, or never had someone that would. But for whatever reason, she was letting him, asking him to make her feel it all.

Pulling away his hand from between her, he eased her leg further aside, and caught her slight surprise when he glanced up. She had expected more. But she didn't expect the more he would give, judging by the breath she took as he slid downwards still. Stretching his arm up to her breast, caressing it, he then bent to taste her clitoris as he had her nipple, brushing it with the tip alone, and then circling. Dipping his tongue within her, tasting her with a satisfied growl at what he found there and slipping back up, he circled her nub again. And again.

B'Elanna arched hard as a ragged moan was drug out of her. She hadn't expected that. She was grasping still at his arm, desperately then, and she clutched when his hand slid into hers, lacing their fingers--holding her hand.

Then he flicked his tongue, bucking her slightly, but then she ground into him. He did it again, hearing moans grow louder, less caring of the silence beyond them, and his name, "Tom," finally, upon her lips.

He squeezed her hand, lightly pinched her nipple between his other fingers and kissed her swollen flesh. "B'Elanna," he whispered against her, warming her still. He then took her into his lips, sucking slightly, caressing the very tip of her hardness, nimbly, around and in, and relishing her the natural sounds and motions he was eliciting from her.

He had done that so many times, to so many, but something, many things both known and unknown, about her made it mean something. It had been so long since it meant something. So long since he enjoyed bringing a woman to that pleasure.

And he almost felt it too, when B'Elanna's body finally gave way and the tremors of her orgasm washed over her, bucking her body into a sharp arc as she cried out to him, clutching his hand painfully. Sighing deeply, he licked and caressed her still, drawing out her groans and tremors, bringing her down as slowly as he could, until she was gasping and twitching under his final ministrations. And he kissed her sweetly once again before moving, that time on her other side so he might touch her freely, yet not release her hand, which he held to his cheek as he looked down to her glazed black eyes.

B'Elanna swallowed hard, trying still to catch her breath. With his thumb, Tom caressed her hand, finally relaxing, silently assuring her there was still plenty of time in the night. His free hand, warm on her belly, slid softly over her, tracing her ribs.

"You're beautiful, B'Elanna," he breathed.

She reached up to him, guiding him down to kiss her again, and was not a little shocked at first at the taste of herself on his lips. He looked at her, understanding, but she tried again, then knowing what to expect, and opened their kiss at her own measure. He let her get used to it. Letting her take it in. Soon, she did.

Soon, he had pressed her head against the blanket again, moaning softly as their mouths moved over each other, and he gently squeezed and pressed her breast, spurring himself again for her. And again, he slid over her body, but a little at a time, drawing his kisses off her lips, nibbling her jaw, the smooth skin of her neck and collarbone, gradually covering her.

But he did not enter her, as much as he wanted to, close as he was. He pressed the fingers still laced with his own, getting her attention.

Looking up at him, B'Elanna asked silently, not knowing what he wanted. Tom smiled gently to her and took her other hand, which had laid prone on the edge of the blanket, touching the short grass. He brought her hand between them, pressed it upon his shaft, which lay on her belly. Her small fingers tentatively, if not a little awkwardly, wrapped around it. Tom groaned lightly at the feeling, approving.

A tiny smile touched her lips even as a new thrush of desire filled her, feeling him move a little, between her hand and her stomach, knowing she would soon feel the same inside herself.

His hand moved back to her jaw, tracing so tenderly the line of her neck, the bone of her shoulder, down and around her breast. She squeezed his erection slightly as he pulled downward again, and it surged with that attention, drawing a moan from his lips. Suddenly, she knew he was ready. She had brought him there. She wanted more.

Tom touched her cheek, stopping her breath for a second, driving her stare to his again. Nothing sat there but want, no doubt, no trance, nothing unsure as had been there before, yet still expectant. Wanting.

Needing.

He slid down her body again then moistened with their heat and with the heat of her arousal. Spreading her gently with his fingers, he placed his tip into her, only slightly pushing. Their eyes were locked. She was ready; he was more than ready.

"I'll be gentle with you," he whispered.

"It's okay," she whispered back, trying to dismiss it, desperately wondering exactly what he thought he knew about where she'd been before. But then she wondered why she gave a damn. He obviously wasn't going to be like the others. "Please, Tom."

He grinned. "I will anyway."

And gradually, steadily, he eased himself into her, slowly stretching, filling her, squeezing her fingers as she did his, bracing her shoulder as she sucked a long, quivering breath. Her eyes rolled back as she arched and her free hand grabbed his upper arm. He did not stop nor did he speed until the stroke was fully done, and he did not move again until she released her breath, took another, relaxed a little.

She looked at him, again a little surprised. She saw him asking her with his eyes, and she smiled slightly, relaxing a little more. It was okay; she was okay. This seemed to please him.

He pulled out only slightly, reaching down to bend her at the knee, lead her leg around his, then pressed in again. Then he pulled out a little more. Soon, he knew, he would be able to start a better rhythm. For the mean time, he tried to be only gentle with her, tried to let her simply feel. They had time--if, of course, he could hold himself back so long. The deliberation was proving convenient to him, too.

And he couldn't get enough of watching her react. She was amazing, he decided, so alive just then, so ready to feel. He could see so much, and, like her, feel so much...it was all so natural, then. It had been a very long time since he'd felt like that.

Finally, he almost completely pulled out of her, and began to move in long, steady strokes into her. He drank in her gasps of pleasure, growing into moans, then short whimpers as he ground his hips against her, burrowing his shaft deeply within her small body. Then he stroked her long again.

Soon, B'Elanna caught on to his motion, and unconsciously rocked into his thrust, clutching still to him, lost, eyes closed yet still in that reality she put upon herself and was finally getting, the feelings she'd asked of him and that he was delivering.

She no longer muffled the sounds that emanated from her throat, but let them fill the air, as his groans of pleasure echoed in her ears. It was a far sweeter sound than she had expected. The feeling of him inside her was beyond her; the waves building inside her body were nothing like any she'd imagined.

Feeling dizzy, she opened her eyes to find him lost in a similar world, neck arched, mouth open as he moaned in his motion, then catching her gaze again. His hand drove into her short locks, cradling her head. Breathing hard, he fell into kissing her, tasting her open mouth as he filled her again. Then upon her lips, he breathed, "Put your legs around me, B'Elanna. Let me all the way in."

Without a thought, she complied, and barely heard the keening growl that flew from her when he moved hard into her, beginning the pattern again. Pressing into her as far as far as he could go, he ground deftly in her, meeting her every response, and she thought she'd pass out from the sensations that flooded her head and every fiber of her.

She didn't think it would ever end, couldn't imagine how high he would get her, but wanted to go there, wished it didn't have to be completed. Beyond the pressure of his initial entry, quickly fading but yet reminding, there was the undeniable pleasure his movements were building in her, addicting her immediately. She had always been disappointed in reality. No dreaming might have prepared her for what she was experiencing...

Then his hand slid down her body, over her wet and quaking skin, her heaving breast, to her belly and over her still swollen clitoris, then stroked her firmly.

"Oh god!" she rasped and clutched his shoulder, boring her short nails into his skin. Another long, hard stroke, within her and over her, and she thought she might cry for it all, tossing her head back in want and sensation. "Tom--I'm..."

"Let it come," he gasped, hanging on as long as he possibly could, desperate to bring her where he wanted her to go. It seemed impossible, but when he felt her tremors begin, and when he slammed their joined hands down for purchase, he knew...

B'Elanna bucked hard under him; her legs convulsively clutched his waist and she screamed a ragged gasp, wailing at the climax that struck her as if from nowhere; Tom watched tears crawl from the corners of her bolt wide eyes, watched as she was feeling all of it. As it endured, as he eked it on, as her legs trembled as her ankles unlocked from his waist, Tom grabbed her and rolled them over, perching her atop him.

He grabbed her waist and thrust up into her, making her cry out again fall forward, her hands landing on his shoulders, grasping tightly there. Driving a few more short grinds into her, buckling her further, he thrust long and hard again, lifting her even as she gasped, head dropping, arms shaking, whimpering away the last waves that consumed her. Then, finally he gave in, crying out in benediction as he came inside her.

Feeling his release, the warm rushing flow within her, hearing his call, her name a blind whisper behind it, B'Elanna pulled up her head.

Tom was heaving for breath, almost seemed in pain for the contortions that marked his thin but handsome face. Yet, when his eyes drifted back down to hers, staring up at her, he almost seemed in awe, eyes shining with emotion, almost sadly but for his gentle smile.

He reached to touch her face, guide her down to him as he ebbed, and he kissed her, then her eyelid, then her brow, as she slowly blanketed him.

"You're so beautiful, B'Elanna," he choked, holding her protectively in his arms, stroking away the sweat down her spare backbone. He pulled her a little, sliding her moist body up enough that she could rest her head in the curve of his neck.

She struggled for a clear breath, not once, then... "Thank you, Tom."

He almost didn't hear her whisper, but realizing what she said, he smiled softly and pulled the blanket over their quickly cooling bodies.

"For what?"

"For knowing me," she breathed, then sighed, "No one ever bothered...to make me feel like that."

He nudged her hair, falling forward on her brow, aside; he kissed her temple, lingering there. Her skin was so smooth, like satin, and warmed so easily with his breath.

He had not felt so much in so long. He had not realized how long. She had helped him feel again, inspired him to feel, and to taste, and to...

"We can't...let anyone know." This she added without any emotion but tiredness. "Chakotay doesn't like...complications."

Tom nodded, very slowly. "I understand."

"Do you?"

"Yes." He kneaded the muscles of her lower back, eliciting a bare purr. "But I don't want us to go back yet."

"I'm tired Tom," she breathed. Her fingers caressed his soft hair.

"Okay."

He had put it neutrally, as much as he was capable, and his fingers still massaged her lightly. He didn't blame her being tired. They'd had a full day aside from their lovemaking....

Lovemaking.

She purred with every touch, moved not a muscle, still insuring the warmth between them.

Less than a minute later, she said, still quiet, "On the other hand, we might not get this chance again for a while...."

He felt her little grin on his neck and smiled, too.

He wished they could stay there, on that god-forsaken planet, together, never alone. He knew they couldn't. And yet...

True to his word, Tom said nothing.

B'Elanna awoke, feeling rather groggy and sore as hell, to find him cooking breakfast with his usual jibes about how maybe they might throw themselves on fire later that day to cool down, just as he had the day before. Seska was getting tired of his jokes, told him outright to shut up. Yuri rolled his eyes at her. Seska had grown worse tempered with every sunrise, being anxious to get back to the Liberty and its relatively comfortable living conditions.

B'Elanna dreaded it. She was sure Chakotay would figure it out.

Tom set a cup of coffee near enough to her that she could reach it without knocking it over, giving her that usual, casual grin. Bleary eyed, she took it.

Seska noticed her. "Didn't sleep, B'Elanna?"

She only shrugged. "Just overtired, maybe."

"A little fresh water will probably help," Tom suggested, turning a wink, that usual wink, her way. "I'll be happy to show you."

"In your dreams, Paris," she returned, purposefully sour with only a little effort. "I can find the lake myself."

She crawled to her feet, taking her coffee with her. *Thank you, Tom*, she thought with some relief. She knew she needed another bath.

Seska watched the other woman go, and eyed Paris, chuckling still to himself. "Don't you ever give it up, Paris?" she asked.

"Never," he grinned.

That evening, they met yet again at the lakeside, and turning to see her, he opened his arms and she flew into them, kissing him immediately upon arrival. They didn't make it as far as the opposite knoll before falling together to the ground.

They walked each other back to the camp, softly talking, familiar, exhausted and not regretting it. They fell asleep staring at each other.

The sun was directly overhead, yet another day unrelenting, when he found her at the waterside, cooling off, scooping the warm yet refreshing water onto her well-tanned arms, up to her shoulders.

Then Tom reminded himself why he came there, and propelled himself forward again.

"We got a communiqué from the Liberty," he said. She spun at the sudden presence, but let out her breath a moment later. "Sorry, B'Elanna."

She nodded quickly. "What did it say?"

"We'll be picked up in a few hours." She nodded again. He took a step closer. Her eyes widened in caution. "Don't worry. Seska and Yuri are over the next rise, scouting the caves." Another step, and he saw her shift her stance. She never said anything, but he had watched her. She was sore.

"I wish we had a regenerator for you."

"I'll live," she said, pleasantly enough, knowing well she'd gotten herself into it.

"I wish we had more time."

B'Elanna never thought she would ever say to him, "So do I." But she did. She did not even know if she meant it, even if her whole body flushed with arousal to think of their having more time together. To dismiss it as lust was too easy, though tempting.

"Glad to hear it."

She only shrugged.

Tom took her hand. "In a while, maybe?"

The spark in his eyes caught her off guard. She pulled her hand away. "I don't want to make any promises, Tom," she said flatly, dismissing suddenly taking over and seeming perfectly sane. "Not like this. You never know from one day to the next if you'll be alive. I can't go that far."

She was being honest, he knew. He understood. Still, he suggested, "But if someday, somehow, we manage to get away...?"

B'Elanna threw up her arms spun on a heel. "You just don't give up, do you? Ooh, I knew I shouldn't have done it!"

Tom was taken aback by that. "What did I say? I'm not looking for you to drop everything to be with me, B'Elanna."

Those words widened her eyes even further. "Then it was casual?"

"No! I just told you it wasn't." He sighed, trying hard to find a way to put it right. "I'm just saying that I wouldn't mind being with you again, when we could, when it wouldn't be 'complicated.' I don't want you to get in any disagreements with Chakotay. I've got enough

myself for everyone to share."

"But I've just invited more," she pointed out. "Why the hell did we do it? What was wrong with me?"

Tom drew a breath, squinting at her. "Maybe heat poisoning. It can play tricks on the mind."

"Oh, yeah," she smirked, "that's a good one. I'm sure Chakotay will be thrilled to hear that one."

"Only if you tell him."

"He going to know, Tom!" B'Elanna shook her head tersely. "He's not an idiot, much as you like to tell him he is."

Tom laughed. "How's he going to tell if we don't say anything and stick to business. Even if we're friendly, he could just as easily think we have some time to talk while we were down here--which we did."

"No," B'Elanna returned, "he's going to take one look at me and he's going to figure it out. --And we'll never get time away, and you know it. It'll be another notch on your bedpost and an effective cure for frigid-- Hey!"

Tom had grabbed her arm and spun her out of mid-stalk into his arms. A second later, his lips were over hers and his arms held her tightly enough that she could not push free, though she didn't try again after the first attempt.

Parting from her, her mouth opened again, eyes still blazing. His replaced his lips with a finger. "I personally don't give a damn what Chakotay thinks about people being together on his precious ship. His ship, he runs it however he likes, but he doesn't own my soul. Now, I'm not about to lie about how I feel, but to him and anyone else you name, I'll deny that I'd ever cared for you, thought you my friend, or had made love to your spectacular little self, for the rest of my life if that'll make you happy."

She stared at him. Her fists flattened over his shoulders.

"That said," he added, kneading her back a little with the hands that still held her, "I'll never deny it to *you*."

"I don't want you to go that far," she admitted. Sighing, she shook her head. "I'm sorry. I can't tell you how many times I've heard Chakotay swear off complications on the ship. I don't want to be one of them."

"You still have needs, B'Elanna."

"I know. I guess we all do."

"Someday, maybe, then?"

Giving him a wise eye, sighing again, she put her hand on his cheek.

Her touch lit every fiber in Tom's body. And then her mouth turned upwards, heating that light into a furor. That smile again.

He loved that smile, a slight yet gentle one, one he'd seen when they were together, but nowhere else. She'd smiled like that when, finally rested, she stroked him hard again with her own flesh and he lowered her onto him. She smiled like that when she looked down, into his eyes, almost in girlish wonder, trying to place a word to what she felt but knowing there was no word. Testing all the waters.

To his 'maybe' she said nothing. But she did not say no.

It was enough for Tom.

He took her hand again, lest he take the easier temptation. "Come on. Let's go check out that last power relay before the rendezvous."

It was in the opposite direction of where Seska and Yuri were--he knew she knew that. He was relieved when she didn't let of his hand the entire way, and more so when she let him use what little time they had left.

Two hours later, he gave her the PADD. While she slept that morning, after they had crept back into the camp, he had punched out all those codes he'd told her about, glancing up from time to time to stare at her in sleep. So still. Later, he felt a rush of joy at the sincere thanks he got her his efforts, and the smile she gave, and the secret kiss upon his cheek.

An hour after that, she acted as if she didn't know him, and walked away without a mere glance as they prepared for the confrontation.

A day later, he stared at her, bloodied and lying unconscious on the deck, resisting the urge to pull her away from the hard metal grate. With but a word from the captain, he was in the shuttle forgetting the checklist. It would take several hours to get to help.

Minutes after that, she was carried into the wardroom, muttering his name beneath the hisses of coolant and flurry of personnel.

Not an hour later, he stared at the Federation ship from the shuttle, knowing that all his hopes and desires had been made vain; in that painful moment, he accepted his new and brief role as decoy and ran like hell.

A day after that, B'Elanna awoke in a dark room to faces lit with concern and bitterness.

Three days after she brought him to that hill where she'd seen him crying before, three days after she gave him more feeling than he'd felt in years, proved to him they were still possible, in her, all those feelings and reassurances were to be useless to him and he knew it.

That same day, sure she was alone, she sobbed herself to sleep, swearing she would kill him should they ever meet again. At the same time, she prayed they might never meet. And yet she knew he had given her something she'd once longed for, helped her know that it was possible. He was gone.

Three months after that, he worked without thought. Yet, he slept with her haunting him. Woke up trying not to remember his dreams of a past realness, but remembering them anyway, numbly moving to dress himself and begin another day. And so, he worked even more diligently.

Those same three months later, she extracted herself from another, feeling cold and sick. And she went without thought to her own bed. Woke up cursing what found her in sleep, but

never in life, never again. And so she cursed the memory itself, and threw herself into the work she knew best.

And yet he still caressed her portrait, felt her smile within him. He tried to pretend it had been some other world, some other time, as if it had been another's life, viewed from a distance. And yet he felt, he knew, it had all been so real. Soon he asked for more work.

Yet she would always know it had been, burrowed deep in her memory, in the well of a bitterness she'd borne most her life, practiced with ease. She tried, knowing it was futile, to recreate it. But she could only walk away, again and again, feeling nothing and not understanding why. Soon she swore she didn't care. By the time she returned to the region that had borne that misunderstanding, she was confident that she had crushed it into oblivion, but knew deep inside she never would.

Never looking back at Auckland as the shuttle flew him away, his hopes had changed. Yet Tom would never regret the one selfless act he could ever remember of himself. He wouldn't regret the other, either.

It was going to be a long turbolift ride. An even longer night alone to think about it. Tom had no more replicator rations and no holodeck time spared, his usual distraction from his thoughts.

B'Elanna had all but spit on him at the staff meeting, riling him to the point that he just had to throw it back at her. Theory by theory, he made all her guesses look like finger-painting by a monkey, and it gave him an odd satisfaction to watch her slink back into a shell. Nor did he spare her his most satisfied grin, making her fire burn even hotter.

That time, she deserved it. She was starting to go too far with him, thinking she could get away with what she said because of who she was, and he'd been too damned polite with an eagerly angry woman. Calling him a pig in public was one thing, calling him an irresponsible idiot in front of people he was trying desperately to earn the respect of was something completely different. So Tom decided to play her game a while.

It was frighteningly easy.

It had been a long journey already, at only a few months.

Still, he had not spoken a word, even to her, about that night they spent together nearly ten months before. Obviously, neither had she. But she had changed--as if he'd expected anything different. True to his initial beliefs, she did despise him--rightfully so, considering.

She didn't know. And she didn't give a damn if she did or not.

He sighed to himself, arms crossed, waiting--praying--for the lift doors to open.

She growled a little, stewing still. "I hope you enjoyed that, Paris."

"I'd think you'd had a lot more fun than me--*Torres*. You're just mad because I was right."

"You enjoyed making me look like a fool."

He rolled his eyes. "Fine. I loved every second of it." He squinted at her, an angry little grin planting on his lips. "Actually, Lieutenant, I can't wait to do it again. There's nothing that gives me more pleasure than seeing you eat that arrogant little streak you've developed since we met last."

B'Elanna glared at him, and yet couldn't help but feel a little twinge inside herself. She'd known many sides of Tom Paris, but spiteful was a new one on her. But she'd be damned if she let him hurt her again. "*I'm* arrogant? You're the one who thinks just because Captain Janeway saved your butt from that little hotel you stuck yourself away in so that you can get away with tucking away half the women on board and flying Voyager like it's your personal cruising shuttle--at *my* expense."

"Getting a little jealous, B'Elanna?" Tom grinned, knowing that nothing she believed of him

was true, but damned if he'd tell her that.

Like I was damned when I never told Chakotay, followed that idea, and spun in his head, stirred a regret of it.

But B'Elanna's mood was equally cruel, and strengthened still when she turned to glower up at him. "You might have been original, Paris, but you haven't been the only one. The fact that you cut out only made what happened between us *expedient*."

Naturally, she didn't comment on what those other times were like--or, more correctly, weren't like.

To her fury, Tom recovered instantly, returned, "We don't belong to each other--and you were the one who insisted on that, remember? For that matter, I never grabbed you by the hair and called you *jiH dok*. So you're perfectly free to screw around to your heart's content."

She could have killed him for that, and he knew it.

But he also knew, deeply, he didn't want her to feel like that.

But he wasn't about to let her hurt him. He did that well enough on his own time.

So he turned more quickly than she could react, adding, "By the way..." as the turbolift doors opened, "...I never betrayed you, B'Elanna--you or the Maquis. Never. So feel free at any time to leave me the hell alone."

Turning on his Starfleet issue heel, he left her there to believe or disbelieve it. Only for a minute or two, as he strode to his quarters, he really didn't give a damn either way, only was satisfied that he'd put the bug in her memory for her own dissection. Let her do with it whatever she wanted. She'd already done that well enough with help.

And yet when he entered his confines, he stopped. "Damn."

B'Elanna growled to know the bastard had gotten the last word. He was good at that. Too good.

But she'd seen his eye twitch when she hurt him, told him, cold as even she could manage, that in essence she may as well have used him for greener pastures. It was brief, but she saw it, and smelled his fury.

She wanted to hurt him. She wanted him to hurt as she'd been hurt, when he left them adrift, after he had told her she was beautiful, told her she mattered to him.

Deserter.

Stomping into her quarters, she sunk straight into a chair with her PADD and thumped it on to start her reports... *All these damn reports! I wish I could delegate *that.**

She flipped the PADD across and into the pillows of another chair, huffed a breath as she sunk back in her own. Her eyes shot around the room, searching for something--who knew what--to distract her. But she couldn't kill the ire he'd fanned with brutal ease. *And his pithy little challenge... Never betrayed me? Rumor has it he's been with... Oh no, don't go there. You don't care, and you don't really want to pry into that can of worms...especially if it were true.*

She sneered to herself at the thought he'd actually had the nerve to throw it back at her. To her credit, she said nothing of what his words had done to her, how they twisted in her, made her rage all the more defensive. And she wouldn't dare show it--not to him.

She wished desperately she could find something to do....

To his credit, though, he'd still not said a word about them, to anyone. As if she had requested it only a day before, very few knew they'd ever even met before coming aboard Voyager--amazing considering how rumor ruled the underbelly of that ship.

And he'd never tried to defend himself before that day. *Why all the sudden the need? Nowhere else to go but to make me feel guilty? Like an animal striking at a point it thinks most vulnerable? Asshole.*

But in truth, she didn't know. For spite, for the first time in a long time, she wanted to.

Tom didn't cry, though his feelings, turned over so many times, his utter frustration, had afforded him that luxury many times over. At the same time he wondered why it still mattered, even though he did know. He knew well what he'd done any why. He hated it, but he didn't regret it. He just couldn't.

He sat on the side of his cold bed and pushed the tab to open the drawer at his knee. Moving open the case he'd replicated upon coming aboard Voyager he saw her face again, grinning at him.

"What do you mean by that?" she'd asked him, and he never told her.

But he always remembered what he meant, and acted upon it, as she had acted upon him. He still believed, equally arrogant as she pretended to be, perhaps, that she had not used him, that they had not used each other...not in any conniving way, at least.

For a night, they had needed each other. Certainly she could not have expected of a man like him that a night was all it took, that a night with her was all he needed to realize...

He'd never told her what he'd meant, but he had meant it, and surprisingly still did.

He stared into her eyes and felt that familiar stab of feeling, one he had felt only as one feels a memory, since he last saw that smile, knowing in his heart, more than ever, he would not see it again. He no longer tried.

He had acted twice for her, and couldn't bear to keep trying, to try again, to tell her. She would not have trusted his intentions. He didn't want to believe that he'd been right not to hope, and cursed himself for his habit of self-torture, knowing well he'd do it all over if he had to.

But he'd damned if he'd let her hurt him again.

It was true enough--he couldn't wait to get away from New Zealand. To be on a ship again, to be away again, and maybe to do something useful with himself again, was more rewarding than any rusty information would be to them.

Believing he had betrayed them, after all, Chakotay would have given up that planet. If Starfleet wanted to see some empty buildings, fine. But he would show them the way, look like he was helping, and get the hell away.

"You'll be cut loose," the upright captain stated.

"Story of my life," he'd replied, and didn't know whether or not that was such a bad thing.

Again. I'm going to do this again. If they didn't have cause to hate me before, they'll really want to rip my throat out now.

The purpose of their mission had stirred everything he'd tried to disbelieve, and he didn't know whether to hate the frosty captain for it.

He threw his sparse belongings in the duffel anyway. He wanted out of there more than anything, but it was happening all over again, and he knew it.

He growled and sighed. *Why are you always in trouble, B'Elanna?*

If he wasn't so anxious to go, if he wasn't so worried about her, if he wasn't curdled to the blood about being made to look even worse than he already was, he'd have laughed at the irony.

But he also knew it was his only chance. One tiny chance of redemption, and one tiny chance to see her again. The first was easy to admit to wanting, the second an unwilling admission of need.

Even if he didn't have a rank, maybe his actions would prove that he wasn't as bad they'd chalked him up to be...and maybe he'd convince himself too.

Of course, anything he said or did--as he was certain they'd have abandoned those camps by then--would earn him no more points with the Maquis, with B'Elanna. Yet even if she cursed him, he wanted to see her again. He still didn't even know if she was dead or alive, or still on Chakotay's ship--though he doubted she'd leave of her own will.

Staring down at her portrait, touching the visage of her soft, warm skin, still so achingly palpable to him, he knew there was no hope she would ever let him near her again. Touch her again. Share her warmth.

Why do I still remember her? Why am I torturing myself like this? came his thoughts as he remembered how she looked when he eased himself inside her, made them into one, felt her small hand clutch to his. *Because you do it so well,* was his own reply, not as much bitter as

honest.

So he knew then and there he had nothing to lose--and even less time.

A few hours later, Tom waited on the pristine lawn. It would be sunset soon, they would come for him at dinner. He paced around the bench that sat on the natural path, wondering still if what he was doing would be the right thing. He wondered still what he would say.

Coming around again, trying to collect his unusually nervous breath, Tom glanced up.

There was salt in the man's short sable hair, which was thick but brushed back neatly. A curl sat over his temple, too stubborn to go anywhere but there. His uniform was one of a science officer's--lieutenant commander, Tom noted as the man came forward.

My god, she took after her father, Tom thought. His eyes, the turn of his mouth, the color of his hair--even that damned cowlick--were so much like B'Elanna's, Tom had to think to blink and try to put on a face aside from the shocked one he knew he was wearing.

"Commander Torres?" he finally blurted, feeling the heat of the reality. *I'm talking with her father... Why did I do this?*

The man seemed a little confused, but he did acknowledge him with a stare slightly askance. "Thomas Paris?"

Tom couldn't help but grin. "Yes." For some reason, all the manners he'd learned as a child seemed awkward. He gestured before he spoke, and shifted from a foot back a step. "Like to sit?"

"In a minute, maybe." He crossed his arms to examine the nervous young man. He had come there only because it was convenient, and had looked at that man's records briefly, wondering how a convict might know him. He hadn't a clue. "Why don't you tell me why you've called me here, Mister Paris. Because I know we haven't met."

The man was kindly enough, cautious without judging, but Tom suddenly realized that his idea was a very bad one. But he'd started it. He shifted again. "Look, I know this isn't going to sound very good, coming from me. But...I'm leaving here for a while, and just in case--anything can happen on a starship. I guess you know that."

The man grinned. *Some convict*, he thought. *Reminds me of myself when I was a teenager*. Drawing a calm breath, he then gestured to the bench. "Very well, Mister Paris. I'll sit with you."

Not with a little relief, Tom did, and once joined there, he said, almost guiltily, "I called you here because of B'Elanna."

So much for trying not to hope too hard, just in case it wasn't, thought the older man, stilled by the convict's words. "You knew my daughter?"

"Yes. I know her."

A pause, which deadened the air and felt longer than it lasted. "In the Maquis?"

Tom nodded slowly. "Yes."

The commander took a moment to accept that, sighing deeply. "My daughter is a terrorist."

Tom turned a quick stare to the man beside him. "Your daughter is an engineer, and a good woman. She's alive, and she thinks about you, or she was a lot when I knew her." Tom stopped for a moment, knowing how quickly he'd reacted, which surprised him. "I've been here more than half a year, but I don't think she's changed her mind. I...I just wanted to know if you got it. But if you didn't know she's Maquis, I guess you didn't get her message."

The older man furrowed his brow. "I've gotten no message from her."

"She was going to send it," Tom pressed. "It might not have come through, or it got stuck. But just in case, I wanted you to know...she does think of you."

Disturbing as part of the news was--the unsure young man giving him that news seemed to already be regretting having to tell him--the older man did feel a grin come to his mouth at the last portion of it. Turning a look Paris' way, he leaned back in the bench, relaxing a calf on his other knee. "You were her lover," he said.

Tom darted his eyes, visibly flushed. "I was her friend."

The commander knew better, grinning wisely.

The expression made Tom laugh unexpectedly, as much as it made the lump in his throat grow to a stone. "God, don't do that."

"Do what?"

Tom shook his head. "She takes after you, you know. That look you just gave me... I knew it pretty well. I see a lot of her in you... It's hard."

"Tell me about her, then?" Torres suggested. "You've brought me here to say she was alive and well, and I do want to know about... What?" The look on Paris' face had changed. "Isn't she well?"

Tom sighed slowly, thinking. "I can't tell you why I'm leaving. It's classified. But I will say that part of the reason is because of her. She may be in danger."

Again, the older man nodded, slowly, steadying himself. "Let's walk, Thomas. It'll help."

Tom didn't argue that.

Without determining a path, they started into the park together, at an easy enough pace that was yet movement enough to work off Tom's nerves. Finally, he sighed out the rest, looking into the distance, towards the afternoon sun. "B'Elanna..." he whispered. "Where do I start?"

Yet, once he found the words, he knew. Not ironically, he smiled at the first thing that came to him.

An hour later, they had returned to the bench. The older man had become intent, drinking in every word that Tom had to say, having heard of her expertise, her terseness and standoffishness, her conscience and willingness to look beyond the apparent, and the accident from which she emerged ready to begin again. She was hurt, she was young, but she was growing. Hopefully, she would continue to.

It was better news than he expected. It was much more than he knew before.

Tom was increasingly glad to give it to him, seeing how well the man had taken the truth. He had not hedged about B'Elanna's temper, or that she did seem dedicated to the Maquis cause. However she ended up there, she was loyal to it.

As the sun began to set through the trees that surrounded them, and Tom mentioned again it would soon be time for him to leave, Torres gave him another look askance. Tom had not told him anything about himself in the time they had talked, but he still knew somehow... "You're in love with my daughter, aren't you?"

Tom grinned, barely. But he did not return his gaze. "Maybe I was. But she'll never reciprocate, not even friendship, now--which was hard enough to earn--thinking that I betrayed the Maquis."

"Did you betray them?"

"No."

It was simply put truth, and Torres nodded slowly, turned his eyes out to somewhere near to where Tom had focused. "You can't tell her we met."

"Why not?"

"From what you say of her, what I know of myself and her mother, I don't think it'll help. She'll see it as an intrusion more than a favor. I don't want her to be more angry with me than she is."

Tom felt that harden in his throat. "Then this was a mistake."

"No. Not for me, anyway. You've given me hope that maybe someday we'll have a chance to meet. I'd lost all hope of that until now."

"Then you still love her?" Tom asked. "Knowing what's she's involved in?"

"Of course I do. She's my child. Nothing will change that." Then he shrugged. "Doesn't mean I have to agree with what she does, though."

"Then she has the right to know, that you love her."

To that, the older man assented. "Perhaps you're right."

Then it was Tom's turn to eye his companion steadily. "Tell me one other thing?"

"It depends what that is."

"Why did you leave them? B'Elanna never knew why." Tom examined how his question had dimmed the man's eyes, and yet continued, "I think that's what hurt her the most."

Commander Torres was quiet for a minute, though his eyes didn't move, and his posture remained relaxed, or flaccid. "You ended up in this prison, Thomas. You made some mistakes." Tom said nothing, and he took it as agreement. "I made my mistake, too, and lost everything I loved. When you're young and scared, you don't think, you let your weaknesses drive you. You do things, and you don't know why, even years later. It's not even worth

analyzing once it's all said and done. Only...only that you don't repeat those mistakes.

"I left my wife because she and I divorced, and she took custody of B'Elanna. What's more important was that I never returned, never contacted them afterwards." He sighed deeply, his dark eyes blank, or hardened to that familiar regret. Tom knew both too well. "The truth is, I didn't know what to say. To my own daughter, my child, I couldn't find any words that seemed enough. Time passed, and it became harder and harder to explain it, even to myself. What could I say to her that would make up for what I'd done? Nothing. So I said nothing."

Torres shook his head, as if he couldn't believe his own words, true as they were. "I was so ashamed of myself, I couldn't accept the fact that I had failed her. So I shut myself off, convinced myself she was better off without me. I walked away for good because it hurt too much to face... I couldn't see, refused to see, that it would curse me like it has. I always thought someday...some other day." He paused. "It was a mistake, and I lost everything."

Tom swallowed silently, feeling a sort of otherworldliness spinning in his head. "I'm sorry," was all he said.

Torres nodded. "I know. So am I. But there's little good in that anymore, is there?"

"Just don't do it again, right?"

"Right."

Tom watched the man a moment more. So much like B'Elanna, in his face, even his posture, his gestures, it was suddenly so amazing to him how small children picked up so much, latent traits. *And in his insecurities*, Tom then realized, much like B'Elanna--like himself, too.

He wished so much the commander could know his daughter, then more than ever. There was so much he could do...that they could do for each other. It set Tom's spirit anew to find her, not only for himself, but to try, somehow convince her, to at least visit the man. Commander Torres didn't seem like the sort that would turn his own child in. He wondered if it could be done... He hoped he'd have the chance to try.

But at the same time, he knew that B'Elanna would never listen to him. For her father, he would try anyway.

Renewed in that decision, gave Torres a grin. "I'll find her, if I can, sir."

"Thank you.... But will you do me a favor?"

"I won't promise not to tell her," Tom told him. "I can't."

"No, not that. You'll make your own decision, and I'll respect that. You've known her more recently than I have. You'll decide well."

Torres looked at the younger man, saw all his own mistakes shining through him like a beacon. It was in his expression, clear as a dry winter sky. Yet in Tom, he saw enough that maybe...

"When you go out there, whatever you're doing, do it for yourself. B'Elanna..., she's a woman now, and has to live by her own mind. But if I entrust her to you, in what way I have any right to, I want to know that the man who seeks her is thinking for his own good, taking

care of himself."

Tom snorted. "That's been my problem, Commander."

"I don't mean thinking only of yourself, but thinking *for*. There's a difference. Take *care* of yourself. You have the right to move on, away from all of this." He waved his hand around at their surroundings. "I didn't. I let myself sit for years in some stupid fantasy and let the years go by without realizing anything important. Even when I contacted B'Elanna at the Academy, I had this notion that it'd be all better if we just talked. When she didn't respond--that's when I realized what I'd done. That's when I knew, in my heart, that I'd truly lost her."

"Help yourself now, before you wake up, middle aged, wondering why you had deluded yourself into thinking it'd be okay if you only kept moving, kept avoiding what you really needed to do. For your own good, promise me that."

Tom let out his breath very slowly, and numbly held Torres' stare when it returned to him. He did not avoid it again. "I promise."

The older man seemed relieved, and didn't avert his eyes, either. "Good."

The moment passed, and the two men returned to the view, the gold and rose sunset then glowing through the trees. On a sudden thought, a break in the topic, Tom reached into his pocket and pulled out the card.

"You can replicate a copy of it," he said, almost casually, then added, "but I want the original back."

Torres curiously took the small card from Tom, and stared down at what he expected, and was even more pleased to see it was true. *She is beautiful*, was his first thought, although he could tell her hair was a bit mussed, her eyes a bit tired. Despite the fact he knew his child was Maquis in that portrait, that whatever she might have been doing when it was taken was likely illegal, he felt a flush of joy at the sight of her, at her little smile, the slight tilt of her head... *So much like my mother's, so wise in that funny way...* that made his heart feel alive again.

"I would like a copy of this. Thank you."

"We'll make it inside. The guards 'll let you use the replicator. I already asked."

Torres laughed, a gentle laugh, genuinely amused, and stood when Tom did. "I think my daughter will be well looked after."

Tom only grinned and motioned for where they were to go.

But the commander wasn't finished. At least one of his questions still stood in his mind, and he still wanted to hear the answer even though he knew it.

"You care for my daughter. --You don't have to know why, Thomas. But you do love B'Elanna, don't you?"

A pause, though he was glad the older man had said it for him. Tom didn't know why. He didn't know when. He didn't even know why she had stayed so long in him, could never become as unreal as he tried to make her, why he kept staring at her image, wondering what to think, but always knowing any chance with her was gone.

Even so, he knew well what she had given him.

"I guess I do."

Torres was satisfied. "Good."

Three days later, the doors of his assigned cabin closed behind him, and alone he set down his light duffel bag and wondered where to go. A thousand thoughts, of redemption, of loss, of possibilities and impossibilities spun in his head.

Chances for him, except for her...but chance for him all the same to not go back to the place he'd been.

The day after that, Tom stared down, not far, into the alien chamber and saw B'Elanna. Suspended. Then nothing.

A few months later, he believed that his initial sorrows in losing her forever had been correct feelings after all. And Commander Torres was right, too. It'd do her no good to know they'd met, they'd talked, that the older man had freed him in a way to both let her go and to hold on, to make his choice.

All he wanted to do was make peace with her. But she was so willingly deaf that even acquaintance was an awkward term. Not that he didn't understand why. She'd made up her mind. *Fine*, he decided, willingly stubborn and proud and for the first time not sorry for it. *To hell with it.*

A few months after that, Tom's mind was changed for him. Not at all an unusual thing, he was beginning to believe, though it made his dread it no less than the first time.

She needed to know, a little at least.

Tom walked into the darkened confines of sickbay, knowing she didn't want to see him. She didn't want to see anybody, and everybody had tactfully obeyed her wishes, waiting for the 'right time.'

Tom had been with her there, the second catharsis of her life. And that time, he knew there was no right time. Only that he felt it was time. About time.

He'd heard the tale her human half was willing to tell, her side of what he'd already heard, and felt almost a little angry at her for blaming herself as she did...as he himself did too often, too, selfishly, arrogantly, beat himself up for things he was powerless over.

Her hair was still soft, not as thick, not like the hair he touched, clutched, smoothed away from her lovely face. She lay almost in a fetal position, utterly still. But he could not see her face. She was laying on her other side. But he knew what it would look like. Human--perhaps with touches of what that treatment the Doc had planned, to reintegrate her Klingon genome.

Suddenly he ached to touch her, just to reconfirm his memories, which invaded him every time he let himself stray back to that time, when she made him feel alive again, when she'd

accepted him. When he was alone and when he was with her, it was far too easy to do that, even still, even after he was assured of her disgust for him, even he was pretty disgusted himself.

Just looking at her, he could remember how warm she was, how softly her skin plied under his fingertips, how easily it warmed, and the sound of her laughter, strangely inappropriate but thrilling to hear, the time he gave her exactly what she wanted and expected.

It hurt to be near her sometimes, when he let it hurt. Even when his fury and frustration with made him think to toss that beautiful smile of her out the nearest airlock, he could not forget, or deny her being within him. Deny what she meant to him, what she had done.

He wanted to tell her. He wanted again to make the peace with her, with a soul tormented, as he had tormented his own. He thought he'd given up the idea, but he couldn't help but try just one more time. She was fragile, but he saw the opportunity because maybe, somehow she would listen. She needed to know. He'd realized that in the mines, when she spoke from her heart of her losses.

*But then, maybe she's *too* vulnerable now.*

"Tom."

He stopped at her whisper. "How did you know it was me?"

"I've had two treatments already. I know your scent."

Her dull tone made him unsure how to take that, so he let it go. "B'Elanna, I need to talk to you. If it's too late--"

"I don't feel like talking," she cut in. "But...I can't sleep, anyway."

"You don't have to talk," Tom told her quietly. "Just me."

Sighing, she turned over to find him beside the biobed, staring down. But his eyes were on her own, unflinching, unwavering...yet gentle...knowing.

He knows, came a faraway voice inside her, and she struggled to push it away yet again, as she had struggled for a year, when she awoke in a dimly lit room and was told that he had betrayed them and left her for dead.

His tender gaze, not judging, was the same that invaded those nights after, ones she sometimes spent with others, but more alone, when she punched her pillow and fought like demons the tears that desperately wanted to fly from her.

Left alone, again, and again. Betrayed.

Why did I believe them so easily?

And no one had touched her as he had. Not her body, not her spirit.

No one else knew her, or bothered to know her, in the ways he did.

And yet she said nothing. She couldn't tell him. Wouldn't tell him. It'd do no good, after what she'd done. And her pride would not allow it, either. She knew she had a little of that

left, too.

She knew well he'd have nothing to do with her again, after she kicked him so brutally down. True, he was a rogue, and a flirt, and a smartass, but he had not done anything to her that deserved what she'd given him, after what he'd given her. After what he did to save them, of which she was easily ignorant...

She felt that most acutely then.

Tom sat on the side of the biobed, folding his hands on his leg. He still couldn't touch her--he didn't want to see if she'd accept that or not. Her emotionless expression beyond her painfully tear-swollen eyes sealed his decision, and made him question yet again the other.

He remembered that stare from the day he left her on the Liberty, just before the attack, when she looked at him without emotion, yet he hoped despite it all.

"B'Elanna, I have a confession to make."

Her voice came back equally soft, yet still dull. "What is it?"

"You'll probably hate me for this--or maybe for not telling you sooner. But you hate me already, so I don't think it can get any worse than that."

She slightly shook her head. "I don't hate you, Tom... Well," she admitted, "I did for a while. But I don't anymore." Before he would ask her the ridiculous, she reiterated, "What do you have to tell me?"

Tom froze, and audibly swallowed. She didn't hate him, not anymore. But she might again....

Hell with it.

"Before I left prison, I contacted your father."

Her head popped off the pillow. "What?!"

"I talked to him. I had to." Sliding off the bed, he fell into a pace, a few long steps away, where he could look elsewhere. "He loves you, B'Elanna. I told him what you were doing and how we met--nothing about the Maquis, though--or about us. I never talk about that. But he knows about you other than that, from what I knew, and he loves you."

B'Elanna took several good breaths. She felt dizzy, confused, and it had nothing to do with the treatments.

Tom saw it, too. "I'm sorry. I should have waited--"

"How was he?" she asked. "How did he look?"

She wanted to know.

The earnestness in her eyes was like one he'd not seen since...

She was not happy--or at least she didn't smile, nor thank him for what he did. But she wasn't angry, either, not at him, not at her father.

Probably without wanting to be, she was hopeful.

Tom understood.

An hour later, he left her silently, to let her have her time. She'd been through a lot those last few days alone. He respected her enough not to ask any more of her and talk about it. He only told her everything she asked for. When her questions were done, so was he.

But he also knew, without her thanks, without a mere smile or look more pronounced than inwardness, without having touched her, that friendship, at least, was possible. She didn't trust him, he was certain, but she wasn't angry at him anymore. That was more than he ever expected.

He talked to him, B'Elanna thought as the tears came again. They were still very easily made, her human emotions still raw and ready. They were tears she always wanted to shed, but had been restrained by defter avoidance. In her original form, of course, she was capable of tears. Another side of her denied them.

That other side wasn't prevalent--yet.

Tom had described him in striking detail, and she could see behind her swollen eyes exactly what he looked like, somewhat tall and slim but certainly not weak in frame, with dashes of gray in his beard and on his temples. He'd grown a beard. To cover his face.

I made him so sorry...and I still don't know if he got my message. Words really, trying hard to put down feelings I wasn't really sure of in the first place. But they were real, just as Tom said I should write it, that second night we spent together, when we made love again...

One night, she was alive with the want to make herself known again, to face all of those that she had run from, only to come to know another who'd lived in similar steps as she.

Three nights after that, she faced all that she had consigned to distance, to fantasies, by joining with that man who knew her. She joined with a man also longing for that which avoidance had trained him too well not to embrace.

In the rush of her self-discovery and want to connect to those around her, Tom's reminder of a near lifetime of isolation made her expand the idea she'd known only in modicum before, and accept her ironic desire for him. So she propositioned him--knowing all too well he'd be easy to convince, and was glad he accepted for more than her purpose.

He knew her, understood her. And she wanted him to have someone, too. She wanted him to have her, wanted him not only to feel, but to feel because of her. She would give him what he also needed to know.

She'd been scared and unsure, but determined to know, to know if she never wanted to be alone, to be away, isolated in what she could as had created for herself. She'd been disappointed with reality before, but was ready to try again.

And together they taught each other the bliss of realness, of feeling and being. Together they found pleasure in the acceptance of reality. For her, it was the first time she felt so much--of anything. For him, it'd been forever ago.

That first night, she simply allowed it all, told herself to allow it all that time, to trust him, if even irrationally. More than being pleased, she'd been inspired by what she'd gotten out of

that, from him.

The second night, she threw herself into his arms with none of the caution she'd felt the first time, only the expectation of feeling the passion and the pleasure of the night preceding. She wanted more, she wanted everything she could get, and wanted to give it back again.

She knew he did too. He certainly proved that to her.

With a verve and speed that pleased her well, he'd swept her into the cradle of his arm, held her easily as he stripped away the last of her clothing, growling like a animal happy for its long awaited meal, when finally able to ravish it. And she'd laughed aloud at the sudden intoxication of getting what she wanted, and everything and more than she expected, that first memory of possession having ached in her core throughout their endless day.

That time, she wanted to feel what she felt before, clamored for that reassurance, lest she disbelieve it. And in him she wanted to see that beautiful smile, his tender eyes upon hers as his breath slowed, a sight that embedded immediately in her heart, made her feel complete in another, with another, with him. A look in him that assured her that he did know her, that he did care about her, which made her feel more alive than she ever had.

And she thanked God or Kahless or the stars themselves that something had gone right enough with her that she could feel like that, and for Tom Paris--say whatever about him--and his becoming a part of her life. She even thanked herself for finally allowing it....

Alone in the dark silence of sickbay, B'Elanna cried at the memory.

How could I have believed so easily that he'd left me? How could I have woken up, expecting him at my side, worried and pale and dirty from the firefight, then only minutes later, turned on him without evidence? At another man's few words?

She could see again that image she'd expected.

I believed what Chakotay told me, having only three nights before left my childish, unreal fantasies of him aside and allowed myself all that was real and took everything Tom gave? After I gave myself to him? Why didn't I defend him? Why did I run back to the fantasy? Why did I hate him?

B'Elanna drew a sobbing breath.

Because it was easy. Because he simply wasn't there when I wanted him to be.

She imagined how Tom must have felt, having done what he did. Sitting, alone, in a Starfleet brig with his thoughts alone to keep him. Looking into the face of the father of a woman who he knew despised him.

Tom must have known I'd believe he betrayed us...me. And I did. I did, all too willing to believe that he'd turn on me and run away...like Dad did.

She choked and cried in the acceptance of her self-imposed desolation, hugging herself to no avail, palpably alone. She felt the ghost of his arms around her and so desperately wished it were real, if only in friendship. But she had not even that.

She had destroyed everything and all the possibilities, all that she had longed for and had finally grasped, for far too short a time. She destroyed it all, for fear.

Finally, she fell asleep, wondering how Tom didn't hate her for what she'd done, and swearing never to repeat the mistake she'd made. Only then, there would be hope. But she didn't dare expect it.

Laying on his side, Tom fought back his relief so that he would not get carried away in replaying the idea, the thought, the thing he'd all but completely given up on. He almost couldn't believe it.

Had it been their time in the Vidiian mines, or had it been before... *Did she actually take my challenge and look up the record? It wouldn't have been easy to access, but with her clearance, she could have done it...* Or maybe she was just getting used to him. Maybe she just wanted to leave it behind her.

In any case, her hatred had abated. She even admitted it, told him as much. It was all he wanted, as much as he could expect. He was still alone, but they could be friends. It was more than he'd hoped for, nothing what he expected. Though he knew damn well he'd wanted it.

He lay in the bunk of the cell they'd put him in. He would have a long time to think and to let her memory haunt him. But it was all he had to keep him.

She lay in her bunk, sobbing, readily bitter. She would have a long time take her revenge on him, to try again and again to fight his memory by surpassing it.

It only served him in distraction. He let it gnaw at him like a martyr's pride, even encouraged it, knowing in truth he was no martyr.

In her attempts she found only emptiness. She cheapened herself in desperation, and she knew it, and knew all the while it was useless.

Their eyes met only for a moment, for a moment was more than what they had. Their stares were blank and quick. No time to feel. That came later. So did repression.

Tom sat on the edge of his bed, ready to go on duty. Another day. He'd have lunch with Harry and maybe manage dinner out with someone. He didn't know with whom. At least she was okay, was finally to be released from sickbay, her treatments complete. In a couple days, she'd be back in the staff meetings.

He'd done what he felt was right, told her the truth. He would not hang on to an impossibility again, only remember her sweetly, but start over again. He could move on.

B'Elanna walked into her quarters after many days away. She'd left some things out when she'd left the week before, expected to come back soon. Not on duty for another couple days, she silently cleaned the mess, taking her time, wondering if she should go out to dinner. Maybe Tom and Harry would be there... But she wasn't ready for dinner out yet, much as their conversations cheered her. Another night, perhaps. She decided to catch up on work instead.

She'd let go of her anger of his leaving her, told him she had and freed him of his guilt. She would not treat him unfairly again, would give him friendship. She could let go.

She still treated him shortly and stared at him askance, blankly, long after she was restored to the woman he knew, the same woman who finally said he may call a friend a year before. And they did become friends again, though they never talked about that. It was just understood, as crewmates, senior staff, a professional relationship with occasional off duty hellos. They worked in groups, chatted in passing, pleasant enough.

Increasingly, however, he taunted her, every now and again to where it grew into a game. Friends did things like that. No one thought anything but that he was mischievous.

As did she. And decreasingly, she minded it. She went on with her own work but allowed his input, too. She respected his opinion as others on board had to come to--which impressed her considering what he'd started with on Voyager--very little. Even so, she couldn't help but think sometimes she was maintaining the chief pilot's ship, which always brought a sly smirk

to her otherwise busy face.

He still gave her her distance, though he queried her, looked out for her, went after her when she managed to get herself in trouble again (an old, secret joke that made him roll his eyes and grin to himself) -- all the while beginning the circle again. He didn't even realize what he was doing, really, until...

Eighteen months later, Tom chuckled to himself at the fact that he simply couldn't resist any longer. She had become just so tempting, and she was so close--and she was definitely asking for it, in his opinion, having set herself up from some ribbing from *someone*. And he had nothing to lose, after all. And Bristow was a little dork.

Days after, B'Elanna found herself in her quarters, suddenly laughing, "Tabard monk, my ass." He was just asking her to smack him, all with a casual grin and the carelessness she'd once cursed him for. He hadn't asked for that much attention in a long time.

She felt warm to remember it, to remember him again, to hope...hope he'd do it again.

The same night, he lay on his side, his head rested on his arm, taking in that smile of hers, touching her visage. He hadn't looked inside that case in a while. He always knew her portrait still resided in his bed table drawer, but only once and a while did he open it. That night, he did.

She'd given him 'that' smile again the other day, and it filled him. It addicted him immediately.

A year later, he kissed her, covering her mouth, and she kissed him back. And he forgot about the time, the place, the words and even the reason he had followed her out of the messhall so determined to talk to her; he only relished in that she'd retaliated to his own retaliation. She had not backed away again.

She loved him.

Around the corner in the wide corridor and seeing no others, he sped to a sprint, praying he'd not run into anyone, except her, of course.

Around another corner, he saw her and sped more.

Hearing the thrum of steps, she turned; he swept past her and encircled her waist even as he stopped, spinning her in the circle of his own momentum. His breath was happy, eyes shining as he stared down at her again. He loved her.

She smiled back.

That smile--clever and knowing and not minding, it seemed, more than curious...but alive. Tom touched that smile, as if to see it was real, though he knew well it was. He'd let too much go to fate when all seemed lost, tortured himself too long with that loss, and had been too damned patient when all his hopes had been returned, for it to be a fantasy.

She was nothing but real to him, as was that smile of hers once again.

Tucking her into a corner, he swelled with his smile when she assented to his request. More than willingly, he let her guide him to her waiting lips, into the warmth of her embrace, which filled him even further.

As it did B'Elanna, who for lack of time and privacy might have...she did not know what she might do, but she wanted it all again, for her and for him, for them. In her epiphany, as it was the first time, she had come alive with thoughts and feelings she believed, truly believed were possible again.

She had finally found the courage to rectify her mistakes. She had freed herself once again. Then, in the arms of that man who knew her, who had long been a part of her life, she wanted so to act--

The COMM line opened with her name on it. After she responded to it, when it died, their locked eyes narrowed in mirth, and their laughter preceded their embrace, warm and knowing.

He walked her to the turbolift and kissed her again. They'd get away with each other, another time, when she got back.

They had plenty of time. And they knew it.

The dinner dress looked lovely on her, he appraised, but it looked better still on the floor, after he lifted it swiftly from her arms and drank in a sight he never thought the grace of fate would allow him again.

Sighing deeply, he felt his entire body flush as he wove his hand back into her thick hair and devoured her sweet, full mouth. He never realized how much...

She pulled away his shirt and started on his trousers--the fit of which had caught her eye like a beacon the moment she entered his quarters. His scent and skin, delightfully familiar, made him all the more wanted.

She shivered in expectation as he rendered her bare, that long ago memory filling her with need. No other man...

She felt the edge of his bed press against her calves; she let him ease her back and follow her down. Their hands taking in every curve and feeling, their kisses blinded, their passion, too neglected, flooded through them, uncontrolled, not wanting to be ebbled. It had been...

She rolled on top of him without his having to ask, stroked his flesh with her own, readying them both as he softly, so softly, caressed her nipples. She arched naturally, lost in a rhythm that nature alone dictated, recording their equally approving growls and purrs, all familiar.

Sitting up and moving into her waiting embrace, he kissed her again, tasted her again; remembering it so well, so clearly, it might have frightened him. But it didn't.

She let him take her down again, wanting him to blanket her again, to feel his warm body pressed against her. She shivered deep within herself, as she had the first time.

He pulled himself up and her lips parted to see him. Tears lay in his eyes as his hands softly yet thoroughly memorized her, as they had the first time. He drew a breath, shaking his head slightly as he stared into her, in awe of her, of them, of it all.

"I missed you so much," he whispered thickly. "I tried so hard...not to, not to hope...and then I couldn't hope too much..."

"I did too," she breathed, her gaze clear and full.

She touched the corner of his eye, then tasted his tear before guiding his lips to hers again, softly crying into the relief it brought, to not have to try anymore, but only do, and to soon be one, once again, after so long secretly remembering.

And reliving every moment and pleasure and feeling in that intoxicating present, they rediscovered each other. His fingers easily teased into her, stroking her wetness and circling her peak as she bent her head back and moaned aloud; he purred low in his throat to see her so alive, so ready, no longer in memory.

Her gentle touch firmed around his shaft, pressing it against her trembling belly, running along its length, her memory alive in the present once more.

"Make love to me," she pleaded in a breath, barely spoken for the emotion that clouded it. "We have time for the rest, but I need you, Tom. I need you inside me again."

A heavy blink of assent, and he took her hand; their fingers laced. Her slim, strong legs encircled him and he completed them. She cried for the fullness of her body and her heart; he cried out as well. The tear finally escaped his eye as he smiled gently upon her. She was beautiful, and in ecstasy, perfect. Everything. And he wanted her to feel everything, from him, in her, in them.

She clutched his neck, rocking in his flow and rhythm, feeling everything, every tremor and touch, and meeting his every move. Making love with him. Her moans without restraint escaped her and he drank them, and she relished in his responsive song, basked in his heat, the smell and taste of him.

She belonged to him. She had for a very long time. She made him know it.

She came as she filled her gaze with his own, touching his straining face, letting him see her, letting him see everything, giving him everything, herself, and all that she could inspire in him, everything she'd sought to hide when there was no hope. And when her reward filled her, she smiled gently, satiated, knowing.

He belonged to her. He had for a very long time.

In a way, deep in the well of the hurt and denial, she had always known it. Finally, she welcomed it.

And again.

She stared at the memory, the memory he'd carried with him those four years, a memory of herself she thought she'd left behind, in many ways had.

The night before, they had relived everything and more.

That morning they'd created even more still.

An hour later, unwillingly bathed and dressed, combed and scented, Tom kissed her sleepy head and left her in his bed to rest. But she did not feel alone.

B'Elanna's eyes lazily opened on her lover's quarters. It did not speak of him, for a reason she couldn't puzzle out, but wasn't at all alarmed about. Her own quarters were much the same. She kept her few personal items in safer places.

Wondering on that, she straightened her arm and tapped open the drawer in the table beside her. In the slightest breeze it sent, she smelled his cologne. Finding it, taking in the full strength of the woody citrus, she separated it from his natural scent and taste with an ease that no longer frightened her.

Putting it away, she looked inside the small case the cologne sat beside, and saw the portrait. A slow, strange smile grew upon her lips.

It had been so long ago, but she remembered it all.

She felt much older than four years had afforded her--and yet she'd never felt more alive.

She could see the blank hurt in her eyes, and yet the little smile beyond it. A time when she knew, and wanted to know, only to mutilate what she'd learned, only to gradually accept it again.

She was ready to accept it.

He had carried that portrait of her through those years, through the months in prison when he knew what he'd done had forsaken any of the "maybes" she'd been too tempted by to refuse, too scared to embrace. Kept it when she spit on him in her stubborn ignorance, denying him so many--once, twice, a hundred--times, even tried to deny they had ever known each other, tried to forget their nights together. Kept it when everything she gave him was hopelessness.

She loved him even more for seeing her face, young and angry, yet in that little grin with hope for better. This image he had tucked away in his drawer in a case, worn at the side for opening it.

Not far away, Tom's eyes hardly focused on the hypospray tubes he filed away. B'Elanna's smile, that lovely smile, only hours old, was unlike one he'd ever known of her. She smiled like that when she gave him everything, her body and her soul, in that smile, in their knowingness.

She made him know she had. And she drank him in when he returned it.

He belonged to her. He had for years. In a way, he'd always known that, and he had never really been sorry for that at all.

Even if his first realizing that was such a long time ago, he never remembered regretting.

More than six months later, Tom had to laugh at her question--which was tucked inside her admission. "You were snooping in my drawers that long ago?"

B'Elanna grinned. "Call me curious."

"Better than that than uninterested, I guess. I suppose I kept it because I didn't want to leave it all behind, what happened between us. I wanted to remember at least that much. I never stopped caring about you, even when I wanted to laser seal that mouth of yours."

"Thanks a lot," she snickered, though she knew what he meant.

He became quiet after that, well after he spoke, and though she knew he smiled at her reply--she felt it pressed upon her brow, on which his cheek was resting--she thought he'd paused unnaturally after the smile faded.

After giving him another minute to speak again, B'Elanna raised her head to look into his eyes, pointed away in distraction.

"Hey," she said softly. "What's going on up there?"

Tom took a full breath before answering. "I was thinking about something Seven said."

She furrowed her brow at that. "What did she say this time?"

Another pause, the slightest shrug. "Maybe I still am scared of being alone."

"Are you still thinking about that?" she asked, turning her gaze at him. *Of course, I ought to know.* But she said, "Well, I guess that's like you, considering what you've been through."

"What about you?" he countered softly. "What are you scared of?"

He knows this, she thought, a little confused that he would have to ask. "I'm frightened of people leaving me. That's no surprise, is it? Much as I try to make that happen sometimes, I'm scared to be left behind, left...alone." She grinned at that irony. "I guess we've never changed in that respect, for the most part."

He nodded slowly, knowing that all too well, and feeling not a little silly to know what a stupid question it'd been. They'd been lovers again for some time, and they'd already been to hell and back together, even recently. That night he found her trying to escape the holodeck seemed a lot longer ago than it really had been. He'd almost forgotten it in in itself...or perhaps didn't expect it was still so primary after what healing she'd accomplished, and what they'd gotten through together. Then again, he hadn't expected it'd just go away, either. Losing her friends was only one thing, he knew.

Afraid of loss--and he'd known that since they first knew each other. Little wonder she had despised him, and it took so long to earn her trust again, even with her knowing the truth of his actions. The idea of betrayal only put a better reason to it, solidified her injury.

He met her eyes again. In them, he knew she loved him, and it felt so strange. It still amazed him sometimes, maybe not the fact itself anymore as much as how he could see it, so clearly then.

Tom touched her cheek with a finger, grinning gently. "You don't ever have to be afraid of being left again. I swear, that will never happen."

"Thank you," she said, a little quiet still, yet returning in her face the tenderness he still showed her, amazingly, after all that time. So familiar... "That means a lot to me."

"Well, I mean it." In his voice was certainty.

She would have killed and died for that man at that moment, though she wondered, even having known her as he had, if he truly knew how much she'd wished for it...how long she had really waited...

"And you don't have to worry about being alone again..." She stopped. The rest of whatever she was about to add died on her lips and in her memory when his eyes returned to hers, so intently that she blinked. "What? What are you thinking now?"

His eyes did not avert, and he reached below the blanket to blindly take her hand. It was as warm as his.

"B'Elanna, will you take the Oath with me?"

(fin.)

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