



*For Her*

"Here to stamp out intergalactic evil?"

"It's funny."

"What?"

"I went on this mission expecting to play out a childhood fantasy. But along the way, when I realized that ocean would just be...gone one day..., it started to matter to me....Sounds pretty stupid, huh?"

"No..."

"No, it sounds like you found yourself a cause."

"I never thought of myself as a cause kind of guy."

"Well, for what it's worth, I'm proud of you."

"Thanks..."

"But Captain Proton's not going to be able to save the day this time, is he?"

"...What about Tom Paris?"

*Vivo por ella sin saber si saber, si la encontr? a me ha encontrado  
Ya no recuerdo come fue, pero al final me ha conquistado*

Her words and that song, that passionate song, were stuck in his head as his gaze drifted around the indentation in the gray mass above him. The voices that sang it, the passionate thrust of the notes and the music spun in his head, repeating or repeating phrases at no will of his own.

*I live for her without knowing if I have found her  
or she has found me I don't remember any longer how it was  
but at the end she has conquered me*

The last time he heard it...He tried to block it out of his mind, even if the song remained. Not that the memory had anything to do with anything unpleasant. Far from it. Lack of privacy alone made him try not to think about those things. It was difficult to do.

*I live for her because she gives me all of my real strength*

*I live because of her and it doesn't go away*

*Well, maybe not \*because\* of her, but it's pretty damned persistent,* Tom grinned to himself as he continued to trace the line of the ceiling panels with his eyes in that unending rat race. In his more distracted moments he let himself do it again, though he knew it'd only lead in circles.

In his quieter moments, when he was sick of talking to himself or watching whatever lucky crewman assigned to duty there go about routine, boring security checks and subroutines--when he let himself do so, he would think of her and miss her.

He would wonder if she thought she'd sent him...Wondered if she actually had. He wondered if he would have sat on his conscience if it hadn't been for her, letting it eat at him like things so often did, like so many things did. Would he have gone on, like he had so many times, playing the role of indifference or forgetfulness, if she hadn't told him, in essence, that the role wasn't what was important, that what was important was his conscience.

Would he have acted without her support?

He knew he'd wanted to. But would he have? He probably would have stuffed it.

But they were still his actions. He had acted.

Now he was paying for it, he knew. He knew at the very least he'd be busted--though a child inside him thought for an instant he might not. That child died as quickly as it had asserted itself, when he heard the captain's voice over the COMM, telling him essentially she'd kill him if necessary. He didn't blame her that.

He wondered if that was such a good thing sometimes, for as good as it felt to have stood for a cause he truly believed in, he also was pained with the knowledge he'd betrayed a trust given in gift and later hard earned, an incredible trust he'd paid into over and over, and gladly so.

He still, somehow, wasn't sorry for his decision. He couldn't be. He couldn't allow himself to lie like that anymore, not to them, not to himself...

B'Elanna missed him, Harry had said. The thought, though aching in truth, put the beat in his heart when he eyes drifted to the ceiling tiles again.

She was with him. She supported him. She was being strong, and missed him. She had every right to remind him of himself. She was the one who'd had her choices taken away--and though he didn't regret his part in that for an instant, he could understand why she'd reminded him that he did have a choice, and had the power to stand for his beliefs. She hadn't been able to act on her beliefs.

He hadn't wanted to live with that stab--that stab of conscience that invaded far too many of his memories. Captain Janeway had acted just as she had every right to, and he knew the moment he decided to act that he'd have to live with another kind of stab, also familiar--the stab of disloyalty. But there had been purpose this time, not selfish need.

At what cost--again--would he have had to pay for his duty, had he given in and left the Minaens to their own devices? He would never know. All he knew was that he couldn't *not* act that time, once he knew he could.

He'd paid too hard the last time, he suddenly, unwillingly, remembered.

He remembered the Mari, what they did to B'Elanna.

Only a night before they took her away he'd laid with her, touching her, tasting her, making love to her. He caressed her ears with his endearments with the reward of her purrs and with her repeated arousal, her well directed touches as she moved herself above him and returned all his favors. When he came in her again, when she clutched onto him and swore his name in her ecstasy, he knew he was happier than he'd ever been, complete in the arms of his lover, his friend, with B'Elanna.

(Tom rolled over on the hard bunk, away from the guard. The mere thought of her, in any context, was a hard thing not to react physically to, and he cursed himself for letting that intimate memory crawl into his thoughts when he could do nothing about it.)

They took her away. She'd committed no crimes, and they would "purge" her. Their captain sought legalities as the clock quickly ticked.

He couldn't believe it--not then, nor in what reasoning he attempted later. But she was, after all, as Chakotay reminded him needlessly, the captain.

He tried to fight for her, that woman he loved, pleaded to Janeway, then to his first officer--the official, correct channels. Instead the captain chose the more subversive route while Tom fiddled with escape plans he knew would never be considered--he did it anyway for his initial suspicion, to keep busy. He hated every second of it.

It'd turned out okay. B'Elanna had recovered, but Tom had been forced to stifle his heart, his soul, every feeling in the core of his being, when he obeyed her orders and didn't blow the Mari power grid to bits, didn't grab a shuttle, didn't beam her out of there and tell the Mari to go to hell. He'd sure wanted to. But he didn't. He obeyed. He'd hated himself for that, even if it might have been the right thing, even after they left that world to their own idiocy and solutions to it.

He'd almost forgotten how angry he'd been with his captain for choosing diplomacy over B'Elanna, how angry he'd been at it all. He buried it...so he could be an officer, be still a good officer to a captain that had given him everything.

B'Elanna could have been permanently damaged for it.

He never let it go, only put on the long list on stabs in his gut when he thought unwillingly on past events. He never forgot. He'd just not let himself think about it...until then. Oddly, he hadn't expected that the frustration, the anger, would have remained as well. He should have expected it.

He'd stayed angry over so many other things, over his father, over so many things he couldn't control, over things he could control but didn't, over his own stupid mistakes and so many decisions, right or wrong. Why not that?

Because it wasn't useful to be angry with the captain when a transfer was impossible. Because he was powerless and he knew it. Because he didn't want to fight the same person who'd saved his life.

B'Elanna, his friend, his love--his first real, unselfish, mature love--could have been permanently damaged for his obedience.

He wondered if B'Elanna had been frustrated too...if she knew all the details behind the Mari incident. He'd never told her about that, only his relief to see her safe and healthy and home again. That was all that mattered then.

Would she have been angry, too? At the captain? At him? Or would she have locked that away as he had?

Tom's eyes were still pinned on the wall. By his instinctual clock, he knew there'd be a shift change soon, the third shift. Until then, the panels would do. He'd wait for the shift change and then he'd go to sleep. He didn't feel like talking to a PADD anymore that day.

B'Elanna could feel his arms around her again, and she shifted in her bed to stare up at the barely lit ceiling.

She could feel his motion against her, his warmth and touch, his soft words in her ear. She growled at herself for thinking about it. It wasn't helping her sleep.

But she couldn't stop thinking about it.

It hadn't been too long since they'd started talking, really talking again, since she'd let him back into her life, told him what was happening with her.

He had suspected, even covered for her--though unwittingly at times--but couldn't put a name to that which he recognized from his own questionable past but was seeing in a different form. When she finally told him, really told him, of the hell she'd unconsciously endured and put herself through, his tears of understanding and heartfelt sympathy fogged his relieved eyes. He reeled with guilt, cursed himself, for not knowing more, for being too close to see more, and praised her strength for persevering. He offered her everything and anything she needed, even if it was distance, if that would help her.

It'd been more recently still since he'd told her for love and for fear of loss, he'd have taken her decision to die away from her. She lashed at him for it, begged him for a reason why he'd have disrespected her wishes.

He told her he just couldn't, in *his* conscience, have let her die. He told her she hadn't had the luxury or ease to think about it--but he did. Her life meant more than any principles or regulations or codes of ethics.

It might have been wrong, but it was true, and it was for love of her that he'd argued for her life, not for any vindication of the Cardassian, not for any support of the Doctor, not to contradict Chakotay--only for her. He could think only of that, and couldn't have lived with himself otherwise. He said she would have done the same thing had their positions been switched.

B'Elanna couldn't argue that. Because of it, she couldn't even argue the captain anymore for agreeing with him, life first, issues later. She couldn't argue *that* part of it, anyway...anymore.

B'Elanna sighed. Nothing was easy to think about, as if anything ever had been for her.

He said he missed her too, she'd been told.

With a simple command, the chords of the song played through her half lit room. She closed her eyes as the words played in her head, and heard the memory of Tom whispering those lyrics in her ear, felt his warm breath on her neck. It was the last time they were together, moving slowly together, barely dancing, nor had they intended to.

They let the music stir them when it did, and let their stirrings guide them together, sharing their warmth and love as they had the song, but joined as one instead of two moving together.

*I live for her who gives me  
all the love that pours from her...*

The song concluded and she deactivated it, rolling over onto her other pillow as she forced her eyes close again, forced herself not to touch herself to seek the relief that the memory that song and its consequence, and his lingering scent in that other pillow, aroused in her. She knew it'd only make her want him more, anyway. She knew from experience.

She instead clasped her hands tightly under that pillow, rubbed her legs together for a temporary fix, and willed herself to relax. She knew she had to wake up early, and she'd be damned if she'd slack for a minute.

Though she kept her feeling and beliefs to herself, she felt she honored Tom's disgrace somehow by being at her best while he couldn't be. She felt somehow she was representing him, doing him honor through her own dignity.

It was, after all, partially her fault he was there.

Ironically, she'd liked that Tom had stood his ground that first time, when he'd told her he'd fight for her life no matter what. It was side of him she'd seen before, a proud defiance that invariably--right or wrong--was noble at its core. She knew well she and Tom had argued on issues, but she always knew, even in the bitterest debates, the underneath the anger was a man who cared deeply, and wanted things to be all right.

Yet it was a defiance quickly muffled by the need for compliance or morale or policy--all of which they both knew well were necessary--until only recently, when he'd stood and cursed all the ethics, his fellow officers, even her own wishes, to fight for what he felt was right, truly right--her life. He'd spoken out before, *many* times before, but he'd never stuck so hard in the opposition to regulations, ethics, and his fellow officers. Not that much before.

Though it pained and angered her, she loved him for it all the more, ironically trusted him more than ever with her very life, as he had fought even her wishes for it.

Meanwhile, her beliefs and wishes would remain her own domain. In the end, she could live with that, albeit grudgingly.

She told him so, when she found him coming off his shift--she'd waited for him at the door of his quarters. Told him he didn't own her. He knew that. Told him she had the right to hate him. He knew that too. He asked her if she would rather be dead, hoped she didn't. She admitted she didn't.

Slowly, inevitably, they came together again.

She held him close and told him she was angry, but she loved him still. He kissed her hair, caressed her back, told her he was sorry for her anger, hated having to risk her love of him, but he didn't regret his actions. It was a risk he felt was worth it.

She liked that, for its truth, for its meaning. No way, she knew, was this man letting her slip away, in spite of all the abstractions, beliefs, histories and practices. In spite of good and evil and everything in between, even in spite of her own words, he would preserve her because her life was worth more than anything said or done.

In turn, he wasn't going anywhere, either.

It didn't make her any less indignant about the captain's visit, even if B'Elanna had calmed down and returned to work without any more incidents between them. Tom claimed no special hold on her, but only spoke from and acted on his heart and instinct. It seemed the captain felt, for whatever good reasons, she had a *right* to contradict her wishes. That was different.

B'Elanna would never accept that, even as her commanding officer, Captain Janeway had control of her body or soul in any way. She could control the workings of the ship, and act to protect them. Nevertheless, she owned no one. It wasn't much like an officer to think it, she knew, but B'Elanna truly believed, right or wrong, that it was the crew who chose to obey or not obey, to give their body and soul to the orders placed upon them. It wasn't a requirement to obey and comply.

The captain probably already knew that. She hadn't shown it very often of late, though.

When B'Elanna left the briefing room, after Tom had made his impassioned argument, she knew what was in store for him. When he came forth with his beliefs and indignation at the Manaen toad who even B'Elanna knew wouldn't do a damn thing, she could see Tom arguing for her life again, acting on instinct, on what he truly felt was right.

She left knowing precisely what would come out of Janeway's mouth -- and it wouldn't be agreement that time. And she knew what Tom would feel.

B'Elanna didn't want him to feel that. She didn't want him to have to give in, though she knew he'd likely be forced to without compromise, without option.

She didn't want him to get in any more trouble than she knew he was in--but she liked that fight in him, saw how it lit and fired him. It was the truth in Tom Paris, a man finally, totally exposed to them. That was the man she knew and loved, trusted and believed utterly--but it was also a man she rarely saw outside the nest of their most confidential conversations.

He had boldly opened his heart to all of them, unafraid, as he had when he fought for her life against her wishes.

She knew when she left the briefing room that Janeway would quash it that time, as she had quashed B'Elanna's own beliefs--whether it was the right thing or not.

B'Elanna wasn't sorry to be alive at all, though, true, she'd felt guilty for it. Tom wouldn't have been sorry to stay out of trouble, but he'd feel the guilt of his continued inaction, the futility of his feelings and beliefs. She knew that feeling of futility pretty well.

Tom probably would have gotten over the Moneans. But at what cost? To allow another person to take away his choices again, to show him how, as if he needed lessons, to stuff his

heart and soul into a little shell and feel his compassion for a doomed people and planet in that tiny, hidden place?

B'Elanna had done that herself under Janeway's command several times--and hated herself each time for it. Though it was probably the right thing each time, it still grated her conscience.

"It was necessary," she remembered herself saying more than once, not knowing if she really meant it, though knowing her unwilling actions were the more correct ones.

In those cases, she'd been a good officer, as Tom had in so many similar situations. Being an officer was not her soul's work, however. It wasn't Tom's either, and she knew it. In a way, she'd always known that. There was a difference.

They both had the right to choose which incarnation to be. She truly believed that, then more than ever.

She had the computer locate him, and found him on the holodeck.

He'd told her recently that her life was more important than abstract ethics, historically inspired principles and unplanned oaths--no matter how right or proper any of those things were. Her life was more than that to him.

When she sat beside him, looked into his pained face and saw that man she loved and was admittedly proud of, she told him in but a few words, that his soul was more important than the role he played, and the rules that governed the game. Beyond the facade stood his real being. He had a choice.

She meant it.

When she heard what he'd done, shortly after they left the holodeck together parting ways at the turbolift, she wasn't surprised, and secretly was glad he'd followed through on his conscience. That was the man she knew he was deep inside, an honorable man. For that, she was prouder still of him. She was proud of a criminal.

In that case, she could live with that. If that made her a criminal, too, so be it.

Even as she'd thought it, she wondered when she'd ever been so Klingon without regretting it.

B'Elanna's eyes opened at the alarm, and after deactivating it, she nuzzled her face into the pillow he'd last slept upon, taking in his scent despite what it stirred in her, then rose to begin another day.

Like the other days since she'd decided on her stance, she would do her job, hold her head high, and retain her silence. She would know her own heart--and her own conscience--but she would be completely professional.

It was necessary, but not for the others.

Tom put the PADD aside and leaned against the wall, watching the shift change on yet another day. He didn't even know how many days he had left--a week, perhaps.

How official and clean it all seemed, he thought as the two outside the forcefield quietly exchanged codes and logged off and in. Tom didn't try to engage either in conversation anymore. They wouldn't speak to him, and he didn't feel like wasting his breath with stupid attempts.

How neat the official stand, the regulations and ranks and system seemed. He knew it was what Starfleet was built upon. It had given him what life he knew, which was much more good than bad, when it all added up. He wasn't nearly sorry for its existence -- much the contrary, really. But he wondered how he could fit into the system he knew so well comfortably again, not after doing what he had, after realizing what he had.

He would never be the son his father wanted. In his heart and soul--beneath whatever surface he'd eventually rebuild for duty's sake, rebuild to get behind the conn again, and make what amends he needed to prevent his life from becoming a living hell on that ship he still did love--he would never be the officer Janeway believed he could be, or might have been. He would never *truly* believe in that system again, if he ever had.

He would never again be able to rationalize away his frustration and doubts. Nor did he want to, in all honesty. There was a freedom in his purposed rebellion that fed him in a way he'd never expected. He didn't know what to do with it, but he knew it had empowered him somehow.

As a crew member, he would likely be a good one again--he'd never get through a day without trouble if he didn't. Tom knew that well enough. But beneath it, beyond the official status, the rank and the privileges that'd he both taken for granted and been thankful for, he would always know, for certain then, he was free. Not think for himself, as he too often had, or be an officer with independent thoughts, but he could be free within himself, aside the orders and regulations he would have to follow, truly know he had a choice. There was a difference.

The thought drifted, and he wondered if B'Elanna had realized that too. She had been the one to point out the difference to him, or at least made him know there was one.

Damn right, B'Elanna knew. Right or wrong, there was a difference. They both knew that.

He got a look from outside the forcefield; the shift had changed and the rested, uniformed figure outside the forcefield gave him a quick glance to somehow acknowledge that, for whatever reason.

Tom only gave a blink in response and picked up his PADD.

"The plasma conversion efficiency analysis you requested, Captain," B'Elanna said with no special inflection and laid the PADD in the other woman's hand.

"Thank you, B'Elanna."

With her usual non-committal turn of mouth--a slight flicker of a grin--B'Elanna turned to

return to her duties. It wasn't an excuse. It'd already been a busy day with more to come.

"B'Elanna," the captain said, slightly in the interrogative, and waited for her engineer to turn again. But when she did, plain-faced, as if nothing else was on her mind, Janeway couldn't help but pause. Finally, she asked, "How are you? I haven't seen you outside of your duty shifts recently."

She didn't smile, but she did try to be pleasant. She had been curious. She did want to know.

B'Elanna's expression went unchanged, though she did consider carefully what she would say, even as her mind shot out, *How can she dare ask me that?* To her credit, her face showed none of that conflict, nor did her voice when she decided.

"I've been working...a lot."

The captain, after all, did look concerned. The captain, after all, was yet a good woman. B'Elanna would always know that. She just didn't agree with her all the time--especially of late.

"We haven't had the chance to talk about this," Janeway offered.

"I don't think there's any need for us to talk about it," B'Elanna replied, not coldly, not warmly, either.

"I think there is," the other woman said quietly. "I know you and I have been having our disagreements lately. What's happened recently may have put a lot more strain into a situation we never really did settle."

"Have my duties been affected in any way since the 'incident'?"

"No. But I am concerned about how you're dealing with this."

A pause, and neither turned away.

"Six days, Captain," B'Elanna finally said, softly, neutrally.

Janeway blinked. Her engineer had cut straight to the point. She followed suit. "You do understand I did what had to be done," she said. Her voice was gentle but certain. "That his punishment was more than well earned, and I did what I had to do, for Voyager, for the crew, as captain of this ship."

"I know you did what you felt was best. I know Tom knows that, too."

"Yes. He did."

B'Elanna drew a breath. "But I hope you understand that I support him, and will continue to. As far as I'm concerned, he did the right thing."

Though she felt some blood trickle from her face at the assuredness of her engineer's oath, Janeway accepted it with a slow, single nod. "You miss him, I'm sure," she said, resisting the defensiveness that first came to her mind. "I am sorry for that, B'Elanna."

"He misses me too. Harry told me last week." B'Elanna shifted, preparing her next step to

turn her back to the door again. "Tom has six more days in solitary confinement, Captain," she quietly continued. "He made his decisions, and so did you--and we've all paid for what happened back there. Whether or not you trust him again is your choice. That's your right and your privilege. That said, I will stand by him, no matter what consequences he chooses to pay for his conscience. That's *my* right."

B'Elanna watched this sink into her captain's face. She got no reply in word or expression, nor expected one. "In six days, I hope we'll *all* be able to start over and move on. Not forget, just move on. Until then, with all due respect, I have my own duties to attend to. Permission to be excused, Captain."

She had made her decision, too.

Janeway nodded again. She did understand the other woman's position, and hadn't really expected differently. "Dismissed," she said softly.

...

"Lunch, Tom."

Tom turned from his view of the wall and gave the guard a nod. The forcefield deactivated and Tom moved to get his meal. "Thanks."

Neelix watched Tom move back to the bunk and begin eating. He knew well he wasn't supposed to talk to 'Ensign Paris.' But...

"How are you?" he asked quietly, stepping back slowly to give himself a little more time. He wanted more time. Tom was still being very quiet. It unnerved the other man for a reason he couldn't put a word to.

"Fine," Tom replied kindly. "Thanks for lunch, Neelix."

He said nothing more. Just like before. Friendly but nothing more.

Neelix almost pressed him, planning to casually inquire if the food was all right. But Tom had already started eating, without complaint, compliantly.

Neelix stepped back once more and the forcefield popped back to life. Tom didn't react to it, just ate. He didn't look despondent, he didn't look anxious. He didn't look anything but calm.

The Talaxian shifted once on his feet, took a breath and left, wondering when Harry Kim would get off duty. Maybe he could tell him more than Tom would. Neelix knew B'Elanna wouldn't. He'd repeatedly tried her. She was saying nothing, had said nothing on the incident for the entire month, but carried herself quietly and immersed herself in business. No, Harry would be easier to talk to.

Tom continued his meal.

It was his choice, after all, not to uselessly beg for attention or engage in conversation. It was his choice just to take the rest of his time with a little bit of dignity. He'd made his choice, and he had decided to live with it. There was nothing more than that, really. He

was doing his time. He'd decided to do it well, and keep moving from there.

He hoped B'Elanna hadn't said anything about what happened on the holodeck, and suspected she hadn't. She missed him, that was all Harry had told him, meaning she probably hadn't said anything but that. She was holding her own. Tom was proud of her for it.

He hadn't expected anything otherwise, and he let her influence him again. He too would hold his own, and then move on. It was the only dignified thing he could do. It probably wouldn't have the same meaning to anyone else, except B'Elanna, he hoped. But it was something he knew he'd feel good about.

When his plate was bare, he placed the tray at the edge of the cell and reclined again on the bunk to let it digest. He didn't look when the crewman came to claim it. As the reclamator whirred behind him, he merely closed his eyes and waited.

B'Elanna's eyes flicked across the console. Thirty-nine minutes ago, Tuvok had released him from the brig and to his own quarters.

She had calculated precisely that it would take him ten minutes to get to his quarters and look around with the realization he was home again, twenty minutes in the shower, five to get dressed, five more for cushion. Not long after that, she knew he would leave for a short meeting with Chakotay, to get his new duty assignments.

Those thirty-nine minutes seemed longer than that month. The remainder of her shift would be longer still, for what was on her mind. And less than a minute would set it all into action.

Just thinking about it made a grin curl on her lips as she tucked herself into the secluded workstation she'd chosen that day.

Still tapping on her console as the daily diagnostic flashed across another screen, she tapped her comm badge. "Torres to Paris."

Her pace was quick when she came around the corner, and the sight was as relieving as she knew it'd be--almost unreal and yet surprisingly unreal. Neither set of eyes broke from the other's as she swiftly moved through the living room and into his arms.

Staying there, firm and warm, his breath upon her hair, warming more, he breathed, "God, I missed you," and squeezed her gently again, drawing a deep breath to calm his pounding heart and a dizzy reality that was nearly overwhelming.

She trembled, with excitement, with nervousness, with expectation and anxiousness relieved but not vented. "Come with me," she whispered, pulling away, pulling him with her through the room.

Not since they met again on Voyager, in acquaintance and friendship and loving each other,

had they been apart as long as they had those thirty days--close once, but not a month. He'd always been there, somehow. She'd always been there, somehow. Finally, they were there, together again. The rest of it, for the time, was not important.

She might have been polite enough to ask if he was hungry, but when her claws bumped up against the edge of the bed, his searing kiss slighted any manners she might have managed. Moaning as her body lit up with all that relief, all that wanting and waiting finally over, and the want for him with her, she ran her hands up his chest. They would have circled around him had her fingers not met his collar, noticeably decorated with one less ornament than she was accustomed to.

As her fingers rubbed the single pip, they naturally parted, eyes meeting, asking.

His eyes were solid, not sorry, yet they seemed to ask if it mattered. Her invitation earlier didn't seem to indicate any problem, but he could see that she was seeing it for the first time, feeling the reality of his consequences sink in.

Her fingers circled the pip again, and though her head tilted as she examined it, her eyes didn't budge, and a slow, odd smile grew on her face.

Unlike the last time, the removal of his symbol of rank was a gentle, simple one. It dropped to the floor inaudibly as her hand moved away from his collar.

A moment later, her provisional rank bar joined it.

*I live because of her who gives me  
nights of love and freedom...*

She purred approvingly as he maneuvered a cracker with cheese into her mouth, and savored the taste as her body continued to savor the warmth and feel and after-effects of having him again.

She had needed that time with him, despite the fact she knew she should have been getting some rest. She had so needed him, woke on so many nights with only a memory of him inside her and knowing nothing she did would never cure the ache of her longing for that man who'd taken her few words under advisement. Now the ache, though not satiated, was well eased, as was the loneliness, and the silence.

He had needed that time with her, needed her almost desperately in body and painfully in soul. He needed to know he was, indeed, joined to her in both those ways. So, they'd satisfied the physical, more than once or twice, essentially getting that immediacy out of their systems.

Afterwards, they finally wound up under the covers, propped up on pillows, talking quietly in the ebb of their built-up passions and nibbling on a shared plate of food.

It wasn't all they shared, they gradually discovered as they related their time apart, as a little rest and some food had made them unusually talkative. They even laughed at one point, not having realized yet how much they'd miss just talking, hearing each other's voices. Even so, their talk was necessarily serious, and covered a lot of ground. He hadn't

spoken to her since they'd left the holodeck, when he gave her a quick kiss and left to find Riga.

"No, I don't think I would've gone without your advice," he admitted, and her eyes widened to find her suspicions confirmed. "You did want me to follow through with it, with what I believed."

"Yes." It was the truth.

He shook his head to her next question. He didn't regret his choice, only was sorry to have to put his lover, his friends and their captain through it, too. What he did affected more people than himself.

Still, it was necessary, as necessary as the consequence. With an inward, thoughtful look, into her knowing gaze, he told her, "I believed that, B'Elanna, when I left. I still do. I can't turn back."

He told her he was thankful for her, for her acceptance. He had done the wrong things for the right reasons, and there had been both consequences and benefits. All of it weighed, considering the position he'd put her in, too, for those thirty days, the fact that she had held so strong on his behalf meant more to him than his words would allow him to express.

She only smiled and placed a morsel between his lips when his words ran out. "It was the right thing for me to do," she said, "and I'm glad you stood for what you believed in."

Her words had helped to send him, and he paid--paid dearly--as she secretly had. She was thankful for him, for his actions, for his acting when he could, since he could, for his bravery in an act of conscience that was otherwise deemed criminal.

They both knew well he'd broken orders, broken regulations, broken policy, broken much of the trust he'd worked so hard to attain. "But your conscience isn't criminal," she told him. "Your beliefs are real, and they mean something. Your cause was a worthy one."

Even if it never happened again--who knew if it would or not?--she knew that he truly was a man who could believe, and was brave enough to make do on it, make choices, despite the sacrifice and opposing belief. In a way, it had helped her, as it had helped him.

Even he admitted he didn't know if he would make such a choice again. He hoped he wouldn't have to, but honestly couldn't tell the rest.

"Are you sure you want to stand by me?" he asked yet again, and stopped her from silencing him, taking her hand gently, gazing intently into her solid stare. "Your part in all of this isn't anyone's business."

"If you'd rather I keep that between us, I will. But I'll still support you, Tom."

"You could get a lot of slack for it."

She curled the fingers he held around his own. "If that makes me a partner in crime, I'll take it. --I'm serious. I wouldn't have said anything if I hadn't meant it. You had a choice, and you acted...honorably. You did what I couldn't, and did more than I ever would have even if I'd been given my way. You stood through it--and you plan to keep standing and living with it, to keep going now that it's all said and done."

B'Elanna drew a deep breath, letting the pause drive her point. She had decided, long before, but was only then saying it. She wanted him to be certain of her intent. "I was proud of you before, and I am now. I don't care who knows it, either, or what they think. I will stand by you."

After a moment, looking into her dark, unblinking eyes, Tom drew her hand to his lips, turning it to tenderly kiss her palm. His eyes closed solemnly in the act. "Thank you."

Putting the emptied plate aside, Tom gathered B'Elanna into his arms, calling one quiet command to the computer. "The damn song's been running in my head for a month now."

B'Elanna laughed. "You too, hmm?"

He nodded as the chords stirred the air around them. "In a way, it's true, you know."

*If another life is possible, I would live it...  
for her as well*

"Well," Tom whispered as he hugged her close, "maybe not *for* you. But you're pretty damned important to me--a part of me, you know."

B'Elanna smiled, nodded, at rest in his embrace. "Yeah, I know the feeling."

Several decks away, a PADD was picked up off a table and another cup of coffee was poured. Her eyes took in the information with necessary speed as she scrolled. She'd put aside that PADD for other ship's business, and admittedly waited a little too long. Stopping, she blinked and squinted with thought. She considered what came to her mind; let it roll in her head a few times.

Her eyes drifted out to nowhere in the room, and her held her coffee in mid-air as she remembered all too well, not just one scene that'd played in that room, but two. Then she wondered....considered again, then blinked away her stare and put her coffee cup down with a sigh.

"Computer, locate L--Ensign Paris."

"Ensign Paris is on deck nine, section twelve."

The voice left as efficiently as it came.

Janeway took a breath, and a slight, ironic grin followed it. Taking her cup by the handle again, she decided to just wait it out a while.

Beginnings, after all, were delicate matters.

*(fin)*

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For her  
by D'Alaire M.  
swiftian@yahoo.com  
December 14, 1998  
\*Lyrics in story from "Vivo Por Ella," by Andrea Bocelli